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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Cartwheel or Ladder? Reconsidering Sinhala Caste

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Abstract

Is Sinhala caste simply a weak regional variant of Hindu caste or is it something else entirely? This essay argues that Sinhala caste as found in the territory of the former Kandyan Kingdom has had a distinctive ontology and retains its unique character. The essay begins with an overview of textual, genetic, and archaeological evidence for the origins of caste on the subcontinent. It then turns to the island and the fourth century CE bifurcation of Sinhala society into "high" and "low"; this duality's persistence into the second millennium CE; its elaboration in the Kandyan Kingdom's bureaucratic political economy; and the dissonance between this Sinhala "cartwheel" model of collective inequality and the Brahmanical "ladder" of colonial powers and the Sinhala elite. The essay concludes by examining how the ongoing discordance between these two models of Sinhala caste plays out in people's lives through a case study of a non-elite caste community.

Keywords: Sinhala caste; Sri Lanka; systems of durable inequality; caste history; caste models

Introduction

The institution of caste among Sinhala Sri Lankans has posed a scholarly challenge. Is it a watered-down version of Hindu caste? Something else entirely? Should one even talk about it? Louis Dumont famously labeled Sinhala caste "quasi" because it did not subordinate political to religious authority (1970: 215–16). Patrick Peebles suggested that without the integrating presence of Brahmins, it is "castes without a caste system" (1995: 45). It also has been described as "less rigorous," lacking the "extreme inequalities of untouchability in India" (Kannangara 1984: 164; Seneviratne 2000: 215). Some recent researchers, noting the topic's sensitivity, have suggested that interviewee discomfort may be reason enough to forego inquiry altogether (e.g., Douglas 2015).

Neither the ambivalence nor the Indian yardstick is new. Reflecting colonial policy, E. B. Denham, Superintendent of Census Operations for Ceylon's 1911 Census, wrote: "As caste does not play in Ceylon the important part it does in India, … information on this subject … [was] not … obtained." Yet just a few pages later he lamented, "The effects of tradition remain and whether these are called caste distinctions, racial prejudices, or tribal customs, their influence is … felt in every branch of the life of the country" (1912: 177, 193; Rogers 2004a: 71). Denham's

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second assertion now appears closer to the mark than his first. Caste distinctions have not only endured, they have mattered: a perennial topic for gossip (Spencer 1990: 190; Stirrat 1982: 25–26); a significant consideration in marriage (Abeyasekera 2021); a divisive element in Buddhist monastic organization (Gombrich 1971b: 294 ff.); an impetus for rivalries and power struggles (Moore 1998: 68–69); and a continual basis for political organizing and identity formation, recently amplified by social media (Gunasekera 1994: 99–114; Obeyesekere 1974: 371–73; Wickramasinghe 2006: 332). Caste is also the primary reason that every year hundreds of Sinhala people petition to change their names (W.M.A. de Silva 2009).[1]

Sinhala caste and caste-like practices cannot be reduced to a simple puzzle with a simple solution. But because the subject continues to arise during fieldwork, I find I cannot keep sweeping it under the rug while rehearsing allusions to it not quite being India, especially now that the old presumption of a timeless and monolithic Hindu caste system to which Sinhala caste might be compared has been thoroughly discredited (Fuller 1996; Rogers 2004a). So, throwing caution to the wind, here I reconnoiter a patch of this much trodden terrain anew. I focus on the territory of the former Kandyan Kingdom (ca. 1591–1815), the last holdout to European colonialism. We now know that this interior kingdom was not an isolated world apart (Obeyesekere 2017a; Sivasundaram 2013: 5). Nonetheless, the coasts and the Jaffna Peninsula receive only passing reference here because they had more frequent and more sustained interchanges with the subcontinent (Roberts 1980; Sivasundaram 2010: 431); were longer subject to the direct effects of European rule (Dewasiri 2008; Kotelawele 1988); and in some of these areas, caste distinctions were reinforced by the Catholic Church (Stirrat 1982: 23–25; Guha 2013: 24).[2]

Another early procedural choice proved unsustainable: to consider Sinhala caste on its own. Because scholars have documented the shapeshifting heterogeneity of caste on the mainland, I presumed that caste in Sri Lanka, too, had been remade primarily within local arenas. I soon realized I could not discount mainland effects. For example, the dualism of early Sri Lankan social organization is redolent of the concurrent dualism found in ancient Tamilakam (Abraham 2003: 207; Stein 1980: 173 ff.). And the nineteenth-century colonial idea of a monolithic "Indian caste system" resounded in Sri Lanka despite the fact that it everywhere rode roughshod over the realities of temporal and spatial variability (Fuller 1996: 5–7; Rogers 2004b).

Nonetheless, I have come to see Sinhala caste as neither a hodgepodge of introduced elements nor a collateral effect of the subcontinent's proximity. Its ontogeny has been its own. Here I sketch a possible developmental path. I visit the question of origins, combining evidence from mainland and island archaeology, traditional texts, and recent genetic research. Together, these suggest that Sinhala caste began to develop during the first millennium CE, later than sometimes assumed (e.g., Abeyaratne 1999: 137; Ryan 1993[1953]: 3). I then explore the simple bifurcation of society into "high"

[1]Name-changing may also be done to mask ethnicity (Thenne Gedera 2021: ch. 5).

[2]The Census of Sri Lanka categorizes the population by ethnicity and religion. The 2012 census (total population, 20,359,400) reported: 74.9 percent Sinhala (primarily Buddhist); 11.1 percent Sri Lankan Tamil (Hindu and Roman Catholic); 4.1 percent Indian/Estate Tamil (Hindu); 9.3 percent Moor (Muslim); and <1 percent Burghers/Eurasians, Malays, Chettys, Baratha, and indigenous Veddahs (Sri Lanka 2021: table 2.10). Sri Lankan Tamils predominate in the northern districts, Indian (Estate) Tamils in the south-central highland tea country, Muslims and Tamils in the east, and Sinhala in the western, central, and southwestern regions (ibid.: tables 2.11, 2.12, 2.13).

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and “low” people, as described by fourth century CE authors; this duality’s persistence into the early second millennium; its elaboration in the bureaucratic political economy of the Kandyan Kingdom; and the dissonance between this Sinhala model of collective inequality and the Brahmanical model brought to bear by colonial powers and the Sinhala elite. To better understand how people negotiate living with two conflicting models of caste, I end with a case study of a non-elite community.

From a universalist perspective, caste exemplifies what sociologist Charles Tilly called “social categories that justify and sustain unequal advantage” (2001: 362). But Tilly cautioned that universalism is always tempered by historicism: “How the [inequality’s] mechanisms concatenate and what large-scale effects they produce both depend on the cultural milieu in which they operate” (2000: 489). Importantly, he emphasized that in all milieus social categories are not fixed but emerge dynamically from ongoing “transactions across social positions” (2001: 362). The story of Sinhala caste that my exploration has produced is indeed one of dynamic, adaptive, and relational collective identities.

Origins

Social scientists typically use the word *caste* to indicate social groupings that are endogamous, associated with distinctive occupations and diets, ascribed relational moral valences, and afforded differential access to resources, power, and status. None of these different strands of identity ascription is unique to South Asia. But there, they are knotted together to produce the understanding that human beings are naturally subdivided into intrinsically distinct varieties (Guha 2013: 1–2). It is not known when or where this view first arose. While archaeological, textual, and historical evidence indicates that individual elements go back millennia, their interweaving into a holistic sense of human difference appears to be a more recent phenomenon (Boivin 2007: 341; Conningham and Young 2015: 32–33; Sinopoli 1991: 184–85). For example, archaeologists excavating the sophisticated cities of the Indus Valley civilization, at its height from 2600–1900 BCE, have uncovered evidence of craft specialists taught their skills by kin. But there are no indications of residential segregation or dietary differentiations and, in contrast to contemporaneous cities in Egypt and Mesopotamia, even the existence of political and religious elites is uncertain (Kenoyer 1989; Green 2021).

A millennium or so after the decline of the Indus cities, something closer to what we think of as caste appeared in Sanskrit technical treatises (*śāstra*) written by Brahmins. Beginning about the fourth century BCE, a *śāstra* “sub-genre” called *Dharmaśāstra* referred routinely to four hereditary social classes (*varṇa*): priests, rulers and soldiers, traders, and farmers and craftspeople (Olivelle 2011b: 155; 2011a: 218). However, according to Sanskritist Patrick Olivelle, this was not caste: “These texts recognize only the division of society into four *varṇas* and their social ideology is based on *varṇa* and not on caste (*jāti*)” (2011a: 218). Olivelle also noted that when *Dharmaśāstra* authors addressed ritual purity, they portrayed it as a transient individual condition, not a group attribute or basis for social stratification (ibid.: 240–41).[3] Furthermore, these

[3]How one construes *varṇa* is critical. Historian Stein translates it as “caste” (2010: 78). Sanskritist Olivelle prefers “class,” reserving “caste” for *jāti*. Olivelle also insists that the much earlier (ca. 2500 BCE) *Puruṣa* story of human origins employs *varṇa* for population divisions without connotations of relative purity (2011a: 241).

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texts were not disinterested descriptions of what people were doing; they were assertions of Brahmanical authority at a time when it was being challenged by "the ascetic and world-renouncing ideologies … of the religious reformations in northern India" (Olivelle 2012: 119, 122). So, did people heed the texts?

The evidence is mixed. On the one hand, while the well-known *Mānava Dharmaśāstra* (*Law Code of Manu*, ca. 200 CE) prescribed class (*varṇa*) endogamy, it also laid out non-punitive procedures for dealing with the offspring of "mixed classes," implying that the prescription was contravened too often for deviations to be ignored (Olivelle 2004: 184 ff.). On the other hand, biological evidence suggests that localized endogamy was indeed on the rise around the time that *Manu* was written. Geneticists who unpack population histories by analyzing DNA from present-day people have found that around 200 CE the subcontinent "…experienced a demographic transformation … from a region in which major population mixture was common to one in which mixture even between closely related groups became rare because of a shift to endogamy" (Moorjani et al. 2013: 430).[4]

Archaeologists, too, have looked for evidence that *śāstra* precepts affected popular practice. Robin Coningham and Ruth Young reviewed site reports for ancient South Asian cities and compared them to town planning directives found in the *Arthaśāstra* (ca. 300 BCE–300 CE). They found that while the quadrangular layouts and other architectural details of some South Asian cities, including the ancient Sinhala capital at Anuradhapura, appeared to heed the text, many did not (2015: 417–19). Furthermore, in Sri Lanka there was no evidence of the text's recommended segregation of people by *varṇa*. Coningham and Young's analyses of the particularly well-preserved materials from Anuradhapura Period I (ca. 350–275 BCE) and Period G/H (275 BCE–200 CE) revealed "…no distinct areas associated with specific castes." They also found that "…[remains of food] species forbidden and permitted by the laws of Manu were found together throughout the city" (Coningham et al. 2017: 39). We note, however, that the end date for Coningham and Young's sample was 200 CE, the approximate date for both *Manu*'s composition and the beginnings of highly localized endogamy on the mainland. Perhaps if the archaeologists had included a later period in their analysis, they would not have come up empty-handed.

In sum, we do not really know when caste began. Individual elements waxed and waned over the centuries and evidence for their interweaving is uncertain. Furthermore, as Nicole Boivin has warned, attempts to extrapolate from thin information about the past to the presence of anything like a caste system inevitably "suffer from a tendency to infer caste from otherwise ambiguous data strictly on the basis of a South Asian context" (2007: 349). But Boivin also urged us to persevere, to avoid "shying away" from trying to map caste's development (ibid.: 357). For that, one needs a starting point. My reading of the evidence discussed here is

[4]These geneticists do not claim that contemporary caste groups are genetically distinctive, but that DNA analysis can help to understand past population movements. They collected DNA from 571 living individuals representing seventy-three South Asian "ethno-linguistic" groups. From this sample, they analyzed small DNA fragments ("single nucleotide polymorphisms," SN[i]Ps), which contain heritable variations useful for tracking demographic shifts. Moorjani and her team genotyped 494,863 SNPs and used backwards-in-time statistical simulations to estimate the historical spread of SNP variations (2013: 423). They found an early period of geographically widespread SNP sharing followed (ca. 200 AD) by a transition to almost no sharing, which they interpret as increased localized endogamy. Their appendices describe their methodology (ibid.: 429–36). Reich explains the technique (2018: 130–33).

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that on the mainland but not the island there was a significant social shift affecting local group intermarriage around 200 CE. Therefore, it is likely that the starting point for pursuing the story of Sinhala caste should be after that point, that is, around the middle of the first millennium CE.

Early History

Scholars often look first to the South Asian subcontinent as a source of Sinhala culture. Caste is no exception. But although we find similar artifacts and practices on the mainland and the island, local customization rather than wholesale adoption was the norm.[5] Furthermore, Sri Lanka has long been engaged with a wider geography. By the fifth century CE, the island was the center of the Indian Ocean trade connecting South Asia with the Mediterranean world, North Africa, Arabia, Southeast Asia, and China (Bandaranayake 2012; Bopearachchi, Senarath, and Perera 2016: 415; Schenk 2006: 123; Weisshaar 2015: 219). Archaeologists in Sri Lanka have unearthed late Roman coins, amphorae made in Egypt and Mesopotamia, Southeast Asian-style sprinkler jars, and Chinese ceramics (Coningham et al. 2017: 26–27; Kessler 2016: 445; Schenk 2015: 162–67; Schenk and Weisshaar 2016: 465–72; Strathern 2009: 827). In a time when "the seas were often less a barrier to travel and communication than a vehicle for it," the island's location and harbors underwrote far-reaching networks of commerce and religion (Strathern and Biedermann 2017: 2; also Bopearachchi 2008: 2). These external linkages contributed to the making of distinct milieus for the development of Sinhala caste.

For example, first millennium CE Sinhala religion had at least three different ingredients. Foremost was Buddhism, introduced from the northern subcontinent during the third century BCE. It subsequently evolved in exchanges with Southeast Asia to become part of a regional Buddhist tradition grounded in shared Pāli (rather than Sanskrit or Gāndhārī) texts and an important facilitator of interregional trade networks (Ray 1994: 189–91; Salomon 1999: 3–8; Stargardt 2008: 675; Weisshaar 2015: 221–22). Second was probably the still mysterious "Tabbova-Maradanmaduva culture," evidence for which consists of hundreds of deliberately damaged ("sacrificed") terracotta figures excavated at twenty northern and mid-island sites (Coningham et al. 2012). This culture may represent the persistence of pre-Buddhist traditions, traces of which linger in Sinhala Buddhist village rituals today (Gombrich 1971a; Paranavitana 1929). And finally, there was Brāhmaṇism, its persistence testified to by the remains of Hindu shrines and rock inscriptions found alongside Buddhist ones; the propitiation of deities of Hindu origin in Buddhist rituals; and artifacts, such as the little "Lakshmi plaques" excavated widely and variously interpreted as coins or amulets (Coningham et al. 2017: 35, 37–38; Wallburg 2008: 85–108). Together, these three made up a uniquely Sinhala religious amalgam.

Sinhala social ranking also took a distinctive turn. First millennium CE Sinhala society lacked the depth of hierarchical differentiations that developed during the post-Buddhism resurgence of Brāhmaṇism on the northern subcontinent (Stein 2010: 87). The *Mahāvaṃsa*, a key forth century CE chronicle, described society in Sri Lanka's

[5]Examples include megalithic burial traditions (Coningham and Young 2015: 348–50), pottery forms (Schenk 2015: 169; Weisshaar 2015: 220), and Black-and-Red Ware firing methods (Ray 1994: 14–17).

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north as having two levels: "people of good family" (*kulīnā*), who own land and work for themselves, and "people of lower classes" (*hīnā*), "artisans and craftsmen [who] … work for other people…" (Geiger 1960: 30–31). Pāli scholar Wilhelm Geiger stressed that the *Mahāvaṃsa* used the word *pessā* for craftsmen categories, not *jāti* or *vaṇṇa* (*varṇa*), adding: "In the chapters of the *Mahāvaṃsa* where medieval times are described, the institution of castes is seldom mentioned…" (p. 25). On the island's southern coast, archaeologists excavating the Tissamaharama Citadel (450 BCE–500 CE) also observed a two-level hierarchy: "…[a] sharp difference between the Workmen's Quarter … and the living quarters with large mansions…" (Weisshaar 2015: 220).

Interestingly, while Sinhala social structure contrasted with the mainland north, it was similar to the mainland south, at least for a while. Early first millennium CE Tamilakam—"roughly the present-day states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu" (Abraham 2003: 207)—also was two-tiered. The higher tier was composed of Brahmins, then expanding from north to south. The larger, lower tier comprised the *ilipirappalar* (low-born) or *śūdras*, a broad, flexible, and generally undifferentiated class that included farmers, craftsmen, and service groups (Avari 2007: 241; Gurukkal 1998: 42). However, within a few centuries, Tamilakam's lower tier had become internally divided into Right Hand and Left Hand castes (*jāti*), a different bifurcation that persisted into the twentieth century (Appadurai 1974: 216; Beck 1970; Stein 1980: 173–215). On the right were agriculturalists and subordinate service castes; on the left, more autonomous and mobile artisan and merchant castes. Brahmins, now more numerous and influential in the south, were placed either at the head of the Right Hand division or atop the system altogether (Appadurai 1974: 218). A similar dual organization has been reported for twentieth-century Tamils on Sri Lanka's Jaffna Peninsula but not for Sinhala people (David 1972: 204–49; Pfaffenberger 1982: 82–91; cf. Banks 1960: 74).[6] Some scholars have suggested that the Right/Left system functioned to absorb immigrant craft and trading groups into local agricultural social formations, which, as we will see, has parallels with later developments in Sinhala Sri Lanka (Appadurai 1974: 226; Obeyesekere 1975: 46).

The northern Sinhala kingdom described by the *Mahāvaṃsa* did not survive the first millennium CE. By the eleventh century, it had been weakened by climate change, malaria, and invasions from the mainland (K. M. de Silva 1977: 44–46; Lucero, Fletcher, and Coningham 2015). Subsequently, political centers and much of the population shifted southwards. Some settled near the coast, attracted by well-watered farmlands and dynamic coastal entrepôts; others chose the relative safety of interior highlands. Transient capitals were established along the way in protected rock fortresses (Dam̆badeniya, Yāpahuwa, Dädigama, and Kurunägala) and upland Gampoḷa, before consolidating in the fifteenth century at Kōttē near the coast, where the Portuguese would find them in 1505; and during the sixteenth century, at

[6] David (1972: 204–49) called these "Bound" (*kuṭimai*) and "Unbound" castes. Pfaffenberger (1982: 82–85) used the Right/Left terminology, emphasizing perceived similarities with medieval India. However, Banks contended that the twentieth-century autonomy of Jaffna artisan castes is less ancient heritage than the result of court rulings after the nineteenth-century abolition of slavery (1960: 74). On Sri Lanka's East Coast, hereditary Hindu Tamil domestic-service castes are also called *kuṭimai* and artisans are independent but there is no evidence for Left Hand/Right Hand organization (McGilvray 2008: 156; M. Whitaker, personal communication, 19 Mar. 2023).

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Senkaḍagala Nuvara (Kandy) in the highland interior. Historians describe those centuries as unsettled and unstable: political power and administration were fragmented (C. R. de Silva 1995a; K. M. de Silva 2016[2005]: 113–14), local rulers ("petty chiefs") gained autonomy (Kulasuriya 1976), and immigration from the mainland increased (Roberts 1980: 37).

It was during this transitional time that increased interest in inherited collective identities seems to have emerged.[7] In 1266, at Daṁbadeniya, one of the short-lived capitals, new Buddhist monastic rules called the *Daṁbadeniya Katikāvata* initiated the requirement that monks be asked their *jāti-gōtra* (caste/clan) during higher ordination (Gombrich 1971b: 307; Malalgoda 1976: 90). A century later, in the Sinhala capital in highland Gampoḷa (ca. 1341–1415), royal scribes compiled administrative boundary books (*kaḍaim pot*) that sometimes mentioned caste-like groups in passing. For example, the *Srī Laṃkādvīpayē Kaḍaim* listed service groups (*duravala*), low groups (*jāti-pajāti*, *aḍukulayan*), Brahmins (*bamunu*), and people of the "four *varṇa*" (*cāturavarṇaayo*) (Abeyawardana 1999: 157/192, 160/196, 165/201).

That *varṇa* reference might lead us to think that Brahmanical influence was gaining a foothold in Sri Lanka. However, we should be cautious. The *kaḍaim* described an altered *varṇa* order: *rāja* (king), *bamunu* (Brahmins), *velanda* (merchants), *goi* (farmers), and "other *jāti-pajāti*" (Abeyawardana 1999: 138–40). Elevating rulers above priests befitted Sinhala polities where Brahmins served kings primarily as secular advisors and royal tutors (Obeyesekere 2017a: 166; 2017b: 374).[8] And while boundary books distinguished the different occupations of the non-*varṇa* population and sometimes grouped them in blocks (e.g., Abeyawardana 1999: 138–39), they did not rank them. Overall, the boundary books recall the *Mahāvaṃsa*'s ancient social bifurcation: now, *varṇa* and non-*varṇa* people, with a focus on services and products forthcoming from each, appropriate for field inventories of kingdom properties and peoples (ibid.: 136, 208–9).

Interestingly, this growing interest in caste-like identities was accompanied by controversy. Even in the elite worlds of monasteries and royal scribes, Sinhala caste apparently was not an accepted social fact. The fourteenth-century *Kulavistara* (Treatise on Castes) went so far as to caution that because all Sinhala people are mixed descendants of immigrants from the subcontinent, "…Siṃhala residents should not refer to … caste membership" (ibid.: 17). The *Janavaṃsaya* (ca. 1420),[9] a much-cited Sinhala compilation of imaginative origin stories for dozens of occupational groups, credited almost every group with Brahmin roots. As if to underline an anti-caste stance, the *Janavaṃsaya*'s author interpolated the text with lines from the *Vasala Sutta*, Buddha's well-known anti-caste teaching: "Not by birth is one an outcast; not by birth is one a brahman. By deed one becomes an outcast, by deed one becomes a brahman" (Ariyapala 1956: 290–91; *Janavaṃsaya* 1887 [ca. 1420]; Piyadassi 1999; Wickremasinghe 1900: 86).

[7]Early Sinhala kingly authority was sometimes bolstered by claims to *kṣatriya* heritage. But historians describe this as an aspect of the king's personal identity, not a claim to membership in a category within a system of such categories (Gunawardana 1990: 65).

[8]Dirks (1993: 283–84) describes a similar supporting role played by Brahmins in a seventeenth-century Tamil kingdom on the subcontinent.

[9]While 1420 is commonly cited, some authorities suggest an earlier date, others a later one (Roberts 1980: 46 n22).

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The Kandyan Kingdom

Thus, during the centuries leading up to the Kandyan Kingdom (ca. 1591–1815), Sinhala society was increasingly focused on lineage and inherited occupation as important group identifiers. Some sources referred to these groups as *jāti*, others used the word *kula*, Sanskrit for family or lineage (Olivelle 2011a: 158). These groups were not understood to have a linear hierarchical relation to each other. Historian Nirmal Dewasiri wrote, "A community becomes a caste only by being integrated into a caste hierarchy" (2008: 187). But the hierarchy that emerged in the Kandyan Kingdom was neither the ladder-like ordering of the mainland's North nor the South's twin hierarchies. Instead, the Kingdom retained the ancient dualism. Returning to Geiger: "The division of the whole society into two which had begun in the medieval period with the distinction between *kulīnā* and *hīnā* is now [by the Kandyan period] definitely completed" (Geiger 1960: 32; also Dewaraja 1995: 375; Gunasinghe 1990[1980]: 105). Agriculturalists (farmer, *goi-vaṃsa*, Goigama) composed the upper half of the population, with an internal elite group called Radala (Obeyesekere 2017b: 374). A dozen or so service and craft specialist groups made up the non-Goigama half of the population without a "fixed order of precedence" (Dewaraja 1995: 379; also Dewasiri 2008: 186–88; Pieris 1956: 176).[10]

But Geiger's "division of the whole society into two" does scant justice to the Kandyan Kingdom's evolving complexities. The underlying principle was simple enough. The king was the lord and protector of the kingdom's land; therefore, almost all land users owed taxes, *rājakāriya* (king's work).[11] *Rājakāriya* was a perennial obligation. It defined citizenship, ran with the land, and mobilized labor at local, regional, and kingdom levels. After the Dutch "ousted the Portuguese" and gained control of the kingdom's formerly lucrative external trade in the mid-seventeenth century, the king's dependence on *rājakāriya* increased (Dewaraja 1995: 391–92). Accordingly, the organizational apparatus for extracting labor and products through obligations attached to inherited and monopolistic trades became more centralized and earlier "flexibility in caste matters" gave way to greater social rigidity (ibid.: 380).

By the early eighteenth century, elite Goigama administrators were overseeing a service bureaucracy made up of occupation-specific departments (*badda*), each with its own head, obligations, and entitlements (Dewaraja, Arasaratnam, and Kotelawele 1995: 335–36). For example, the Potter's Department (*baḍahāla-badda*) saw to it that "Each provincial chief … sent his quota of men to the capital for three months of the year to perform whatever service required of them…" (Pieris 1956: 99; also,

[10]The Englishman Robert Knox, under house arrest in the kingdom from 1659 to 1678, claimed in his memoir that the kingdom did have a fixed caste hierarchy (1911[1681]: 105–11). But his sociology is unreliable. For example, we quickly discount his statement that *Roḍiyā* people routinely practice mother/son and father/daughter incest (113). Knox stated that he wrote from "personal Knowledge" supplemented by what was "commonly known to be true," a phrase suggestive of stereotype (10). Scholars have observed that although Knox could read, he had to relearn writing on the long journey home, where his rough notes were edited and amended by his brother, representatives of the British East India Company, and the Royal Society. Their prior knowledge of India, as well as Knox's experience in Portuguese-controlled areas of India as a teenager, may have colored the brief memoir sections devoted to Kandyan social organization (also, Mahroof 1997: 5; cf. Dewasiri 2008: 193–97). Those financing publication of Knox's account were less concerned with its sociological accuracy than with rushing it into print for political and commercial ends (Leach 1989; Winterbottom 2009).

[11]For coastal areas: Dewasiri 2008: 32–33; and C. R. de Silva 1995b: 43–44.

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Dewaraja, Arasaratnam, and Kotelawele 1995: 335). This duty was rotated among the kingdom's four central provinces so that "the king always had potters at his service" (Pieris 1956: 99). While serving, the potters were fed and housed but not paid. Once their service period ended, they returned to their villages to farm, make pottery in their workshops, and live with their families on kingdom land. Not all specialists were called to Kandy for *rājakāriya*. Some served a regional landholding governor, chief, or temple, and others had no service obligations but sold their products or traded with other specialists (Kulasekera 1985: 207). The Kandyan bureaucracy was most effective in the central provinces; at the kingdom's distant edges, "the overlordship of the monarch and his state officials was scarcely noticed…" (Pieris 1956: 44; also, Dewaraja, Arasaratnam, and Kotelawele 1995: 337–38).

Some lands and even whole villages were held outright by Buddhist temples and deity shrines, which were able to claim the owed goods and services for themselves (Pieris 1956: 22–24, 180–87).[12] An excerpt from the land register of the Wilbawa Pattinī Dēvālē gives the flavor of these arrangements. Again using Potters as an example, here are the obligations specified for those who use the nineteenth share or "Potters' portion" of the *dēvālē* (deity shrine) land: "During the four festivals to give one hundred clay pots to the *dēvālē*; to tile the roof of the Pattinī *dēvālē*; and during the Yala season festival, to provide fifty oil lamps; and once a month to keep watch over the *dēvālē*; and once a year to give a *pingo* [shoulder-pole] load of pots to the Basnāyake Nilame [lay shrine chief] and a pot for the Bo tree almsgiving. [These] are the duties of the nineteenth share holder."[13]

The Kandyan Kingdom's economic administration was a clever system that addressed the reality that because population density was low,[14] labor was harder to come by than land (Bandarage 1983: 196). This mode of labor extraction did not depend upon a comprehensive ranking of occupational specialists in relation to each other or upon the debasement of non-elite groups by the elite. It depended, rather, on system-wide participation and interdependence (Obeyesekere 2017b: 374–75).

So, is caste the best way to understand the high/low structural dualism that ordered endogamous occupational groups on much of the island for almost two millennia? Only if we avoid conjuring a stereotypical vision of the subcontinent's religion-justified hierarchies. As Obeyesekere has observed, there is no Sinhala word for "caste" that does not also have other meanings, and while the Brahmanical *varṇa* categories were known in Kandyan times, they were cited only on "… formal occasions, such as during a ritual for gods or as a reference term in written texts" (2017b: 374; also Rogers 2004b: 627). If even the simple four-level *varṇa* scheme did

[12]When I inquired about contemporary performance of these duties, I heard complaints about the difficulties of collecting on them. One *kapurāla* (deity shrine priest) showed me a thick packet of letters he had written in vain to users of shrine land.

[13]This share register belongs to a temple in Potuhera, Kurunegala District (copy in author's files, translation by Mr. Raja Pothuhera). Entitled, "Register of shareholdings and work to be done in accordance with the enactment dated 4 November 1870 governing Kudāgabade Kōraḷē, Kurunegala District," it was likely compiled in response to the British Service Tenures Ordinance of 1870, which sought to determine which lands the British could control, sell, or tax, and which were held by temples or others with legal title (Roberts 1973: 133).

[14]Sixteenth-century Portuguese sources suggest roughly 750,000 inhabitants island-wide: 400,000–450,000 in the western and southwestern coastal areas; and 100,000–150,000 on the Jaffna Peninsula; leaving 150,000–250,000 for the Kandyan Kingdom, which had large stretches of uninhabited territory (C. R. de Silva 1995a: 37–38).

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not provide the working model for how all these occupation-associated groups understood their relationship to each other, then what did?

Models of Caste

When we think about social strata, we imagine layers, such as the horizontal sediment stripes revealed by a road cut or a wedding cake's frosted tiers. The four ranked classes (*varṇa*) of the *śāstra* literature and the myriad local caste (*jāti*) hierarchies that appeared and disappeared over the centuries on the subcontinent may fit this image.

But the social structure of the Kandyan Kingdom seems to call for a different visualization, one that includes not only high and low, but also center and periphery, more cartwheel than ladder. We can picture the king and his elite administrators occupying the cartwheel's raised hub; specialist providers arrayed in villages around the rim; and goods and services flowing along the spokes into the center with rights to land and other recognitions returned. The cartwheel was adaptable. It could incorporate new spokes—Muslims, Christians, Indian migrants who settled on kingdom land, refugees from colonial rule on the coast—without losing its integrity or forcing people into arbitrary categorical boxes. It was a suitable system for a dynamic, cosmopolitan polity faced with the task of absorbing new peoples (Strathern and Biedermann 2017; Sivasundaram 2013: 41–43).

But while the superiority of the Goigama hub in relation to the service provider spokes was clear, how the spokes stood in relation to each other was not. Most villages were small, single-specialist communities. Few occasions brought different specialists together so that a hierarchy might be negotiated. Even weekly markets where producers congregated to buy, sell, or barter goods and services did not exist until the mid-nineteenth century, introduced by the British to provision the needs of expanding cities and estates (Winslow Jackson 1977: 76–84).

The *Äsaḷa perahära*, a Buddhist parade festival held annually in the kingdom's capital, Kandy, has been described as a "pre-eminent representation of the [Sinhala] caste system" (Seneviratne 1978: 112). But the participating specialists—shrine chiefs, whip crackers, drummers, dancers, elephant handlers, and so on—did so as members of individual parade sections, not in a single hierarchical order. The arrangement of the sections laid out the kingdom's core values and cartwheel political structure: Buddha, represented by the Tooth Relic; contingents from each of the four central deity shrines; representatives of the central administrative departments; and representatives of the twelve ranked territorial divisions (Seneviratne 1978: 108–10; Winslow 1984).

Outside the Kandyan Kingdom, pre-colonial society is less well-documented because almost all indigenous archives were destroyed in warfare (K. M. de Silva 1995: 3). But after first the Portuguese (1505–1658) and then the Dutch (1658–1796) gained control of the coasts, they quickly created new records to identify group-based service obligations they could enforce for their own support and profit (Dewasiri 2008: 5, 32–33, 86; Rogers 2004a: 54–57; Strathern 2008: 101–4). The Europeans referred to the service groups as *casta*, using a word from Portuguese, the colonial lingua franca in South Asia, denoting human and animal groups distinguishable by bloodline (Guha 2013: 19–25). For the Portuguese and the Dutch, it was enough to simply distinguish one *casta* from another; for their purposes, a more detailed sociology was not needed.

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The British expelled the Dutch from the coasts in 1796 and gained the interior Kandyan Kingdom in 1815, becoming the first colonial power to rule the whole island. They, too, undertook an accounting of services owed. In the coastal areas, they began by distributing a circular seeking relevant information from local revenue collectors.[15] Responses received ranged from brief assertions of universal liability for coolie and military duty to detailed "caste" lists, which included not only the usual specialists—fishers, potters, and so on—but also Europeans, Chinese, Dutch, Moors, Parsis, and slaves. For the interior areas formerly held by the Kandyan king, early British observers reported simply "high" and "low" castes. British surgeon John Davy did attempt a more detailed breakdown of interior castes but confessed that it was "not perhaps … thoroughly accurate," because "…the relative rank of the lower castes is of little consequence … and differently adjusted in different provinces" (Davy 1969[1821]: 84–85). He added that while "pure Singalese" are "completely Indians," caste "prevails … to a less extent, and with less effect on the minds of the people" (ibid.: 82, 84).

At first, the British, like their predecessors, applied the word *caste* to "almost any social group…" (Rogers 2004b: 634; Wickramasinghe 2006: 47). Then in 1833, the Colonial Office in London sent a deputation, the Colebrooke-Cameron Commission, to investigate the colony's deficit finances. The commissioners declared that policies distinguishing people by caste were unprogressive and should be discontinued. But erasing caste from official lists, speeches, and policy documents did not so much eliminate it as move it to the shadows where its influence persisted (Rogers 2004b: 639–40, 645). So, while the government followed the Commission's recommendation to open up the civil service to Ceylonese, in practice this meant giving opportunities to "local elite" (Samaraweera 1973: 84; also Peebles 1995: 45). When the British sought information about traditional laws and customs, they often turned to this same elite.

The elite had their own concerns. They faced competition from non-elite groups who wanted to translate success in colonial schools and the increasingly mercantilist economy into social status (Jayawardena 2000; Kannangara 2011: xix–xxiv). To maintain their position, the elite were inclined to reinforce the idea, also held by the British, that hereditary groupings were naturally distinctive and that some were entitled to preferment (Kulasekera 1985: 217–22; Rogers 2004a: 58–59; 2004b: 640; Wickramasinghe 2006: 140–42, 171–73). At the same time, the earlier view that Sinhala caste was different from Indian caste was being eroded by the diffusion from the subcontinent of increasingly textualized interpretations of caste (Dirks 2015: 90–99). The influential *Níti-Nighaṇḍuva*, a late nineteenth-century account of Kandyan law compiled from interviews with Kandyan elites and translated by a succession of British officials, even opens with an alleged migration of "four great castes" from India to Sri Lanka, an assertion of priority by those who also were claiming *varṇa* heritage in public debates (LeMesurier and Panabokke 1880: 5–6; Kannangara 1995: 118). English anthropologist A. M. Hocart went so far as to base his account of Indian caste on his experiences as Archaeological Commissioner in Ceylon (Hocart 1950: 3).

Frederic Austin Hayley, an English lawyer who represented clients before the Ceylon Supreme Court in the early twentieth century, witnessed these contradictions first-hand. In his own compilation of Kandyan law he wrote: "The caste system in Ceylon, like many of the social institutions of the Island, while exhibiting in certain features similarities to its Indian counterpart, has developed upon lines of its own,

[15]Vimalananda reproduces the responses (1972: xlii–lxi).

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which distinguish it as a separate local phenomenon…. Native [colonial and Sri Lankan] historians, on the other hand, have always been at pains to bring the divisions of caste into line with the Indian distinctions as described by Manu" (Hayley 1994[1923]: 146, 147). Thus, Sinhala people entered the twentieth century with two starkly different conceptual models available to them for thinking about themselves and others as members of caste-like social groups: the two-level multi-spoked cartwheel and the multiple-level ladder. The two are so different that we might wonder how they have been brought together in contemporary social life. Have they merged? Has one taken over, the other faded away? Can they coexist?

Living with Multiple Models of Caste

The depth of the contrast between these two models was brought home to me when a Potter friend[16] told me his version of the Mahāsammata story. The usual starting point for this tale is that long ago, after eons of living as gods in "anarchic bliss," people grew selfish and thereby lost their immortality while society descended into chaos. Realizing they needed someone to restore order, the people chose Mahāsammata, "one selected by … all," as their ruler (Pieris 1956: 169–70). This story is told widely in Sri Lanka (Stirrat 1982: 18). But the Vidānē Mahattea's[17] version stands out for its brevity. Here, in its entirety, is what he said:

"Mahāsammata Rājarua was a king soon after Vijaya came to the island and destroyed the Yaksha (demons) who were living here.[18] He gave to different families all the work for the palace and he made the divisions last through the generations."

I asked,

"Where did the levels come from, the differences between high and low?"

The Vidānē Mahattea replied,

"Mahāsammata Rājarua did not make the levels, only the divisions. Higher and lower came later, as those who had more difficult lives were thought lower than those who had easier lives, like someone who has a government job and someone who is poor and has to struggle."

He hesitated, then added:

"But the king might have had it [the levels] in his mind when he gave out the jobs" (fieldnotes, 25 Nov. 1975).

The Vidānē Mahattea's Mahāsammata story encompasses royalty, occupational differentiation, and economic inequality. The image of the king in his palace amidst specialists providing him with goods and services suggests the Kandyan cartwheel. We also notice that people existed *before* they were divided, a contrast to the Vedic origin story. That hymn describes how, by dividing up the primordial man, Puruṣa, the gods created people and *varṇa* together: Brahmins from Puruṣa's head, warriors

[16]*Badahäla* or *Badahälayo* is the traditional Sinhala name for the Potter caste (Abeyawardana 1999: 137). The Potters I know prefer *kumbal*, possibly a Tamil borrowing although there was a similar thirteenth-century Sinhala term, *kumbuakāra* (Abeyawardana 1999: 138).

[17]The Vidānē Mahattea's title ("Headman Sir") lingered from his village-level colonial service.

[18]According to tradition, Vijaya was a northern Indian prince and grandson of a lion (*sinha*). After he and his rowdy followers were banished from the kingdom, they sailed to Sri Lanka, defeated the Yaksha inhabitants, and established the Sinhala people (Gombrich 1971b: 27).

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(*Kshatriyas*) from his arms, ordinary people (*Vaishyas*) from his trunk, and servants (*Shudras*) from his feet (Fuller 2004: 12). While the Mahāsammata story presumes a common humankind, the *Puruṣa* story implies more fundamental differentiations.

So, how is this discordance encountered and negotiated in people's lives? The answer to this question is best sought where people live, such as the Vidānē Mahattea's own village, Walangama.

Kulaya: The Cartwheel at Home

Walangama (my pseudonym) is a Potter caste village located in the Kurunegala District, formerly the Seven Korales, an outlying province (*disāvanē*) of the Kandyan Kingdom.[19] Walangama people prefer to discuss caste in the privacy of their homes and workshops. For specific instances of caste identity, they employ the Sanskrit-derived term *jātiya* (kind or class, applicable to any noun) or combine a caste name with *minissu* (people), as in "Goigama *minissu.*" In the abstract, however, they talk about *kula bhēdaya*, distributed by *kulaya.*[20] Carter's Sinhalese-English dictionary translates *kulaya* as "caste, rank, or tribe" (1965[1924]: 179). But when Walangama people talk about *kulaya,* the word conjures more than division. It also invokes the causative agent because of which those divisions exist. One is a Potter (or other inherited caste-like identity) because of one's *kulaya.*

In Walangama social theory, *kulaya* is transmitted unilineally from fathers to children, carried by blood and patrilineal *vāsagama* names. People told me consistently, "*Kulaya* always goes with *vāsagama.*" Interestingly, the Sanskrit root, *kula*, similarly references bloodline (Olivelle 2011b[2006]: 158). Most Walangama marriages are contracted within Potter marriage circles that connect about two dozen villages (Winslow 2002: 165 ff.). But cross-caste marriages do occur, perhaps facilitated by the belief that *kulaya* carries no implication of pollution (*killa*)[21] (Gombrich 1971b: 181; Silva, Sivapragasam, and Thanges 2009: 2–3; Stirrat 1982: 13). If a Walangama Potter man brings in a non-Potter bride, their children receive his *vāsagama* names and his *kulaya*; they are Potter *kulaya.* Similarly, when a Walangama Potter woman marries a non-Potter man, the children receive his *vāsagama* name and *kulaya*, not hers.

However, *kulaya* as *fixed patrilineal inheritance* is not the whole picture. There exists another dimension, a more *mutable bilateral sociality*, which gives the mother a small role in determining her children's *kulaya.* Yes, everyone agreed, children get

[19]My fieldwork in Sri Lanka, mostly in Walangama, has totaled about fifty-five months: 1973–1976 (thirty-three months), 1992 (seven months), 2004 (two months), and 2013 (nine months), with shorter trips of one to six weeks between.

[20]Anthropologists working elsewhere in Sri Lanka have reported a second term: *varige* (Spencer 1990: 268; Stirrat 1982: 11). When I asked, Walangama people suggested that *varige* referred generally to "others"—Tamils, Christians, Muslims, and foreigners (unpub. field notes, 29 Oct. 1975).

[21]The small, scattered group called *Roḍiyā* may be an exception to this norm. Traditionally farmers and basket makers, recent research has revealed multiple occupations (Silva 2011). In the Walangama area, *Roḍiyā* people travelled on foot to sell baskets from loads balanced across their shoulders. They sometimes were described as dirty (*kätay*), physically unclean and likely to leave a mess behind if you let them camp on your land. Other accounts (e.g., Ryan 1993[1953]: 225–38) describe a more visceral negative response. *Roḍiyā* numbers have always been few and their origins are uncertain (Denham 1912: 213–16).

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Table 1. Percentage of mixed-caste marriages in Walangama over time.

Year	Marriages surveyed	Mixed-caste marriages	percentage mixed
1975	135	3	2%
1992	129	6	5%
2013	195	24	12%

their blood from the father. But because of her love, some of a mother's blood passes into her milk and on to her children, transmitting a bit of her *kulaya* as it does. This is consistent with Stirrat's account of caste on Sri Lanka's west coast. There, too, where caste is unequivocally said to be a matter of patrifiliation, when the parents are of different castes, the mother's caste may affect a child's status (Stirrat 1982: 26–30).

An additional factor is residence. It is mentioned mostly with inter-*kulaya* marriages, still rare in Walangama but increasing (Table 1). For example, three Walangama women have married high-caste Goigama men employed in the military police. The husbands' work entails long absences from home. So, after virilocal (*dīga*) marriage ceremonies and brief stays in the husband's community, each of these couples settled in Walangama while retaining the right to later return to their husbands' villages should they wish. In Walangama, such ambilocality is neither unusual nor confined to mixed-caste marriages. Walangama is relatively uncrowded, with space for newlyweds to build houses. The increasingly mechanized pottery industry provides good money-making work for women and men, even those without traditional skills (Winslow 2016). It is not uncommon for women who have married away to return, husbands and children in tow. In the case of these three marriages, the wives were able to earn money making pottery while enjoying the support of kin as they raised their children without their husbands' day-to-day involvement. When asked about the children's caste, however, that *mutable, bilateral sociality* again came into play. Yes, because their fathers are Goigama, the children are Goigama. But, as one mother explained to me, they are also a little bit Potter caste (*apee*, "ours"), more than there would be if they lived in her husband's village. "This is because of where they live," she said.

Although Walangama fields and gardens were never held on service tenure, residents link *kulaya* and place. Echoing the Kandyan cartwheel model of caste, they emphasized differentiation, location, and traditional occupation. They easily recited the names of different castes in nearby villages but were uninterested in relative ranks.[22] If pushed, they grouped castes dualistically, using categories remarkably like those Geiger found in the fourth century CE *Mahāvaṃsa*: good people (*hoñda minissu*), who included, in their view, not only Goigama (the highest caste) but also the Potters themselves; and lower people (*aḍuy* or *bālay minissu*), service and artisan castes (also, Gunasinghe 1990[1980]: 109). Both old and young Potters expressed no doubt that their own place is among the good people. They reminded me that the sixth through the tenth nights of the Kandy *Äsala Perahära* make up the *Kumbal* ("Potter") *Perahära*. They cited a *Jātaka*

[22]Near Walangama, these include Goigama (traditionally, farmers), Panikki (traditionally, barbers), Beravā (traditionally, drummers, dancers, musicians), Radā (traditionally, washers), Durāva (traditionally toddy-tappers), and Hakuru (traditionally, palm sugar makers).

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(a story of Buddha's former births) in which Buddha was born to Potter parents and grew up to make pottery to support his own family.[23] The Potter caste people I know are secure in claiming *hoñda minissu* status but also are aware that others might not agree.

The village has thrived from pottery making. Comparatively few residents have chosen to leave for agricultural colonization schemes or to work abroad. When I walk in village lanes, I pass busy workshops, neat roadside stacks of pots, and lorries loading pottery to sell. This prosperity enables Walangama residents to entertain Goigama politicians and other notables at funeral and wedding feasts. During the spring pilgrimage season, dozens of pilgrims of all castes walk through the village to a *dānsala*[24] in the village temple complex where they consume refreshments prepared by Walangama men and women. Recently, Walangama added to their temple complex an imposing stupa (*chaitya*), much enlarged from the original plans. When I asked, "Why did you make it so big?," the temple committee president responded simply, "So that people will come and see." They are confident in their worth and take pride in their accomplishments. At home, they welcome everyone and do not hide their identity.

But outside Walangama, they have learned to be more cautious. As one Potter man explained to me in 2013, "There are those who might think less of us because of the work we do."

"In that time…"

In 1975, I had a conversation about caste with a Walangama *upāsaka*, someone known for piety and religious knowledge. "Is it correct," I asked the *upāsaka*, "what some people have told me, that caste no longer exists in Sri Lanka?" "No," he responded, "that is not right. But it is not like it was *in that time* (*e kālē*)." When Sinhala people talk about caste, they usually begin by saying that it is a feature of the past, not the present (Spencer 1990: 189; Stirrat 1982: 20). They then go on to describe former behavioral constraints for non-elite castes. The *upāsaka*'s list included:

- Potters could not wear tailored shirts or blouses; men had to go bare-chested, and women could only use the end of their sarong or sari to cover their breasts.
- Deferential forms of address were required when speaking to higher-caste people.
- When higher castes served food or drink to Potters, it was on disposable leaves and in throwaway coconut shells.
- In school, Potter children were made to sit apart from higher-caste children.
- At the Buddhist temple (*vihāra*) down the road, the Potters listened to the monk's sermons from outside the door while higher-caste people sat inside.

[23]This Jātaka is "The Tortoise Who Loved His Home Too Much." While digging clay in a lakebed, the future Buddha/Potter mortally injured a tortoise. Although killing is forbidden in Buddhism, the fault was determined to lie not with the Potter but with the tortoise. The tortoise was so attached to his lake home that he did not migrate during the dry season to the safety of the river as he should have. This Jātaka warns of the dangers of attachment.

[24]*Dānsalas* are places where pilgrims or other passersby can stop for free refreshment. They may be roadside booths or, as in Walangama, larger eating areas on village temple grounds. The sponsors accrue religious merit (*pin*) for their generosity.

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In contrast to the Mahāsammata story of a simple division of labor, the *upāsaka*'s list differentiates the Potters in multiple contexts and implies that they once were relegated to a lower status than they now claim. The list has had an impressive longevity. Versions from 1975 and 2013 varied little, and its power to haunt has endured even though contexts for segregation have been transformed. Walangama got its own school in 1959 with a Walangama Potter principal, ending segregation of Potter children (Winslow 2019: 276–82). In the 1990s, Walangama residents built their own temple presided over by monks who do not condone caste discrimination. In 2013, I observed people of castes high and low arriving each morning to work in Walangama's flourishing pottery workshops, where they consumed the tea, betel leaf, and snacks provided by their Potter employers. Yet that canonical list remained, background music that never quite fades away, a persistent cautionary tale.

However, inter-caste encounters at home have always been few. Like most Sinhala villages, Walangama is composed almost entirely of people of a single *kulaya*. In the late nineteenth century, R. W. Ievers, Government Agent of the North-Central Province (1886–1893), compiled a list of caste membership for each of the 1,070 villages in his province. All but nine were single-caste. Ievers concluded: "Persons of different caste did not live together in any village" (1899: 89–90).[25] More recent reports concur. Marguerite Robinson wrote of a high-caste Goigama village in the central Kandyan highlands, "Morapitiya is a single-caste and rather isolated village; the people, therefore, have relatively little contact with persons of low-caste status" (1975 :31). Paul Alexander found that in a fisher village on the south coast, "…most meetings between the Karāva fishermen and other castes take place in … small towns" (1995: 25). And in the northern Vanni, James Brow observed that "… those who lived in the same village were normally all members of the same caste…" (1996: 50).

So, it is primarily when the Potters leave Walangama that they must deal with a multi-caste world. When they work at home in their own workshops, marry within their own marriage circles (Winslow 2002: 169–74), and attend their own temple, their interactions with other castes are few and on their own terms. Nonetheless, the "in that time" list reminds them that the world beyond the village holds the potential of disrespect or even incivility because they are Potters.

Names and the World

In the past, Walangama residents engaged the outside world infrequently. They rented lorries for religious pilgrimages, traveled to other Potter communities for weddings and funerals, and, during harvest season, took their bullock carts north to trade pots for rice. Otherwise, their lives were lived locally. Now, that has changed. Today Walangama traders travel widely in lorries to wholesale pottery; older children commute daily to town schools; and about a third of the households include someone with paid outside employment. In all of these contexts, they are identified by names, and many of the old names are identity-revealing.

[25]Dewasiri, using eighteenth-century Dutch records for coastal villages, found that 362 out of 464 (78 percent) were single caste (2008: 50).

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Table 2. Percentage of names given at birth that were later changed.

Survey year	Number of names sampled	% changed (males)	% changed (females)
1975	644	7.3% (25/342)	0% (0/302)
1992	613	6.9% (22/320)	1.0% (3/293)
2004	304	7.3% (12/164)	2.9% (4/140)
2013	571	4.6% (13/280)	2.1% (6/291)

Walangama names are composed of a patronymic[26] *vāsagama* name, abbreviated as initials, followed by a personal name; for example, M. N. (Madume Naidelagē) Punchihami. "Naidelagē" endings are associated with craft-making and artificer castes (Carter 1965[1924]: 316). The most Potter-specific *vāsagama* name I encountered was J. B. (Jayakody Badahälagē), literally, Potter House Jayakody. By the 1970s, the J. B. *vāsagama* name was rare. In 1976, when a woman reported her elderly father's name to me as J. B., he angrily insisted that I "cut it" from my notes; he had changed it to the more neutral J. A. (Jayakody Arachilagē).

Name changing in Walangama appears to have increased beginning around 1949, after the government introduced a pottery marketing co-operative and village men began selling pottery outside traditional territories (Winslow 2016: 218). It was never widespread. My surveys[27] suggest a frequency of under 10 percent for men and under 3 percent for women (Table 2).

The changes were accomplished by going to a local government office, registering the new name, and obtaining a new birth certificate. Some changed personal names, too. Nimal (born 1948) told me that he originally was named Bandianaide. When I asked him why he changed it, he responded, "You can't go out into the world with a name like that!"

In 2013, a teenaged girl who attended a selective town secondary school explained to me with emphasis: "[In school], they don't use initials. They read your *whole name*. And if the Miss reads some '*naide*,' everyone looks!" So, her father went to the district offices and changed his and his children's *vāsagama* names from K. N. (Kāluappu Naidelagē) to K. M. (Kāluappu Mudianselagē). He commented, "We value the *N* [for *Naide*] but the younger generation doesn't so much." This was one of the few instances I heard of a girl's name being changed (Table 2). W. M. Amarasiri de Silva, who analyzed Sri Lanka-wide name changes between 1976 and 1995, also found it to be a predominantly (70 percent) male phenomenon (2009: 82; also, Gunasinghe 1990[1980]: 110–12), possibly out of expectation that men are more likely than women to be "going out into the world." Today, the more problematic names are gone and name-changing in Walangama appears to be declining.

[26] If couples marry matrilocally (*binna*), usually when a woman has no brothers to inherit the family property, children may take their mother's father's *vāsagama* name instead of their own father's.

[27] The rate may be somewhat higher. I did not consistently survey for name-changing but recorded it if volunteered or after inquiry about inconsistent names in genealogies.

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Two Worlds or One?

On the face of it, then, Walangama people live in two different caste worlds. In the village, they interact primarily with others of their *kulaya*. There, where they control the narrative, they receive outsiders confidently, happy to show off their impressive temple complex and be recognized as owners of prosperous pottery businesses. This world contains elements of the cartwheel: inherited occupation, acceptance of higher Goigama status, and little attention to calibrating comparative standings of non-Goigama *kulaya*. Outside the village, however, in the multi-*kulaya* worlds of school, trade, courts, and more, the situation is different. There people of different *kulaya* may be seen as intrinsically different, separated by heritage, and locatable in a linear hierarchy even though the cartwheel's legacy means that there is no clear blueprint for doing so. Therefore, facing uncertainty and anticipating disrespect, Walangama people seek *kulaya* anonymity abroad.

And yet, is that divide really so clear-cut? When Walangama people told me that *kulaya* is carried in the blood, they were implying some degree of biological difference between people of one *kulaya* and people of another. This may leave them open to the ladder's more elemental discriminations. For example, a young Walangama friend and I went to visit a well-off family in a village adjoining Walangama. When we arrived, my friend refused to enter the house; when offered refreshments, she accepted only water. "Why?" I asked her later, anticipating that the family's wealth had made her uncomfortable. But I had misread her unease. Her problem was not class, it was caste. She had heard that the residents of that village were *Durāva* (traditionally, toddy-tapper) *kulaya*. Might this family be *Durāva*? Should she eat their food? She was troubled by possible incompatibilities, uncertain how to proceed in a situation she would not have been in if I had not led her to it. So, she opted out, remaining outside on the verandah sipping water while inside I feasted on cake and tea.

That was 1976. Since then, inter-*kulaya* contacts have become more common and more intimate. As noted, some Walangama residents have taken non-Potter spouses. They seem to fit easily into village life: their relatives visit and in at least one case, a Goigama woman's marriage was followed by her brother, too, settling in Walangama with a Potter spouse. And yet, when outside the village, forebodings about inter-*kulaya* relationships persist. In 2013, a Walangama woman told me that her police officer son had married a Goigama colleague whose family remains ignorant of his Potter background. She worried that it might be necessary to stop having her son's daughter to visit lest the child, just learning to talk, return home with tales of potters. That old background music echoes still.

Conclusion

Historian Nicholas Dirks wrote, "When we think of India, it is hard not to think of caste" (2015: 83). One would not say that of Sinhala Sri Lanka. Sinhala caste is muted, unvoiced, rarely discussed openly—"shadowy," Rogers once observed (2004b: 645). But silence, name changing, and other avoidance tactics fail to subvert Sinhala caste's attendant unease. Perhaps it is because the simple bivalent social structure of the ancient texts and the Kandyan Kingdom ill suit negotiating today's more frequent inter-caste interactions while alternative linear models presume multiple, only vaguely specified inequalities that no one lives with easily. In any case, the gap between form

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and content looms increasingly large. Grounded as caste is in situated social relationships that shift over time and circumstance, why would we expect otherwise?

My exploration here has found that some features of Sinhala caste have persisted for centuries: a guild-like association between endogamous groups and occupations; a two-tiered stratification system; inattention to relative group-based status; and the assumption that all (or almost all) Sinhala people share a common humanity. What I have called "the cartwheel model" evolved in a time when, because of low population density, there was broad access to basic resources, particularly land, giving non-elite groups considerable economic autonomy.[28] Here, I have focused on the territory of the former Kandyan Kingdom but investigations of the low country suggest pre-colonial Sinhala systems that looked not much different (e.g., Dewasiri 2008: 93–95).

Other features clearly have shifted over time. Buddhism, introduced from the subcontinent and developed in interaction with Southeast Asia, countered but did not eliminate mainland Brahmanical influence. We saw it in the thirteenth-century emergence of caste in the monasteries and *varṇa* references in fourteenth-century boundary books. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Kandyan kings perfected the two-tiered cartwheel political economy that ignored the finer calibrations of Brāhmaṇism. But after the Kingdom fell in 1815, the more ladder-like Brahmanical model, as understood by the British, was reinforced by colonial policies that sometimes encouraged up-and-coming lower-status groups and at other times gave preference to the traditional elite as a "native aristocracy" (Dirks 2015; Wickramasinghe 2006: 49–50). Either way, caste was reified as a significant marker of identity despite official policy to the contrary.

How did ordinary rural people encounter these developments? Given the overwhelming prevalence of single-caste communities, it is likely that in pre-colonial times they did so largely through caste-specific exactions attached to land and religious participation at Buddhist temples and deity shrines. But under British colonial rule (1796–1948) and its land-hungry plantation economy, many Kandyan villages lost their former access to Crown lands even as population grew (Bandarage 1983). Tax farming to fill colonial coffers, corvée labor to build colonial infrastructure, and increased dependence on imported foodstuffs and other goods pushed people into greater market engagement and inter-caste relationships while also empowering resource-controlling elites. As class distinctions became more salient, hierarchical caste culture apparently did as well (Gunasinghe 1990[1980]: 43–70).

Today, Sinhala caste continues to take its place alongside ethnicity, gender, age, and other modes of pigeonholing people into hierarchically arranged boxes. Such "categorical distinctions" underpin systems of durable inequality everywhere. All of them, including caste, are grounded in differential access to political and economic resources. But, as we have seen, they also are scaffolded by replicating the same hierarchical scheme across multiple domains (Tilly 1998: 10). Rules for dress and speech, norms of endogamy, limited entrée to religious participation and schooling, the embodied effects of unequal access to food and health care, these and more create myriad distinctions between groups that reinforce, disguise, and normalize exploitative political economies. It is said that King Mahāsammata produced social order by the simple expedient of giving people different jobs. However, as the Vidānē Mahattea observed, other differences ensued.

[28]The same is said to have been true of frontier regions of medieval India (Srinivas 1968: 189, 191).

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In Walangama, memory of an earlier time's scaffolding for inequality is preserved with the "in that time" list, even though the scaffolding itself has crumbled. On the one hand, the list is firmly tagged as history and the extent to which it ever affected behavior is unclear. Walangama residents did not lose the right to clear Crown lands for gardens until around 1940, and thereby retained some economic autonomy. Few children went to school and temple attendance was seasonal, so except for direct sales of pottery, interactions with higher castes were limited. A cartwheel-derived understanding of caste would have had few challenges. On the other hand, "the list" with its harsh evocations of incompatible differences between people retains power to unsettle, keeping alive an alternative understanding of their place in the world.

Yet Walangama people do not live as if stranded between two incompatible models of how caste once was. They may have to toggle between the two, but they live in the all-consuming, multi-dimensional flow of daily life in the present, rarely facing head-on any inconsistencies between what they believe to be true about themselves and what they fear some in the outside world might think. When they do, when *kulaya* emerges from the shadows and their own practical understanding of how the world works forewarns them of potentially uncomfortable encounters, they employ avoidance strategies—changing names, sipping water on the verandah, forgoing a granddaughter's visits, whatever is needed. These improvisations do not in themselves resolve conflicts or create new norms, but they do provide the flexibility and fuzziness that make social life possible and that may, over time, produce new expectations (Lamaison and Bourdieu 1986: 118; Yalman 1960: 78). The codes of the past are carried forward but only because their implementation is adjusted to meet the needs of the present.

This, ultimately, is Sinhala caste and, most probably, any system of durable inequality in practice: not a set of ancient rules to be obeyed or resisted, but contemporary relationships to be negotiated and then negotiated again. Sinhala caste is not and seems never to have been neatly and finally formed, a system diagrammable in clear dark lines as, for example, cartwheels or ladders. Rather, it emerges anew at each encounter through strategically reworked social interactions, descended from a complicated past but not determined by it.

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