Elites and Aristocracy in Colonial and Postcolonial Sri Lanka

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Abstract

"Elites and Aristocracy in Colonial and Post-colonial Sri Lanka" attempts to answer two major questions: First, what is an "elite" and how can we define one? Concentrating on aristocracy and with reference to Georg Simmel, I will describe forms of social and cultural self-aggrandisement and self-construction, which have served many elites as a model and ideal type for emulation and further development. My second question is: How did the Sinhalese up-country Kandy aristocracy in Sri Lanka react to British, colonial change and how did it interact with newly emerged and much more numerous low-country elites? This interaction will be described as a process of political marginalisation of the Kandy aristocracy and of cultural emulation on the part of the new low-country and Colombo elites.

Keywords: Sri Lanka, aristocracy, Kandy, elites, colonial change

1. Aristocracy as an ideal type of elite formation

Where can we position provisionally an aristocracy or an elite in the general sphere of social interaction, and in "society" at large? In this question we follow the political sociologist Jean Baechler, who insisted on a definition and strategy which rejected any objective, statistical and stratifying attempts. Instead Baechler opts for a radical, subjective and voluntaristic solution: Every society consists of an elite, people and the rabble, "l'elite, le peuple, la canaille" (Baechler 1985: 347). The images and self-definitions we construct and operate are ultimately interpretations driven by experience as well as wishful thinking. They reflect the unavoidable cognitive necessity to operate with dualistic concepts and perceptions – the high and the low, the white and the black. They likewise reflect the psychological tendency to search for and secure a middle ground, a majority. This need for self-positioning certainly does not rule out further sociological work on defining and differentiating social order – estates, ranks, class, levels of income etc.; and obviously it coexists with endless varieties and evolutions of "elites", "peoples" and "underclasses". For us here the posi-

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tion and formation of an elite or elites is of interest. And we approach this constituent of social order, both constantly changing and irreplaceable, with a further concept and definition provided by Georg Simmel (2008/1907), namely that of aristocracy.

This German sociologist regards aristocracy not as a historically confined, European, "feudal", socio-cultural construct. Instead he sees it as a universal element of any increasingly complex group and group formation, which is thus not only social but political. It is universal, because aristocracy answers social and political needs for distance, self-legitimation and self-containment of a minority wielding authority, surrounding power holders or competing for power. As a necessary element at least of traditional power, aristocracy therefore can be defined as an ideal type. It is a model which is universally emulated and admired, as well as rejected and denounced, by "l'elite, le peuple, la canaille". What then is "aristocratic", and what are an aristocrat's salient features?

First: There is the tendency of aristocrats to be seen and to perceive themselves as guardians and wardens of a corpus of tradition, a canon of historical conventions, events and experiences of supposedly far-reaching and primordial significance. This corpus and canon have not only formed and protected, maintained and moulded this group but society in general, its history and institutions, its "body politic".

Second: Resulting from this, aristocrats are thus seen and see themselves not only at the apex of a social pyramid, but at the very centre of ever wider social circles and cultures.

Third: Perceived as a dominant, dominating and necessary social force they are simultaneously seen as a tie between a golden past, an uncertain and contested present, and an unsure yet promising future. Aristocrats can thus act in the original, etymological sense of "natio", "birth" group, that is, as the first prototype for an eventual, future political and historical nation.

Fourth: This credo and these assumptions impact directly on the specific, "aristocratic" mode of individuation, an individuation seen here as the outcome of the antagonism between group pressure and an individual, the child. This antagonism leads to many variants, variants of creativity, unpredictability, imbalance, and disorder. There is the contrast of etiquette versus eccentricity and ceremonialism versus originality. There is, in the words of Max Weber, the unbound territory of benevolence and arbitrariness, "das freie Reich von Gnade und Willkür" (Weber 1972: 133). Yet, ultimately these variations of contrasts between the interplay of psychological forces and extremes rest on the complementarity and paradox of unbound "independence and responsibility".

Fifth: This contrast, this productive or destructive predicament, which is an endowment as well as nemesis, operates as the genuine origin and powerhouse

for the creativity, self-perception and "boosterism" of an aristocracy. To these self-images belong the "hero with a thousand faces", the constructions and sublimations of "chivalry", the self-serving notions and ideals of the "call of duty", the self-entitlement of "born to rule", the ideas of mission and self-sacrifice. This folklore of the aristocracy, these cultural, ethical and psychological pretentions rest on a further paradox, derived from the complementarity of freedom and responsibility, namely equality and supremacy.

Sixth: Aristocrats, operating on the same psychological and moral principles, in the same social universe, constitute a "band of brothers", a community of equals. They are equals because exalted; they are exorbitant in privilege and self-imposed burden. This creates a further, optional role model: The aristocrat acts out his own, self-determined calling, he experiences life as an adventure. The role model is predicated on the "travelling hero" and it facilitates and legitimises far-ranging mobility.

Openness and cosmopolitanism are thus legitimate ingredients of an aristocratic habitus. Aristocrats are thus well placed to enter into transregional, often trans-"national" marriage alliances, religious networks, commercial ventures and most importantly of all new and far-flung political loyalties. The aristocrat, true to his convictions, in defence of his freedom is not only empowered but expected to change king and country if the occasion so demands. Aristocrats are thus placed above narrow ethnic, religious, regional and language communities. Their eminent class consciousness and independence allows them freedom of travel, universal albeit aristocratic contact and changes of loyalty and alliance. Openness combined with curiosity leads to adventure and facilitates diplomacy.

Seventh: Becoming and staying an aristocrat thus resembles a highly complicated work of art. How do aristocrats maintain such an order, artifice and estate? According to Georg Simmel, aristocratic individuation and the respective aristocratic role model coexist with a specific type of group maintenance. This tradition, not mechanism, ensures the social distance, the unquestioned cultural superiority and political cohesion of any functioning aristocracy. In contrast to the mathematical average, the social average tends in most groups to operate according to the convoy principle. It lowers itself to the level of the less ambitious and capable. The least motivated, the laggards impose their expectations, presumptions and routines on the respective group. Their leaders and majorities take such restraining forces into account.

Aristocracies, if they want to survive, can and must operate in the opposite direction. They must and they can ensure an elevated social and cultural group average. They can thus be compared to other highly specialised and exclusive, that is sectarian, professional or commercial groups. But in contrast to these groups aristocrats operate from a different strategic position: They operate at

the apex of power, they can claim to speak for society at large (l'elite, le peuple, la canaille) and not for just one sectional interest.

Aristocrats, furthermore, maintain their group identity and cohesion not only through professional training, memory, discipline and mechanical imitation in face-to-face interaction. In addition through the concession of self-determined space for liberty and responsibility, that is through an education which allows for reflection, self-definition and decision, they are prepared for adult roles which facilitate as well as restrain. They are prepared for a habitus, which regards life not as an instrument or an obligation but a work of art. Seen thus, aristocracy becomes a challenge, an "unmasterable" art. It is an art in which every succeeding generation must engage – and possibly fail. The outcome is uncertain. The only certainty is: When identity, cohesion, distance cannot be maintained through these (or other) means, the aristocracy will fail – only to be replaced by new, more capable and more assertive pretenders.

Aristocrats are therefore, according to Simmel, trustees of tradition, guardians of power, virtuosi of self-determination, traveling heroes and cosmopolitan networkers, class-conscious internationalists and lobbyists, artists among politicians and statesmen above provincials and pedestrians. In all this they answer to universal needs of states, polities and power formation.

2. Aristocracy and new elites in Sri Lanka

2.1. Buddhist elites and the *rajakariya* system

Drawing on these considerations, can we find evidence of something we can reasonably define as an aristocracy in Sri Lanka? Our attention should first be focused on caste, here as *jati* or *varna*, since these concepts can embrace notions of estate and socio-political status, quite apart from endogamy, craft-specialisation, "liturgy" and sect. But in Sri Lanka since antiquity only an indistinct variant of a caste system has existed, derived in all probability from South India. This already truncated form was transferred from Tamil Nadu to the island. Social distance from India and two millennia of the pervasive influence of Theravada Buddhism have further eroded this caste system. In this simplified caste system we find a majority of peasants, some fifty percent, constituting the largest caste – Goyigama among the Sinhalese, Vellala among the Jaffna Tamils. These peasants, "the people", at least in the case of the Sinhalese are enormously differentiated according to their different land titles, obligations and privileges. Thus the majority is upwardly open, where it comprises various levels and varieties of elites, monks and abbots, courtiers, officials, clerks and commanders. The majority is strictly closed off towards the bottom, the "rabble" or the unadjusted and aliens (Pieris 1956: 169–194).

Here the Goyigama majority is surrounded and served by three dozen specialised castes or service groups – village craftsmen, urban artisans, itinerary and petty traders, jewellers and merchants. There is thus no clear-cut, ritually defined warrior, aristocratic or feudal caste stratum. Aristocrats there might be, but ultimately, in Buddhist eyes and from the perspective of an overwhelmingly rural social order, they were merged into the general category of Goyigama. When *jati* and *varna* fail to define and to localise an aristocracy, is there any conceptual substitute – sociological, historical or political?

There is, yet this term is enlightening as well as confusing. Since the emergence of a new, simultaneously ethnic and religious nationalism, since the elaboration of a Sinhala Buddhism at the turn of the 20th century, the Buddhist majority on the island has imagined itself as the "people of the lion", the Sinhalese. This is an old, classical concept, although with a surprising ideological history: For more than two millennia, since the advent of Buddhism, the "canonisation" of a founding myth for the (Buddhist) dynasty and the onset of Buddhist chronical writing the idea has existed that the discoverer and conqueror of the island was Sinhala – in the sense of "descended from a lion" and "like a lion". For centuries the island itself was called Sihala or Tri Sihala and the language of its Buddhist inhabitants later was also called Sihala.

According to the *Dipavamsa* and the *Mahavamsa*, the fifth and sixth century chronicles, the conqueror of the island and leader of a band of North Indian, "Bengali" migrants, was descended from a lion and a Vanga/Bengali princess. This Vijaya was a misfit and public nuisance, and he and his followers were deported to a harbour near the present day Mumbai port where they were put into a ship and pushed into the southern sea. They then stranded on an island originally called Tamraparni, "red-handed", from their fingerprints in the copper-red sand. As the island was inhabited by demons, sorcerers and witches, it took all of Vijaya's skill to conquer Tamraparni. He took a renegade witch, Kuveni, as his consort, united with her and thus broke her power. After the conquest he rejected her and their two children. He then procured from Madurai (Tamil Nadu) ritually and socially acceptable brides as well as artisan castes for himself and his followers. Finally, on his deathbed he handed power to his Bengali nephew, who thus founded a lion-like and lion-descended, Sinhala dynasty.

The discovery and conquest occurred while the Buddha in faraway North India was entering his Parinirvana. Here, on his deathbed, the Buddha declared the island to be his most distinguished future *dharmadipa*, the "island of the Buddhist law". Earlier, the Buddha had already visited the island three times, he had terrorized and lectured the assembled demons, dwarfs and snake people (Nagas), and thereby preordained and hallowed the island (Geiger 1959: 51–61). Some two centuries after this conquest Buddhism was finally brought to the island, as part of a mission led by Mahinda, Ashoka's son. He

brought the doctrine and, most importantly for a future sacred centre, a sapling of the Buddha's Bo tree from Bodh Gay. Since then, as the chronicles never fail to declare, Sihala or Tri Sihala, is the Buddha's island par excellence.

The followers of Vijaya, now the majority, the Buddhists, thus own the island through predestination, conquest and through their conversion to "Buddhist righteousness". While in the early chronicles the king, his Madurai brides and the court are termed "Sihala", over the centuries the term has widened. At the end of the first millennium the chronicle tends to contrast the invading, impious, destructive, demon-like (Hindu) Damila/Tamils with the valiant and pious Sinhala warriors, warlords and aristocrats. It was only in the middle ages, parallel to the abandonment of the Rajarata, the classical kingdom in the north, and the slow drift to the monsoon-fed south west, that the concept was further extended: It now comprised all the Buddhist subjects of the kingdom in the south west, the kingdom of Kotte near Colombo. Yet, it was only with the onset of far reaching modernisation and the rise of Sinhala Buddhism, that the concept turned into a fundamental, ideologically and emotionally laden category, holding centre place in most forms of political, social and cultural discourse. It now thus crowds out other and older concepts of profession, caste, locality and region. „Sinhala" as a term is thus instructive for Sinhala identity and politics.

But it leads us nowhere in our quest to define and locate a Sinhalese aristocracy or elite (Gunawardana 1990: 45–86). Instead we have to extricate an elite, an aristocracy, from the political and economic, feudal structure, which underlay and constituted the medieval Buddhist kingdom. This kingdom emerged and consolidated in the 15th century, in the south west near latter-day Colombo (Seneviratne 1997: 3–22).

This enormously complex, productive and malleable structure of service and tax obligation, was called *rajakariya*, "work for the king". It is probable that it already existed and regulated the Rajarata kingdom of classical times. *Rajakariya* was taken over, manipulated and transformed first by the Portuguese and then by the Dutch VOC. More than three centuries of adjustments, arbitrary interventions and accelerating economic change profoundly transformed this system, its beneficiaries and its rules. But an older, or at least a genuine feudal version survived in the realm and the operations of the Buddhist kingdom of Kandy, an isolated "hermit kingdom" in the mountains and jungles of the south west. This kingdom separated from Kotte at the beginning of the 16th century. When the British took over control from the Dutch, entered into contact with the kings of Kandy and finally invaded the kingdom and dissolved the monarchy, they had ample opportunity to study and describe this system, in their eyes an amazing and ponderous one (Pieris 1956: 95–142).

From the outside *rajakariya* might appear to be a well-designed system of feudal service and tax obligation; seen from within it operated as an ever

adapting process of technical improvisation and social change. The court and capital were serviced through a village "Jajmani system" writ large. Administration, warfare and religious patronage were conducted through forms of feudal privilege and obligation. In contrast, the needs of diplomacy, transport, overseas trade and money transactions necessitated the involvement of specialists, foreigners, mercenaries, hostages, itinerate craftsmen, peddlers and religious minorities. A medley of people was thus integrated into *rajakariya* and at the court.

Yet at the apex of the system, as court officials and guardians of a patrimonial bureaucracy a genuine, that is independent, self-confident landed aristocracy can be found. The independence and diversity of this aristocracy were to some extent derived from the inaccessibility and territorial fragmentation of the different territories of the kingdom. Although small, it consisted of at least three components. First there was the core kingdom, restricted to the valleys around Kandy, protected through the rims of the mountains. This mountain and forest area, the Udarata, was sparsely populated by paddy and slash-and-burn farmers. Then, at the court, under close supervision, there was a top stratum of functionaries and four chief ministers, the Adigars. Finally, the various small units of the Udarata, the twelve different Ratas, were governed by Rathe Mahatmyas (Codrington 1939: 178–182).

To the west and the south, the hermit kingdom was surrounded by five provinces, sloping down the mountains into the lower country and thereby towards the seldom demarcated frontier with the colonial powers. These provinces, the Dissavanis, were controlled by governors, the Dissaves. They were further subdivided into districts, the Korales. The Korales, comparable with the up-country Ratas in size, seem to have been the genuine units of control and collection, dominance and exploitation. In addition, it was here that the bulk of the up-country Sinhalese lived, not under the control of a king, but of regional and local strongmen, the aristocrats. The governors, the Dissaves resided at court, in Kandy – at least under strong kings. When they had to visit their province they left their families behind as hostages; as a rule they were recruited from families who had their roots and possessions in different parts of the realm. However under weak kings, Dissaves would tend to consolidate and "localise" their control over their allotted Dissavanis. And in any case it was the district, the Korale, where service obligations and taxes, overwhelmingly in kind, were registered, organised and collected. It was from here that the Korale officials interacted with the villages, that is, with the headmen of the villages and of the local service castes. It was here that the bulk of the local extraction and accumulation of goods and services, of *rajakariya*, took place.

Besides the core kingdom and the five provinces there existed a third realm, the Northern dry zone, the former "classical" Rajarata, now emptied of its paddy farmers. Centuries earlier the ancient irrigation works, the earthen

dams and the tanks, had broken down. They had been abandoned and were soon overgrown by jungle. The whole area, a third of the island, was covered by an immense forest, inhabited by elephants and deer. The villages and sacred cities had disappeared, and only small and impoverished groups of slash-and-burn farmers had survived, often in the middle of the broken, dried up irrigation tanks. They were ruled by a new class of petty chiefs, the Vanniyars. These chiefs sometimes visited Kandy, bringing symbolic tribute and departing with, in comparison, precious gifts (Knox 1989/1681: 21–33).

Naturally every Adigar, Ratemahatmya, Dissave, Korale and Vanniyar had his establishment, his "manor", his more or less imposing, timber-built *walauwa*. Here he ruled over his landed possessions, over his circle of relatives and more importantly over his array of messengers, pole bearers, pack oxen owners, measurers, accountants, granary guardians, night watchmen, field wardens, militias, border guards and tax officials. There were numerous checkpoints fortified with thorn bushes on the roads between the provinces, the Udarata and the outlying "borders".

It was with this medley of higher ranking Goyigama aristocrats that the British had to collaborate, after the conquest and the dissolution of the Kandy kingdom.

2.2. Elites under British rule

Since the beginning of British rule, that is since the early 19th century, the British thus were confronted in the up-country with a "feudal" aristocracy, which in their eyes, was exotic, archaic and yet strangely familiar. It stood in complete contrast to the elites with whom they had to cooperate in Colombo and in the low-country.

Due to the destruction of the Buddhist kingdom and Buddhism – its temples, rituals and orders – in the low-country by the Portuguese, and due to the incomprehension, manipulation and corruption of low-country *rajakariya* through the VOC, this system and its traditional Goyigama service aristocracy had been eroded and marginalised. The Portuguese "Estado" and the Dutch VOC financed their state and their operations through trade monopolies, mostly on cinnamon, through indirect taxes on consumption, through custom dues and the sale of offices. This not only destroyed *rajakariya* in its original form, but it also weakened the established caste hierarchies, above all the supremacy of the Goyigama and the established feudal order with its rules of conduct and etiquette. Now, for the lower castes there emerged new mobility, freedoms and options.

In particular three lower ranking castes benefited from new economic opportunities and the loosening of social constraints. First, there were the cinnamon peelers who exploited the new business opportunities that the Dutch

created through the strictly enforced monopoly on the cinnamon trade. Constantly rising demand and rising prices increased the bargaining power of the cinnamon peelers vis-à-vis the Dutch, and the monopoly created countless opportunities for corruption and clandestine trade. Then there were the Karava, traditional fishermen but also ship-builders, seamen and costal traders who likewise profited from new colonial demand, while at the same time they engaged in smuggling and contraband trade. Finally there were the Durava, the toddy makers and arrack sellers, who now benefited from the new sales opportunities of inn-keeping, arrack export and coconut planting, created through the tax interests of the colonial rulers.

In each of these upwardly mobile castes there emerged a new commercial and entrepreneurial elite which since Dutch times had competed against the established Goyigama elite and among themselves. In addition, the more assertive and innovative sections of low-country Goyigama had equally benefited from change and had invested in new cash crops, trading ventures and urban properties (Jayawardena 2000).

The upshot of all this competition was that these three low-ranking castes undertook a religious as well as a social investment for the re-establishment of Buddhism. They sent emissaries to Thailand and Burma to procure properly ordained Buddhist monks, consecrated statues and much-desired manuscripts for the low-country Sinhalese, in reality for their own caste clientele. The missions thus resulted in the re-installation of the Buddhist orders – not under the control of a *dharmaraja*, the king of Kandy, but under the control of lay committees of the respective castes (Malalgoda 1976: 90–150).

The British administrators and reformers were thus confronted with different elites. These elites would mingle in business, but not merge in religion and politics. They competed along two lines: Up-country aristocrats versus new low-country commercial elites; and all of these new elites against each other.

Setting up colonial administration – the dilemma

The British were thus acutely aware that the imposition of a uniform, centralising administration would run counter to the aspirations and interests of an up-country aristocracy entrenched, for three centuries in their positions of power and authority. At the latest since the early 1830s, the colonial administration faced a dilemma: to pursue a reform policy or to maintain the Kandy aristocracy.

A team of government advisers under Colebrooke and Cameron, initiated a reform program: It aimed at transforming the crown colony into a colonial laboratory for experimenting with laissez-faire market economics. The island was to become a plantation economy on the basis of a deregulated cinnamon sector, possibly complemented by tobacco, sugar cane, coconut and coffee. In

addition the bulk of the population, the Sinhalese peasants were to turn from undernourished subsistence farmers into cash crop producers and the island was to become self-sufficient in rice production. A new administration and infrastructure was to provide the preconditions for this market revolution. The administration planned to dispense with intermediaries – tax farmers, middlemen and the last remnants of the anachronistic low-country *rajakariya* system – and instead to rely on bureaucratic, province- and district-centred control. The new bureaucracy was to be overseen by not more than 60 to 70 British administrators, but in its 20 districts it was to rest on college trained, highly qualified native officials, "burghers" and later Jaffna Tamils and some low-country Sinhalese.

Heading this new centralising structure there was the governor general, responsible to the colonial office in London. In cooperation and in possible opposition to him was a legislative council, operating with ex officio officials as well as "appointed" native gentlemen from all the islands communities. This council as a counterweight was responsible to the British parliament (Silva 1981: 254–281).

The Kandy aristocracy and a misunderstood promise

Against this bureaucratic and economic reform movement there stood a solemn promise that the British had given to the Kandy aristocracy. To depose the king the British had enlisted the help and consent of most of these Adigars, Ratemahatmyas and Dissaves. The Kandy aristocracy had rather naively expected that their king and court would be merely replaced by a British governor or political agent, while everything else – the royal ceremonies, the Buddhist establishments, processions and rituals and most important of all their privileges, possessions, status and functions at court, in politics and in *rajakariya* – would remain unchanged. The British had not disputed these hopes and ambitions. Instead, in the Convention of Kandy before the assembled aristocracy and minor chiefs, they had promised to uphold the Buddhist religion. This promise was interpreted by the aristocracy as a firm commitment to uphold the separate traditions, conventions and forms of government of the former kingdom. Thus between the promise to the Kandi aristocracy on the one hand and the Colebrook-Cameron reforms on the other the British policy makers faced potential conflicts either with the chiefs or their high-flown development expectations.

However, as with most reforms, the actual results were vastly different from those intended: The establishment of a market and plantation economy did not transform the Sinhalese peasants into cash crop farmers and the island remained an importer of Indian and later Burmese rice. The cinnamon export collapsed under the competition from the very much cheaper foreign export-

ers. In the end it was coffee production and following its collapse after 1870, tea, rubber and coconut which transformed the hill country and the north western part of the low-country into a huge plantation sector. This plantation boom controlled by British agency houses (tea) and low-country elites (coconut) displaced, marginalised and exploited the local up-country and low-country peasants. Again the plantation sector never constituted a truly laissez-faire enterprise. Instead the plantation lobby constantly demanded assistance from the colonial government in the form of roads and railways, and state regulation for migrants and Kuli labourers (Silva: 282–296).

Emergence of Mudaliyars – the new aristocracy appointed by the British

While road building into the hills opened the up-country for coffee plantations, and while the British administrators in the meantime invested heavily in coffee estates, neglecting their government work, the question of how to treat the former kingdom and its aristocracy had to be solved. This was achieved through a characteristic process of "incrementalism".

The establishment of a new, centralising administration, the opening up of the interior through road building (organised with corvée labour with the help of *rajakariya* and the local chiefs), finally the introduction of new regulations, licenses and procedures of tax collection – all these interventions shocked and angered most of the up-country Sinhalese. In outlying areas in the east, the local governors or chiefs had not even heard that the kingdom had fallen or simply did not believe it. Over the next 20 years various local and general rebellions broke out, led by royal pretenders, former Adigars or mere social bandits. The campaigns to quell these insurrections were costly. The general plan to replace expensive troop cantonments with coffee estates, that is, to control the highlands, and thus earn tax money instead of expending it, seemed to be failing. To counter this unsatisfactory development and to (re-)integrate and fragment the still formidable aristocracy the administration reacted in various ways.

First, it upheld the ideal type of a Colebrooke-Cameron-inspired bureaucracy, with a pragmatic and cosmetic supplement: On the village and village circle level (Pattu), the colonial administration now rediscovered and strengthened the roles of village headmen and other hereditary and honorary office holders, all of them officials who were entitled to only small, but highly visible emoluments and privileges. In addition it revitalised the village council, the *gansabhava*. The government thus saved money, while increasing its ground level support, and its knowledge of local affairs and its efficiency.

Secondly and more importantly it now systematically widened, upgraded and exploited a traditional honorary "aristocratic" title, the title of Mudali or Mudaliyar. In Kandyan times Mudaliyar or Mudaliyanse denoted an upper

Goyigama stratum from which the higher officials and their families were derived – Ratemahatmya, Dissave, Adigar. The British turned the title into an honorary, purely ceremonial one which was normally not attached to a heredi-tary position. Mudaliyarships were now created on every level of the bureau-cracy – in the capital, provinces, districts and even at the village level. A highly visible, native, folkloristic parallel service emerged which ran from the guber-natorial "Gate Mudaliyar" to the humble village Mudaliyar. During Buddhist or other public ceremonies, dinners, royal visits, inspection tours, inaugura-tion ceremonies and anniversaries the general governor, governor or district agent would be accompanied by his respective Mudaliyar. For the class con-scious and caste conscious British as well as Kandy aristocrats this was a most productive and dangerous instrument (Silva 1981: 188, 322–325).

The British now appointed into the Mudaliyar top positions those aristo-crats who had sided with them, especially during rebellions. Apart from top-ranking loyalists, a huge number of lower and middle-ranking aristocrats entered the various Mudaliyar positions. With the Mudaliyarship they ac-quired prestige, access to the British decision-makers and very soon enormous visibility and prestige vis-à-vis their followers, aristocratic competitors, monks and monasteries. In cases of doubt, scandalous behaviour, political dissent or arbitrariness Mudaliyars were excluded, demoted or replaced by more ame-nable competitors.

Both aristocratic insiders and outsiders were therefore held "in dread and awe" as to their positions, expectations and future careers in the consolidating British developmental state. Yet of even greater importance were the economic prospects, which now opened up with the growth of coffee estates and tea gardens in Kandy and later the Nuwara Eliya area (Peebles 1995: 115–144).

Booming coconut plantations: economic elites

As the coffee plantations spread, an extremely lucrative land market emerged. By traditional right, through arbitrary control and through the forgery of land titles aristocrats profited from this boom. They were not alone in this market, but competed with the four new low-country elites in the acquiring, clearing, amassing, buying and selling of land. They also invested in the building-up of an adjoining sector of rubber plantations. The coffee and then tea sector as well as the rubber sector were controlled by foreign planters and very soon by British agency houses. Sinhalese participation in tea gardens was marginal; it was only in the rubber sector that Sinhalese capital and planters played a certain role. In contrast the coconut sector, the enormous "coconut triangle" spreading in the northeast of Colombo served different goals: From the beginning it served speculative, productive and representative functions. Nearly every elite family, up-country or low-country, Mudaliyar or non-Mudaliyar,

invested in this sector. Building up vast alleys of coconut trees and residing in the midst of them in old-fashioned Kandy-style manors, *walauwa*s, was a sure sign that the owners family counted among the honoratiores, that these native gentlemen had arrived at the top – at a Mudaliyarship, at the governor's dinner table, at temple trusteeships or the planters' club. This was true even when the investment proved a failure and when the profits were made elsewhere, for example in coffee and tea transport, ship building, furniture making, export houses, advocacy or in disreputable arrak renting.

Thus land speculation during the coffee and tea boom, investment in and ownership of rubber plantations and coconut "gardens" and *walauwa*s constituted three stages in the competition, then the intermingling and finally the convergence of the various elite groups: Kandy aristocrats and Colombo elites (Goyigama, Salgam, Durava, Karava). Intermarriage and business partnerships facilitated a rapprochement (Peebles 1995: 145–170, 197–230).

British reforms of 1929

But until the 1930s traditions, differences and political mistrust persisted between up-country and low-country elites. These apprehensions and suspicions operated along the lines of high versus lower castes, inherited versus acquired status, conservative versus liberal politics, traditional, rural Buddhism versus Anglicanism and low-country, "protestant" lay Buddhism. Highland aristocrats were seen as backward, ceremonial, hypocritical and brutal; low-country elites as opportunistic, excessively anglophile, brash and servile.

A fusion of these various elite groups was brought about through political reform: in 1929 the British government decided, after a mere pro forma consultation of the native political spokesmen, to allow full voting rights, free parliamentary elections and government by national parties. In short this was de facto political self-government though it remained incomplete since it lacked explicit and symbolic independence. Only finance, the judiciary and the police department remained under British control. This was a diplomatic move by which the British India government wished to convince the Congress Movement, Nehru and Gandhi, that they could strike a deal with the British on factual if not complete independence, and that the British could be relied on.

This imposition of democratic mass politics came as a shock to minorities, the Jaffna Tamils, the Tamil plantation labourers and their union, and the Muslims, the Moors. The minorities knew that from now on they would be submerged under the advancing wave of an ethnic and religious Buddhist Sinhala majority. But the leaders, low-country as well as up-country, the honoratiores of the Sinhalese majority were equally shocked. To preserve their leadership positions, their status and their estates from now on they had to establish political control over a vast mass of Sinhalese peasants and *Lumpenproletariat*,

which their speculation and plantations had expropriated and impoverished. Both Kandy aristocrats as well as low-country planters and honoratiores were in the same predicament.

The introduction of the secret ballot, mass politics and self-government shocked the Sinhalese elites into joint action. It enforced a new unity on them and drove them down the path to anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim xenophobia and ethnic and religious chauvinism. With extraordinary speed what had been a sectarian and fringe ideology of Sinhala Buddhist militancy now became the official programme of the Singhalese honoratiores, organised in the formerly moderate and liberal Ceylon National Congress (CNC). This ideology centred on the "the land, the race and the faith" of the Sinhala Buddhists (Russell 1982).

The CNC promised to defend the common Sinhalese against their enemies, namely Tamil colonial officials suppressing the majority, and Tamil estate labourers displacing the Kandy Sinhalese in their last Terra Sancta, their Buddhist homeland. The honoratiores made a sweeping promise to protect the Buddhist majority from British imperialists and Indian compradores and entrepreneurs. Wine drinking, meat eating and tobacco smoking missionaries, Christian schoolmasters and Anglicans as well as arrack contractors and Muslim fishermen and fish sellers were increasingly singled out as enemies of the "innocent and pure-hearted children of the Dharmadipa", the island of the Buddhist law. The CNC honoratiores had remarkable success in persuading an increasing mass of Sinhalese voters, peasants and labourers, not to vote for a Communist Party demanding a land reform and better wages – in times of mass hunger and a worldwide depression. Instead these smallholders, landless labourers and rural unemployed from now on voted for the CNC, now exclusively Sinhalese.

Parallel to the introduction of the so-called Donoughmore constitution and democracy, the party spectrum split along ethnic lines: There was now a "Tamil Congress" for the Jaffna officials and Jaffna's western educated elite; a "Ceylon Indian Congress" for the south Indian Tamil estate workers and their trade union; a "Moors Association" for the Muslims. In 1946 the CNC finally transformed itself into the decisive "United National Party", united and national for the Sinhalese, and still in existence. The advancing steamroller of majority rule secured complete control of the government to the evermore homogenous and assertive Sinhala Buddhist voting bloc. This emergence of an ethnic divide, ethnic two-party democracy – with the later founding of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party – and finally ethnic civil war is outside the scope of this paper. Instead, we have to concentrate on the driving force as well as the consequence of this process of ethnic "snowballing" and polarisation (Rösel 1996: 245–330), namely the fusion of competing groups into a compact pan-Sinhalese power elite.

In the late 19th century a curious by-product of the British (re-)integration of Kandy aristocrats in the Mudaliyar system had already emerged. Parallel to the economic and administrative integration of the highland and the levelling of political and social differences between high- and low-country there arose a folklorisation and idealisation of the kingdom's traditions, culture and history. It was the Kandy aristocrats who profited in the first place from the antiquarian interests of the British elites and the exotic curiosity of British gentlemen tourists. Ceylon now became the ideal symbol for "serendipity". In Colombo as well as in England there had appeared what has been called "Victorian Buddhism" (Almond 1988).

This was Buddhism as a philosophy (of tolerance), as a civilisation (of monasteries and irrigation works), as an ethic (of peace and compassion). While British archaeologists rediscovered this classical Buddhism in the Rajarata, the northern dry zone, a unique, exotic, diminutive but living remnant, and a remainder of this "Great Tradition" could be admired in Kandy. Its aristocrats, with their strange (festival) costumes (derived from Portuguese baroque prototypes), their sturdy *walauwa*s and their impressive pedigrees and titles came to be regarded as living fossils, as embodiments of a now only minor but exuberant tradition. In the famous (Buddha) tooth festival and procession, the Esala Perahera, all the constituent elements of Kandy society came together in a perfectly composed, hierarchically structured, feudal pageant. Here every component of tooth temple, court and *rajakariya* marched for hours behind the royal elephants: priests, (former) Adigars and Ratemahatmyas etc., but also the headmen, and the representatives of all the *badde*, service groups (Rösel 1996: 122–130).

With this new romanticism Kandy aristocratic families, inside or outside the Mudaliyar system, with or without estates, now increasingly turned from objects of curiosity into valuable assets for the low-country elites. Apart from political allies and economic partners they constituted a marriage market through which lower ranking but prosperous Colombo elite families might "gentrify" their careers and families. Radala/Ratemahatmya brides could upgrade such families and provide the bride's family with new resources. Obviously these marriage opportunities acquired a new urgency when the new mass politics forced up-country and low-country elites into closer cooperation. It was certainly significant and helpful when the political heir of the richest plantation owner of the island, S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, the future founder of the ultra-Sinhala Buddhist Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) married a bride from a renowned up-country Radala family, Sirimavo.

Thus with the onset of mass politics, first with the Donoughmore constitution 1930, then with independence 1948, and finally with the founding of the SLFP 1951 and its messianic Buddhist triumph over the UNP 1956 a rapprochement of the various elites seemed to have taken place. Until the early

1950s there was an up-country political bloc, run by Kandy aristocrats and politicians. It operated largely inside the ruling party, first the CNC, later the UNP, and could sometimes enforce its resentments and special interests on the government – for instance the disenfranchisement and repatriation of the Tamil labourers to facilitate complete control over the up-country electorates by the Kandy aristocrats. The competition between the UNP and the SLFP and the consolidation of an ethnic two-party and one-majority democracy seemingly eroded this Kandy-Colombo divide.

What has emerged instead since the 1940s is the primacy of some ten elite families that have dominated either the UNP or the SLFP, in the former case the Jayawardhenas, in the latter case the Bandaranaikes. Yet these families were in addition closely interrelated and their lesser relatives held memberships in most of the other respective opposition parties. With the exception of the Bandaranaikes, who overwhelmingly concentrated on their family enterprise, these families would never lose control (Jiggins 1979). Thus it was not an up-country versus low-country but a top-elite versus lower-elite divide which characterised Sinhalese mass politics, at least since 1956. When intraparty conflict arose it operated along the cleavage between honoratiores versus (lower) party functionaries but not between Kandy and Colombo.

When Ranil Premadasa replaced Junius Richard Jayawardhena in 1990 as head of state and the UNP this was resented because a party functionary, in possession of his own party machine (in the Bazar/Petta area across the Colombo harbour) had replaced the grandseigneur among the UNP honoratiores. That Premadasa was seen as an uneducated upstart from the Dobhi, the washermen caste, was only an additional irritant (Rösel 1997: 269). When Mahinda Rajapaksa replaced the Bandaranaikes in the ownership of the SLFP this was seen in terms of a coup, orchestrated by a provincial functionary from the deep south against the founder family.

3. Elites today – Conclusion

At least in the public discourse of Sinhala mass politics the traditional markers of identity, region (first and foremost Kandy) and caste have disappeared. They have been replaced by meritocratic, that is acquired markers like education, engagement in Buddhist and developmental (political) activities and professional achievements. Thus the different caste backgrounds of the competing elites as well as the specific interests, entitlements and sensibilities of the aristocracy have vanished, at least from the public eye. Yet on a different, social and cultural stage the traditions and imagery of the Kandy aristocracy are alive and well. Visits to Kandy, its tooth temple and its Perahera are de

rigueur for tourists. The huge parliamentary complex built in the newly re-established Kotte Jayawardhanapura near Colombo is constructed in timber, in the form of a gigantic *walauwa*. It was financed, "gifted" by Japan and designed by a renowned Muslim architect who had rediscovered the Walauwa style for the dozens of five-star hotels he constructed all over the island. He thus gave to Sri Lankan tourism, its accommodation, cuisine, gift shops and souvenirs a distinct, Kandy aristocratic style (Rösel 1996: 88). But most importantly a self-confident "national" Sinhalese political elite now expresses its ideas and visions of national culture, history and identity through the medium of an architecture, ornaments, costumes, dances, masks and handicrafts inspired by the Kandy aristocracy and Kandy Sinhalese.

This brings us to an interesting result: Three centuries of rapid colonial change gave rise to new elites, elite competition and an anachronistic aristo-cracy. But subsequently, since 1930, British-introduced and then self-inflicted Sinhalese mass politics have transformed elite fission into fusion. The elites have increasingly compacted into one supposedly "national" Sinhalese class and power elite. Even the aristocrats have vanished into this new elite stratum, though their self-images and pretensions live on as part of a national culture, emulated by a new nation, the totality of the "people of the lion".

This leads to a final question: Were the Kandy aristocrats aristocratic ac-cording to Georg Simmel's definition? And: Can the new Sinhalese power elite really lay claim to these aristocratic virtues? In conclusion we can only state: The Kandy aristocrats were a poor specimen for Simmel's demanding defini-tion and ideal. They certainly stood near the apex of power; and though they did not always act as such they perceived themselves as the guardians and trustees of a great, now minor tradition. They were not exactly torn between the internal forces of freedom versus responsibility, and as to their openness and cosmopolitanism they were severely restricted by the seclusion and inac-cessibility of this hermit kingdom. However they were open, class conscious and opportunistic enough to collaborate several times with the British, finally acquiescing to British military intervention and to the dissolution of the mon-archy, in the naive belief that such change would not erode their positions and estates. In addition, the maintenance of their specific identity, distance, au-thority and habitus was not really the result of internal discipline, the ability to prepare for "life as a work of art"; instead it resulted from the continued existence of a feudal hierarchy, a service aristocracy based on the *rajakariya* system and upheld by the king. When the monarchy fell and the British discon-tinued *rajakariya* their class and their positions decayed.

Can the present power elite claim to be an aristocracy? Definitely not. It operates as an embodiment and guardian of a Sinhala Buddhist culture, history and nation. In this role it has levelled the differences between itself and the constantly extolled "common (Sinhalese) man" – in ideology, public ceremo-

nies and political speeches. It parades its lay Buddhism, decorates its consumerism with touches of Kandy folklore and acts as a purely political and economic "national" class. Centuries of colonial modernisation and decades of ethnic mass politics have whittled down a traditional, feudal order. In the process genuine and presumptive aristocrats have vanished into a dominant and militant "national" class.

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