

C. Gaston Perera, *The Portuguese Missionary in 16th and 17th Century Ceylon. The Spiritual Conquest*, Colombo, Vijitha Yapa Publications, 2009. ISBN 9556650466

Zoltán Biedermann¹

A second paradox of Sri Lankan history is that some of those who profess a nationalistic view of the island's past tend, even in recent years, to rely rather heavily on Portuguese sources, mostly through the filter of English translations. As a result, much of what one can read about the Luso-Lankan encounter from a Sinhalese nationalist point of view today still relies as extensively on Portuguese materials as the most conservative historical narratives from the Catholic side. At first glance, one is thus tempted to dismiss Gaston Perera's work, extensively based on Queiroz's *Temporal and Spiritual Conquest* and on the missionary letters published by Vito Perniola in *The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka*, as an anachronistic reflection of such entrenched positions.

And yet, Perera's new book—published after earlier titles such as *The Rebel of Kandy* (an historical novel) and *Kandy Fights the Portuguese*—may serve at present to examine some of the criteria that have become prevalent among historians on both sides of the divide: a divide that, if further deepened, may well threaten the progress of our knowledge of Luso-Lankan history and make communication between historians increasingly difficult. The single-paged foreword by K M de Silva, a renowned historian converted to a Sinhala-nationalist position in the 1980s, is rather blunt in this regard. Silva welcomes Perera's book as essentially a "necessary corrective" to a number of older, "soft-peddling" Catholic accounts of the Sri Lankan missions. This, I would argue, does not do full justice to Perera's work, but it is indicative of the uses that can be made of the book. Behind the curtain of a rather debatable argument—that a country like Portugal, immersed in the culture of the Counter-Reformation and confessional warfare, could barely have acted peacefully in a place like Ceylon—one sees the material that will continue to nurture anti-Catholic discourses in the political agenda of the Sinhala nationalist camp.

As the author himself puts it, "this publication [...] falls clearly, and quite unashamedly, into the 'nationalist interpretation of history' strand" (xi). One might argue that there is nothing wrong with this in principle, yet it is crucial that historians—and this includes amateurs like Perera, who at times reach a wide audience—resist instrumentalisation. Important though as it is to contribute to current debates, it is also very difficult to do so responsibly when all that is expected by certain recipients are arguments "pro" or "contra" certain phenomena in history—in this case, arguments that can be used as ammunition in the debates around the identity of the Sri Lankan state, its commitment to Buddhism and the Sinhalese language, and its relationship with religious and ethnic minorities.

In favour of Gaston Perera, there is scope to argue that, to date, most accounts of the missionary activities of the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka have been written by Catholics who, to different degrees, have tended to avoid a critical perspective on the objectives and the attitudes of their predecessors. It is certainly important to question such accounts. On the other hand, one might well argue that this has already been done, and quite satisfactorily so, by Tikiri Abeyasinghe and Chandra Richard de Silva in their pioneering monographs (*Portuguese Rule in Ceylon, 1597-1612*, Colombo, 1966 and *The Portuguese in Ceylon 1617-1638*, Colombo, 1972 – both deserving to be reprinted). The need for a 400-page "unveiling" of Catholic practices such as that produced by Perera is perhaps not as pressing as the author suggests—"I believe that the complete story of what really transpired in the course of Portuguese expansion must be discovered and revealed" (xi)—forty years after Abeyasinghe's and Silva's works were published. Yet it may also be true that the general public has had easier access to apologetic works such as those of Gabriel Perera and Martin Quéré than to those of the two more renowned scholars just mentioned.

If one considers this to be sufficient reason for reading through Gaston Perera's *The Portuguese Missionary*, the next question would be whether it is methodologically sound. Some chapters make for good reading, for example Perera's thoughts about the missionaries' "language deficiencies" (32-57) and

¹ Birkbeck College, University of London. E-mail: zoltanbiedermann@yahoo.com

cultural “ignorance” (183-193) or their financial and economic strategies (81-113). Others reveal the problems emanating from Perera’s bias more directly, for example when it comes to the fascinating anti-Jesuit testimonies produced in Jaffna in the context of a judicial enquiry in the 1640s. Here, the author is probably a little too hasty in affirming that the papers reveal “what really happened” (150), though I would agree that one of the principle issues at stake in such conflicts was the control of labour in the villages (157) and that reading through the complaints of the exploited villagers would be a healthy exercise for anyone committed to the Jesuit cause today. Similarly, Perera’s chapter on the discriminatory practices of the Church hierarchy makes valid points (though the identification of all this as “racism” (166) with no further historical definition of the concept is evidently problematic).

On another level, Perera takes issue with my argument that there is an urge for reconsidering local agency in proto-colonial and early colonial contexts such as that of sixteenth-century Sri Lanka. I have tried to argue over recent years that it is time to go beyond the binary logic of “colonizers” versus “colonized,” as well as “imperial” versus “local” logics, to understand sixteenth-century Lankan politics. What Perera says in contrast, thus echoing the opinions of other, more radically anti-Portuguese historians in Sri Lanka, is that it is not possible to do so before the “real nature” of the colonizing beast has been entirely revealed. In other words, the author voices a concern that the search for local agency, especially when practised by scholars who cannot be manipulated into a radical Sinhala position, comes with the danger of relativizing the crimes committed by the colonizers. This is a legitimate concern in itself, yet it bears very little relation with what “Luso-Lankanist” historians in the West have been doing over the past ten years. By focusing on the role of the local elites in the build-up to Portuguese rule (it took almost a century after the first contact of 1506 for the Portuguese crown to devise a plan to conquer the island), I am not attempting to neutralize Portugal’s historical responsibility for atrocities committed against people and patrimony in Sri Lanka. I do, however, believe firmly that the analysis of the historical processes involved needs to reflect the complexity of the information conveyed by the sources. There is simply no scope in the documentation for considering sixteenth-century Sri Lanka as a *tabula rasa* where the European colonial impetus raged unchecked by local political, military, religious and economic realities. Recent research has made it clear that, at least for the time before 1595, most of the Portuguese activities in the island can only be explained through the logic of local politics.

What, then, is the problem that nationalist historians have with this? One is led to suspect that it is a generic and perennial issue for nationalist approaches to history anywhere. The re-evaluation of local interests involved in the growth of Portuguese power in sixteenth-century Sri Lanka suggests that divisions running *within* a society along lines that are not ethnic (because ethnicity in the sixteenth century is simply not the same thing as today) are often more important than the logic of imagined national communities. In other words, what defined the course of history was not so much whether people were Sinhalese or Portuguese, but whether people had power over other people or not – and that would depend on many factors other than language or religion. I am thus tempted to dismiss much of Perera’s animosity towards the search for local agency because I believe that, first, this search is in no way opposed to an acknowledgment of Portuguese transgressions (whether we are in a position to judge them is, of course another question) and, second, there is simply no clear correspondence between ethnicity and power in sixteenth-century Sri Lanka.

This being said, Perera may have a point in raising the debate for the seventeenth century, though in fact he only deals with that period punctually, and recent historiography has not even yet started to engage with it systematically. It is beyond discussion that, after 1595, the Portuguese adopted a radical policy of military and religious conquest that strongly contributed to a polarization of positions along ethnic and religious lines (ironically, the new Sinhala-Buddhist sectarianism reflects precisely the worst principles of religious exclusivism developed in Europe after 1550). This policy introduced a new territorial logic into Lankan politics, with devastating effects on the social and cultural tissue of the island. There is little doubt that the principles underlying radical Catholicism in the seventeenth century remount in large measure to the Council of Trent, as Perera argues. And yet it is crucial to ask when and why exactly it became possible for Catholic priests to impose their religion on people in the south-western lowlands. Simplifying such issues by construing a plain binary opposition between “Portuguese” and “Sinhalese” is particularly vain in the wake of Alan Strathern’s extremely meticulous and complex analysis of the single problems of the non-conversion of Bhuvanekabahu VII (1521-51) to Catholicism and the subsequent conversion of his grandson Dharmapala (1551-97). Strathern has gone to painstaking lengths in attempting to define some of the characteristics of Sinhala-ness in the Early Modern period, but none of it has filtered down into Perera’s account (see for example pp. 195-213, 230-271). Although Perera

refers to Strathern repeatedly, there are no signs of a sustained engagement with this author's findings about the nature of Sinhalese kingship and the meanings of the interreligious dynamic in the sixteenth century. Again, the picture would be considerably different for the seventeenth century, yet Perera does not seem to appreciate the complexities of religious and political change over the decades—the very fabric of history.

All in all, *The Portuguese Missionary* has its merits in bringing together materials and constructing a narrative that challenges traditional Catholic accounts. Anyone tempted to see the Luso-Lankan encounter as reflecting an illusory Portuguese “blandness” as a colonial power should read through this book eyes wide open. At a time when there are signs of a renaissance of a rose-coloured view of Portuguese expansion history, it is important that a divergent, albeit simplistic voice such as that of Gaston Perera is heard. Yet by not engaging with the materials thoroughly enough, by eliminating the complexities of the period's history revealed by the research of the last forty years, Perera's book fails to produce a compelling alternative to Catholic mystification.