

ANOMA PIERIS

INTERSTICES 26

Stories from the antechamber: Settler perceptions of Indigenous presence at Kelaniya Royal Temple

Indigenous dispossession and cultural erasure are undeniable features of South Asia's dominant 'civilisations,' with the transition of tribal communities to sedentary agricultural practices frequently naturalised as a teleological process. Equally, by sometimes casting First Nations populations as ancestors, settlement and urban expansion is legitimised. Migrants moving across the subcontinent are called settlers rather than colonists. 'Colonisers' is a term reserved for Europeans, while the term 'invaders' is used to describe competing neighbouring claimants to settler sovereignty. This article explores these perceptions from the viewpoint of Lanka (known as Sri Lanka since 1972), where the Sinhala settler culture, a highly dynamic social construction shaped by Buddhism and the linguistic inheritance of the Theravāda canon—Pāli (and an admixture of Prakrit and Sanskrit)—remains dominant. This 'subcontinental' culture has succeeded in absorbing or subordinating diverse and multivocal Indigenous knowledges from the island's deep past through acculturation. It has assimilated successive waves of immigrants who, by adopting Buddhism, have identified with and contributed to its augmentation, minoritising geographically proximate Tamil and other minority cultures from southern India, and the region. Buddhist literature, rituals, and religious traditions play a dual role in asserting the island's autonomy while acknowledging its subcontinental lineage. The architecture of its celebrated UNESCO World Heritage sites provides evidence of a mature past Buddhist civilisation with expansive monastic complexes and giant stupas. Sinhala political sovereignty and cultural hegemony on the island is characterised by the dense entanglement of these competing interests and their storylines.

These framings marginalise the cultural sovereignty of the island's earliest inhabitants, (First Nations) Indigenous groups, some of whose descendants have begun to identify as Wanniyala-aetto (forest-dwelling peoples). They include those who live in villages or (mainly Tamil-speaking groups) in coastal areas known generally as Vāddas, or more recently as Ādivāsis, adopting the Indian term ('Indigenous' or Aboriginal are rarely used).¹ Although active participants in nineteenth-century anticolonial rebellions in the Kandyan kingdom, alongside the Sinhalese, very little is known about Vāddas, such as clan names or languages, or specific practices and beliefs, particularly in the most populous and western coastal areas which experienced the longest periods of European colonisation

(from 1505–1948). While scholars approaching this subject emphasise relational attributes—cultural adjacency and absorption, religious syncretism, and racial mixing—cultural affinities that substantiate Sinhala or Tamil autochthony are used to moralise acculturation into a Buddhist worldview.² The Buddhist practice of *ahimsa* (non-violence/harm) excludes the hunter ontology. It privileges the autarkic Sinhala civilisation with its innovations in irrigated wet-rice cultivation that are lauded as superior to swidden agriculture and have transformed the island's physical landscape. Buddhists believe in *Samsara*—the cycle of karmic rebirth. Vādda belief systems recorded by scholars include worship of deceased ancestors known as Ne Yaku extended to include some Hindu and Buddhist spirits and deities.³ The Sinhalese also have integrated some Vādda deities into their folk beliefs. However, these entwinements do not preclude popular categorisations of the Vādda culture as that of a primitive and uninhibited population that fall outside the Lankan settler ethos. These hierarchic prejudices undermine the multivocality of an island culture where immigrants have interacted with First Nations cultures over millennia, incorporating aspects of their belief systems—their spirits, and deities, and ritual practices. Once reorganised within the settlers' cognitive framework, these Indigenous knowledges lose their significance and become marginalised or are lost.

Are these modalities of cultural assertion settler colonial practices? Do they reflect what Édouard Glissant might interpret as a systematic, ideological form of “[sub]continental thinking” that suppresses the creolisation that is actually taking place?⁴ Poor knowledge of Indigenous cultural practices, clan names or habitats, compounded by their non-representation in contemporary censuses, suggests that acculturation into settler societal systems suppressed their particularity.⁵ Indigenous activism since the late 1980s, provoked by dispossession of the Dambana Wanniyala-aetto by the Maduru Oya National Park-related irrigation schemes and agricultural ‘colonies,’ has generated awareness of generational trauma.⁶ Scholarly interest in this topic has grown alongside Vādda politicisation with notable archaeological findings of rock shelters, prehistoric stone implements, potsherds, and skeletal remains revealing a more complex pre-Buddhist culture on the island.⁷ Leading archaeologists have sought to investigate the biological continuum between Mesolithic inhabitants and the present-day Vāddas, with competing theories on regional influences and urban cosmopolitanism.⁸ However, the unrecorded social history of the island, dating from skeletal remains of Balangoda man (30,000 BCE), has been obscured by the 2000-plus years of Buddhism-centred histories that have shaped civilisational hubris.⁹ Popular histories that link the Lankan with Indian civilisations, and come with assumptions and prejudices, have been politicised in ways that influence public perceptions and the reception of Vāddas. This influence is most evident in predatory internal tourism to Vādda villages.¹⁰ The built environment disciplines are silent on this topic.

Using a Buddhist temple complex as a single case study, this article asks what visual representations of Sinhala pasts in Lanka's revered Buddhist architectures reveal about these settler processes. Kelaniya Royal Temple located north of Colombo and inland along the banks of Sri Lanka's Kelani River (Fig. 1) is associated with an ancient kingdom, although the present temple buildings date from the eighteenth century, a period under the Nayak dynasty (1739–1815), a royal line with South Indian origins.¹¹ The physical reconstruction of the temple between



Fig. 1 Exterior view of the image house and stupa at Kelaniya Royal Temple [Photograph: Anoma Pieris]

the eighteenth and twentieth centuries transformed it into one of several discursive spaces for fortifying Buddhism against Christian proselytisation when the island's coastal regions were occupied successively by Dutch and British colonisers who succeeded the Portuguese.¹² Senkadagala (Kandy), the last capital, resisted colonisation until 1815.

Buddhist cultural resistance during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, institutionalised through the persistence of the religious orders that protected the Sinhala language and literature, ignited the anticolonial struggle as the ideological foundation for the postcolonial state. The temple played an important role in anticolonial politics as the place for the Kelaniya Declaration of Independence in 1947, one year before the actual event.¹³ These political alignments reified Sinhala, Aryan-Indian origins while emphasising Lanka's distinctiveness as a Sinhala Buddhist geography, as expressed and elaborated in the temple's visual archive. These representations were also influenced by Orientalist constructions of a lost glorious Buddhist civilisation recovered through colonial archaeology.¹⁴

This article presents the murals in the image house as analogous to an assimilatory Sinhala Buddhist worldview that is entangled in these many competing claims to autochthony. Exploring Lanka's cultural dependency and differentiation from the subcontinent, I discuss how these various tensions persist within modes of postcolonial cultural recovery beyond independence. The extraordinary

religious syncretism attributed to Lankan Buddhism by eminent anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere is evidenced in the temple's artworks, which illustrate encounters between Indigenous, Buddhist, migrant-settler, and colonial cultures.¹⁵ The interwoven social constructions of the island through myths, legends, and histories form a multilayered assemblage. The Sinhala culture's land claims extend the authority of the subcontinent over this southern island as imposed, not negotiated, by mythical, historical figures, over spirit, and supernatural beings.

Founding myths and storylines

The assemblage of stories circling Buddhism depicted in murals at Kelaniya Royal Temple offer remarkable insights into how settlers from the Indian subcontinent legitimised their cultural and territorial claims. The *jātakas*—the birth stories of Buddha Gautama, familiarising places across what is now north-eastern India—as well as his life story and his teachings dominate the Lankan Pāli Buddhist texts and commentaries. They have, according to many scholars, provided storylines for Lanka's founding myths.¹⁶ These stories are depicted as horizontal strips of continuous narrations that line many image house interiors, including at Kelaniya. They are typically interpreted through the lens of the mural artist's temporal and social context. The island's history and the works of kings are interwoven with these subcontinental lineages in stories that are mythical and iterative. They confer authority, most notably, for the early period of settlement documented in the *Dipawamsa* (island chronicle, third–fourth century CE) and *Mahawamsa* (great chronicle, fifth century CE) compiled by monks of the Anuradhapura, Maha Vihara; one of three competing subdivisions of Theravāda associated with monastic complexes in that original primate city.¹⁷ These texts describe the island's original inhabitants as *Dēvās* (divine beings, or guardian deities), and as supernatural spirit-beings attributed with various powers, *Yakkhas* (sometimes called *Yaksha*) and *Nāgas* (half human-half cobra beings), which some sources link to the *Vāddas*.¹⁸ Chapters in the *Mahawamsa* that precede Buddhism's introduction mention them as royal allies or adversaries.¹⁹ The sixth-century CE Tamil-Buddhist epic *Manimēkalai* and the eighteenth-century *Yalpana Vaipava Malai* discuss powerful *Nāga* dynasties.²⁰

Kelaniya is closely associated with *Nāgas* in the Lankan Pāli texts. During the Buddha's legendary visits to select the island for his *sasana* (dispensation), having expelled the *Yakshas* at Mahiyangana, and pacified the *Nāgas* at Nāgadeepa, he is believed to have visited Kelaniya on the invitation of Māniakkhika, the *Nāga* king.²¹ An invitation to imprint his footprint at Mount Samanala by the *Dēvā*, Saman, is deemed to have sealed this future covenant. In *Ancient Jaffna*, C. Rasanayagam observes that the *Nāgas* were a prominent race living in South India and Ceylon, as mentioned in both the Indian, *Mahabharata* and the *Rāmāyana* epics, and that they intermarried with Dravidians and were admitted into the "Aryan fold."²² Writing on the prevalence of *Nāgas* around 300 CE, K. Indrapala argues that they were absorbed through acculturation both by the Sinhalese and the Tamils, respectively, and that the identifier is evident in royal names at Anuradhapura dating to the sixth century CE.²³

These scholars envision the subcontinent and Lanka as a contiguous geocultural territory with the *Nāgas* operating on both sides of the Palk Strait. Cobra figures are found sculpted at man-made bathing places and *Nāga* guardians at entrances

to Buddhist monastic complexes in the north central parts of Lanka referred to as Nāgadipa (snake-island) in Claudius Ptolemy's second-century CE *Geographia*.²⁴ The Nāga's symbolic association with water resonates culturally to the extent that the contemporary Mahaweli Authority of Sri Lanka, with oversight of major irrigation schemes, has appropriated the symbol of a seven-headed cobra.²⁵

The Yakshas recur in the second founding myth of the exiled Indian Prince Vijaya who arrives on the island the very day of the Buddha's *Parinibbāna* (passing) (in 543 BCE), asserting Indo-Aryan succession as the royal lineage. He forms a union with Kuveni, a Yaksha Queen, and destroys with her aid the Yaksha city, Sirisavattu, brutally killing her people.²⁶ He abandons her and their progeny to marry a Pandyan Princess and so legitimises his rule. In the *Yalpana Vaipava Malai*, conversely, Vijaya is a Saivite prince who arrived on an 'unpopulated' island vacated by the Rakshasas (demons) after the death of Vibhishana—a hero of the dominant Vaishnava Hindu epic, *Rāmāyana*.²⁷ While this story is not depicted in Lanka's Buddhist image houses, Vibhishana is venerated among the island's guardian deities, with a historical shrine to him attributed to the former Kelaniya Royal Temple site.²⁸ In Valmiki's version of the *Rāmāyana*, one of Hinduism's two greatest ancient epics, Vibhishana betrays his brother, Rāvana, the Raksha king of Lanka, by aiding Rāma in defeating him, and inherits his throne.²⁹ This epic is unfamiliar to Lankan Buddhists and not part of their literary canon, however, the Tamil *Yalpana Vaipava Malai* begins with Vibhishana's demise.³⁰

These competing founding myths and intercultural tensions reveal processes of dispossession, genocide, acculturation, and assumption of *terra nullius*, as well as contemporary symbolic cultural appropriation and naturalisation of these associations in ways advantageous to the settler culture. Their density pushes aside or subsumes Indigenous belief systems. The introduction of Buddhism to Lanka during the reign of Maurya Emperor Ashoka (ca. 268–235 BCE) by his son, Arahant Mahinda, a historical event, sees a radical epistemic shift. Mahinda's conversion of King Devanampiyatissa, while hunting, frames what Obeyesekere describes as a "charter myth" differentiating hunting from Buddhism.³¹ As noted, the Buddhist practice of *ahimsa* excludes the hunter ontology. His sister Sanghamitta *therī* follows Mahinda to Lanka bearing a cutting from the fig tree under which the Buddha gained enlightenment (*Ficus religiosa*). The monastic and royal city of Anuradhapura expands around its planting as the Sri Maha Bodhi.³² The *Mahawamsa* identifies Nāgas as being among the several groups appointed to protect the tree by King Ashoka, having practised magic to win over the tree during its ocean journey, escorted the tree to their realm, worshipped, and returned it.³³ The ritual protection of the tree, the *Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi*, celebrated during the Poson (full moon of the sixth lunar month), is perpetuated through generational transplantings and propagation of trees [the first eight saplings (*ashta pala ruha*) and the thirty-two subsequent saplings (*dethis pala ruha*)], including at Kelaniya. While the symbolism bears deep connections to Vādda animist beliefs,³⁴ its replication as an element integral to every temple complex claims the island for the diffusion of the *sasana*. Over one million pilgrims continue to travel annually at Poson to Mihintalē (Mahinda's plateau, 13 kilometres east of Anuradhapura), the rocky outcrop on which Mahinda and his *bikkhus* (monks) appeared to the king, reinforcing through an embodied cultural practice the links between Lanka and India's Maurya dynasty. On this same pilgrimage, they worship the sacred Bodhi tree at Anuradhapura.

These three foundational narratives are replete with references to Yakshas and Nāgas that serve to elevate Buddhist morality and civility. The Buddhist mission's doctrine of non-violence once scaffolded by political power and urban and economic expansion provokes a chain of challenges from Hindu Chōla and Pāndyan kingdoms. They are identified in the *Mahawamsa* as foreign invaders that threaten Anuradhapura's sovereignty and the doctrine it protects. A significant early conquest is by the Chōla King Elara from 205–161 BCE. The recapture of the kingdom by the southern king, Dutugemunu, and his unification of the island's kingdoms, sees the reinstatement of Buddhism in what the Sinhalese regard as the city's golden age. Dutugemunu is born of a princess from Kelaniya, Vihara Maha Devi.

Writings on this ancient period express contradictory desires both for legitimising kingship through contiguity with the Indian culture and geography, and the need to avoid subsumption into that identity and assert both political and cultural sovereignty. Urbanisation, monastic complexes, the construction of massive irrigation infrastructures, and the scale of rice cultivation for export are regarded as markers of progress. These storylines become fragmented as the Buddhist kingdoms splinter and move southward from the tenth century ACE onwards, until King Parakramabahu VI of Jayewardenepura-Kotte unified the island during the fifteenth or sixteenth century. The arrival of the Portuguese in 1505 destroyed this precarious unity, inaugurating a century of fierce conflict and destruction of many cities and religious sites. Kelaniya is among them. Stories illustrated in the eighteenth century Kelaniya Royal Temple are produced during the period of European oppression and Christian proselytisation when reference and reinforcement of Buddhist genealogies fortify devotees. The recurrence in these murals of the Yakshas, Nāgas, Dēvās, and Vāddas are of interest.

Chamber and antechamber

Stories in the eighteenth-century murals

The medieval Kelaniya Royal Temple was destroyed by the Portuguese in 1510. The complex's reconstruction during the 1780s is attributed to King Keerti Sri Rajasinha (1747–81) during a religious revival against Christian proselytisation. This artistic cultural renaissance filled a gap created by dispersal of the monumental tradition once upheld by the Anuradhapura kingdom followed by its destruction.³⁵ However, only two chambers of the original eighteenth-century image house remain. The antechamber is unfurnished except for wall-to-ceiling, horizontal murals and timber guardian figures (Fig. 2). The inner chamber contains three images (one reclining and two seated) of Lord Buddha and several guardian deities. The murals form part of a Kandyan artistic tradition resistant to proselytisation that set out to familiarise devotees with the island's sixteen Buddhist pilgrimage places (*solosmasthana*), alongside scenes both from the *jātakas* and from Siddhārtha's life story. The style is heavily influenced by South Indian art. Buddhist pilgrimage sites in Anuradhapura dominate. Kelaniya is among them.

These late eighteenth-century frescos testify to the period's cultural syncretism before colonial modernity took hold. The material intimacies of everyday life in Lanka at the time is captured through representations of the people, buildings, landscapes, and objects used to illustrate the *jātakas*. Scenes from the past and



Fig. 2 The antechamber of the eighteenth-century image house at Kelaniya Royal Temple [Photograph: Thomas Wyness/Alamy]

present, and places in India and Lanka, become fused. These paintings are part of a continuous Lankan Buddhist tradition that remains distinct from that of the island's prehistoric hunter-foragers or early agriculturalists and is linked with, but different from, that of the Indian subcontinent.³⁶

The *jātakas* are particularly evocative of India's prominence in the cultural imagination, through faraway places related to the life-stories of Buddha Gautama, illustrated through scenes situated in the Lankan society and environment of that period. This is particularly evident if we look at the architecture, furnishings, and the clothing of figures representing royalty or ordinary folk. Among them, the Mahakanha Jātakaya (Giant Black Birth Story), number 469, represents a rare instance when Vādda presence is central to a *jātaka*.³⁷

At Kelaniya Royal Temple, the tale is depicted on the left-hand interior wall of the antechamber, alongside many others and painted in natural dyes of reds, ochres, greens, and browns. The story is set in a period when the *sasana* of the Buddha before Gautama, Buddha Kassapa, had declined, and the urban population of Benares (Varanasi), the monks, nuns, and laity had gone astray. Alerted to this crisis, the *bodhisattva* (a person on the path to Buddhahood) of Siddhārtha Gautama, in the form of Lord Sakkra (King of the *Dēvās*), descended to the earth as a Vādda with his charioteer—Mātali disguised as Mahakanha—a black dog (Fig. 3). Accordingly, Lord Sakkra

... put on a pair of yellow garments, and bound his hair behind his head, and donned a red wreath; taking a huge bow, fitted with bowstring of the colour of coral, and twirling in his fingers a javelin tipped with adamant, he

Fig. 3 Scenes from the Mahakanha Jātakaya. Lord Sakkra in the form of a Vādda [Photograph: Anoma Pieris]

Fig. 4 Scenes from the Mahakanha Jātakaya and other *jātakas* [Photograph: Tibor Bognar/Alamy]

assumed the aspect of a forester, and descended at a spot one league away from the city.³⁸

Roaring that the world is doomed, leaping over the city walls, and barking at the palace windows, Mahakanha terrified the dissolute population away from the ten paths of evil doing. King Usinara, fearful that the dog was a Yaksha, likely to consume human flesh, embraced the path of righteousness along with his subjects.

The hunter in the fresco—dark skinned with a bare torso, long hair, a bow, and a quiver of arrows slung across his shoulder—cuts a figure of boldness and physical strength. The people in the town are depicted as smaller figures in different shades of brown and ochre (Fig. 4). Among them a group of light-skinned soldiers wear hats, striped shirts, and pantaloons. They carry bows, arrows, and swords. Ornate timber furniture, white drapes, two-storey buildings, brass spittoons, and the patterned clothes and shawls of inhabitants conjure the Kandyan era, fusing colonial with subcontinental traditions.



Two insights from the Mahakanha Jātakaya are significant. The Sakkra's assumption of the form of a Vādda in disciplining the erring populace demonstrates that forest-dwellers command respect. Although Buddhist civilisation was hegemonic, it was not necessarily intolerant, argues Obeyesekere.³⁹ There was no internal colonisation by violence, or forced proselytisation into Buddhism, best evidenced by the many symbolic cultural performances that reiterate their

“separation cum unity.”⁴⁰ Variations in the skin colours of human figures in the frescos suggest a multi-ethnic polity. These seemingly minor details are important for understanding the island’s social diversity. Scholars conducting fieldwork during the 1960s and 1970s, like Obeyesekere and James Brow, argue for co-dependent and symbiotic relations between the Sinhala and the Vādda despite evident differences between ancestor worship and the Buddhist belief in karma and rebirth.⁴¹

References to the Nāgas are also found within the image house. On the right-hand side wall of the antechamber, guarding the portals to the shrine room, is a floor-to-ceiling-high carved, timber statue of Māniakkhika, the mythical Nāga king of Kelaniya in an alcove guarded by two (atypical and anglicised) long-maned lions and flanked by a Nāga man and maiden (Fig 5).

Fig. 5 King Māniakkhika and Nāga men and maidens [Photograph: Tibor Bogner/Alamy]



Like the Vādda, the Nāgas remain outside the inner chamber as perpetual guardians, incorporated and subordinated within the Buddhist hierarchy. However, the Vādda ancestral deity, Saman, and the Raksha Prince, Vibhīshana, brother to Rāvana, are depicted among the island’s guardian deities on the wall of the inner chamber. While Sinhalese Buddhists are seen to form a single moral community, both Vāddas and Sinhalese are united in worship of guardian deities such as Saman and Skandha, Obeyesekere notes.⁴² Rāvana’s brother Vibhīshana, identifiable by his tiny tusks, reappears in one of the temple’s many alcoves, as he is being crowned by Prince Rāma (Fig. 6). Once again connections to the subcontinental geographic and cultural imagination are reproduced and translated from the island’s perspective. Kelaniya’s association with the warrior prince makes it popular among many armed forces personnel, who seek his blessings before leaving on active duty.⁴³

The argument that Vāddas were omnipresent during the last Kandyan kingdom draws them into a period contemporaneous with the nineteenth-century

Fig. 6 Relief sculpture of Lord
Vibhishana in the rear alcove at
Kelaniya Royal Temple [Photograph:
Anoma Pieris]



Kelaniya frescos. Obeyesekere describes a warrior class, employed as the king's guard, where land grants given for services rendered to the king produced a form of Vādda aristocracy.⁴⁴ They fought alongside the Sinhalese in the anti-British Kandyan rebellions of the nineteenth century and protected the royal families during foreign invasions of the capital city. When Buddhist civilisations in the eastern part of the island were abandoned in the fourteenth century CE, both Vādda and Sinhala reverted to forest-dwelling, practising hunting alongside pastoralism and swidden cultivation, he writes.⁴⁵ The anthology, *The Vanishing Aborigines*, argues that by primitivising the Vāddas, colonial racialisation suppressed the many forms of mutual cultural absorption that were taking place.⁴⁶ Bourgeois elites schooled in colonial values internalised these prejudices and their rhetoric of extinction.⁴⁷ The expansion of the British colonial plantation economy into Kandyan areas weakened recognition and reciprocity between these groups.⁴⁸

In societies like Lanka, where industrialisation had not ruptured peasant connections to forest and spirit worlds to the extent of European settler colonies, differentiation was claimed through cultural links to the subcontinental mainland (and its royal lineages) because of the advantages of these connections within the Sinhala social and court hierarchy. These claims suppressed knowledges of, and desire to investigate, pre-Buddhist settlements and the terms of their later acculturation and interethnic mixing with newcomers. There was also reluctance to recognise cultural and genetic interchanges that have occurred over millennia, which Obeyesekere argues are more blurred between Sinhala and Tamil than between Vādda and Sinhala.⁴⁹ These tensions alongside the increased threat of Christian conversions during the Kandyan era provoked reactive affirmations of Sinhala ethnic distinctiveness and ascendancy. Anticolonial sentiment was increasingly directed at constructing, sustaining, defending, and romanticising a Buddhism-centric history. The artworks in the new wing at Kelaniya testify to this process.

Stories in the twentieth-century murals

The twentieth-century renovation of the temple (1927–46) was undertaken by British colonial architect H. H. Reid, a proponent of the Indic style of architecture we associate with the late Gothic, and arts and crafts revival in Britain, which was incorporated into the architecture of the two eighteenth-century chambers. In Lanka, this influence produced an eclectic ‘Buddhist’ aesthetic, borrowing features from ancient and medieval monuments. The temple complex includes the paddy-sheaf shaped *dhanyakara* stupa, the renovated image house with its new (late 1920s) wings, two gateways, the prayer hall, the *sanghas*’ (monks’) residences, and the Bodhi tree (see Fig. 1). The new wing’s interior was decorated by local artist Solias Mendis between 1930 and 1950 after the mural style of the Sigiriya and Indian-Ajanta frescos (see Figs 7 and 8). Mendis’s murals, although rooted in an eclectic, transitional style, influenced equally by European art and the paintings of the Bengali Renaissance, display what is described as a vigorous and unsentimental realism, unlike the Bengali paintings.⁵⁰ Many of the murals depict scenes chronicled in the *Mahawamsa*.

Mendis’s murals were commissioned by Helena Wijewardene, a matriarch from a politically powerful dynasty of future politicians, and contributed to the mid-twentieth-century decolonising agendas of the incipient nation-state.⁵¹ In pursuing this politics, they emphasised the narratives that validated Buddhism’s place on the island, which historian Jonathan Walters argues were equally influenced by British Orientalist constructions of Kelaniya’s past.⁵² Unlike the Portuguese and Dutch who, seeking to defuse its political significance, built churches and schools at the ruined site, writes Walters, British antiquarians saw it as a depoliticised religious site and romanticised their representations of its ruins. Once the Kandyan kingdom was captured, the British colonial administration, as the sole political authority, diverted the cultural narrative towards a lost ancient past disconnected from the several anticolonial uprisings that they violently crushed.⁵³ Their gaze contributed to what Lankan historian Sujit Sivasundaram describes as “islanding,” a process by which Lanka was discursively constructed by its British colonial administrators as distinct from India so as to justify its separate governance as a crown colony.⁵⁴ The historical fortification and defence of Kandy as the last resistant kingdom and a Sinhala-Buddhist domain, its circumscription due to colonial control of the surrounding coastal and lowland territories, and gradual colonial encroachment into the central hill country contributed to this ideation.⁵⁵ Responses that situate prior Indigenous inhabitants in relation to a centralised Sinhala Buddhist culture are exemplified in the new wing.

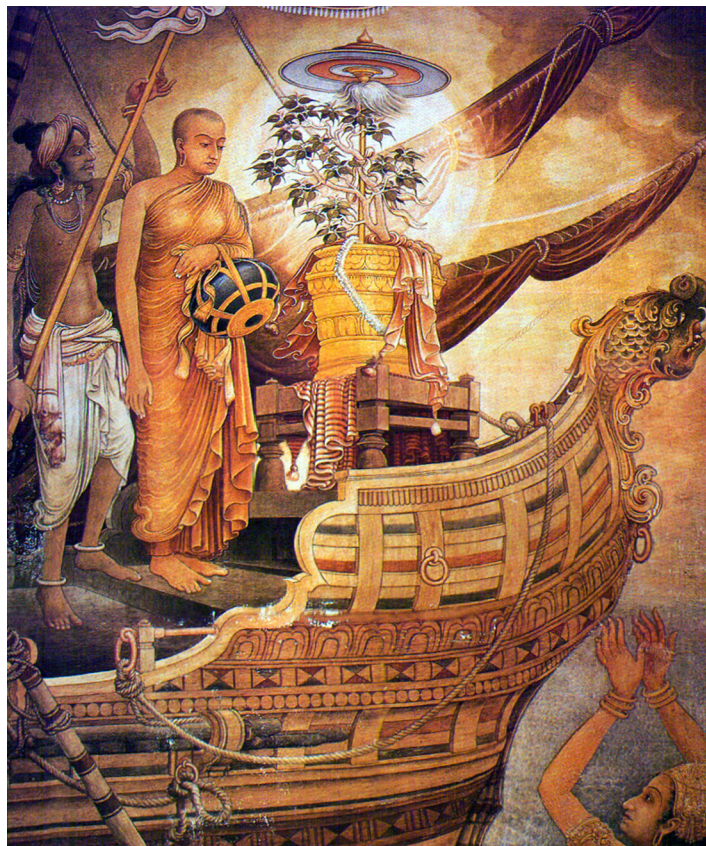
The twentieth-century murals created by Mendis conjure Lanka’s island ontology through arrivals across the ocean. They illustrate both separation from and connection with the subcontinent, exemplifying competing religious-civilisational claims. Many of Mendis’s murals provide an illustrated supplement to the *Mahawamsa* stories alongside depictions of the Buddha’s life story and markers of Sinhala statehood. Using life-size, realistic figures in red and yellow hues, Mendis depicts scenes that amplify the messages of the late nineteenth-century anti-colonial/-Christian, Buddhist religious revival that peaked alongside the independence struggles of the subsequent century. The stylistic shift and human scale of the paintings invite Lankan devotees to identify with these popular histories later integrated into school curricula. Protohistoric scenes include

the Buddha's three legendary visits and pacification of the island's inhabitants depicted as grotesque human figures—the Sinhala idea of the primitive. The Buddha is elevated to the status of peacemaker at Nāgadeepa (Nainativu), settling a dispute over a jewelled throne between the Nāga kings Cūlodara and Mahōdara—relatives of Māniakkhika—an account corroborated in the *Manimēkalai*.⁵⁶ Mendis also depicts Vijaya's encounter with the Yaksha queen Kuveni. Vijaya's ascendance reinforces the subcontinental lineage.

The arrival of Arahant Mahinda is the third example of the unilateral impartation of 'civilisational' knowledge. Mendis depicts the then-King Devanampiyatissa with his bow and quiver, kneeling before the *bikkhu*. Every sixth month of the lunar calendar on the Poson Poya (full moon) day, giant electrified pandals illuminate many towns across Lanka, depicting this same scene alongside familiar *jātakas*. Repetition of these stories imaginatively binds together the Buddhist polity through belief in karmic rebirth and Lanka's recipient role as protector of the *sasana*. One of Mendis's most compelling artworks depicts Mahinda's sister, Sanghamitta *therī* aboard a ship, its sails furled, transporting the sacred cutting of the Bodhi tree. King Devanampiyatissa stands in shallow water ready to greet her (Fig. 7).

As with the paintings in the eighteenth-century image house, Mendis depicts the legitimate custodians as guardians, willingly subordinated to doctrinal patronage. Given that the link between the Vāddas and these proto-historical and mythological figures is unsubstantiated, we could argue that continuous Vādda presence remains unacknowledged or is represented in disrespectful ways. Of greater interest is the way in which the island's geo-spatial autonomy

Fig. 7 Bringing of the Sri Maha Bodhi to Sri Lanka by Sanghamitta *therī*
[Photograph: CPA Media Pte Ltd/Alamy]



is reinforced through emphasis on the Buddhist civilisation at Anuradhapura. Political and economic alliances and hostilities between kings across the water that hybridise and dilute this agenda including the stories of Tamil rulers and chieftains are marginalised. A new constellation of internal power relations linked to monastic traditions and riverine settlements unfolds.

Kelaniya is linked to Anuradhapura's genealogy during the time of Chōla conquest. The story recounted in the murals shifts to King Kelani Tissa, King Dutugemunu's maternal grandfather, who puts to death an *arahant* (worthy one), wrongly accusing him of an adulterous affair with his queen. The ocean rises against the king as a symbolic moral force inundating his kingdom in a coastal tidal wave.⁵⁷ As appeasement for his crime, Kelani Tissa sacrifices his daughter Devi, casting her off on the ocean in a boat. A sobering mural by Mendis depicts both the scene of inundation and departure by boat of the sacrificial Devi who is carried south to the kingdom of Ruhuna where she is rescued and weds the southern King Kāvan Tissa (205–161 BC). She bears him two sons, of whom the elder son, Dutugemunu, travels northward along the island's longest Mahaweli River, conquering successive Tamil forts to finally defeat King Elara's army and recover Anuradhapura for the Sinhalese. The victory casts the Tamils as bitter adversaries in the Sinhala historiographical imagination.⁵⁸

This defensive retelling of the island's narrative suppresses oceanic connections, depicting a geography held together by riverine networks facing external existential threats. Mendis also depicts the destruction of Kelaniya Royal Temple by foreign invaders, King Kālinga Māgha (from northeastern India) and the Portuguese (Fig. 8).⁵⁹ Once the ocean brings new conquerors threatening to Buddhism, the river replaces the ocean as a life force. The riverine system supports sedentary agricultural practices that enable the expansion of low-density urban settlements, in turn producing the complex hydraulic civilisations for which the island is renowned.

Fig. 8 Destruction of Kelaniya
Royal Temple by the Portuguese
[Photograph: Anoma Pieris]



In the new wing of the image house, through stories connecting Lanka to India across the encircling ocean, we can visualise settlement as a historical process where 'subcontinental thinking' and authority are replaced by insular ambitions and claims to sovereignty. These claims are predicated on cultural absorption to grow a homogeneous polity that might defend the island against future challengers. The mechanics of settlement displace Ādivāsi historical authority and then subordinate and appropriate their custodianship. Across the artworks we also

witness the religious syncretism of the Kandyan period giving way to racialised cultural distancing that comes with internalisation of colonial values. Whereas the early *jātakas* recognised and elevated prior Indigenous presence, the religious realism of Mendis depicted demons and primitives too confronting to reproduce here. His purpose was to morally unite an ethnically distinctive population of Sinhala devotees marginalised by colonial rule. To this end, Mendis developed a unique tableau of culturally resonant Buddhist myths and beliefs. His human-scale aesthetic realism embodied, preserved, and homogenised an anticolonial and later postcolonial model of cultural citizenship.

The changing relationship with water, from a surrounding element to an internal resource for settler (colonial) expansion, was foundational for the state-led development projects of the postcolonial era, the very projects that Wanniyala-aetto militancy challenged. The island sustained a sophisticated hydraulic civilisation for wet-rice cultivation at great cost to the Vādda way of life. There was no admission of the violence underlying these mythical settlement stories, nor remorse for their legacies. Prior inhabitants were cast as uninhibited, sometimes violent, supernatural or spirit beings whose suppression was seen as a natural outcome of the civilising process. But their representation as violent and needing pacification suggests that these settler actions met with resistance, leading us to question if they were willing subordinates. After political independence, these narrative occlusions hardened into claims of Sinhala cultural sovereignty that many scholars and politicians have upheld. More recently with new awareness of Indigenous self-determination, these marginalised groups are reimagined as ancestral communities.⁶⁰ This belated desire for claiming hybridity is motivated by competition over autochthony.

In his book, *Fear of Small Numbers*, Arjun Appadurai writes of the growing ambivalence of nation-states to the needs of minorities, and how minorities look to transnational organisational forms for building solidarity in a more inductive, context-sensitive manner.⁶¹ He notes that these minorities

... activate new worries about rights (human and otherwise), about citizenship, about belonging and autochthony, and about entitlements from the state... And they invite new ways of examining the obligations of states as well as the boundaries of political humanity...⁶²

Pan-Indigenous identification via the UN has empowered the Vāddas to demand greater internal accountability for their specific grievances in ways that shine a light on the cultural machinations of dominant groups. While other marginalised non-Buddhist groups have had modern institutional representation, these rightful heirs to Lanka's land and resources have faced forced sedentarisation in rehabilitation villages, exploitation by internal colonists, and impoverishment through systemic dependencies.⁶³ Unlike the violence in European settler colonies, my analysis reveals how the "oppression inherent in social relations"—the "structural violence" defined by Étienne Balibar—is directed towards physiognomically similar groups.⁶⁴ The built environment disciplines have contributed asymmetrically to this process by upholding agrarian urban settlements as ontologically rooted and morally virtuous systems of habitation. If instead we elevate the least invasive settlement strategies of swidden agriculture and seasonal rotation, and recognise the value of our historical interdependence, a respectful story of the island's first peoples might be told.

NOTES

1. The name Vādda is believed to be derived from Vedan (hunter), and Vyada, one who pierces with an arrow, as distinct from the dominant farming castes among both Tamils and Sinhalese. John Bailey, "An Account of the Wild Tribes of the Vaddas of Ceylon: Their Habits, Customs and Superstitions," *Transactions of the Ethnological Society of London*, no. 2 (1863): 278–320, 280.
2. K. N. O. Dharmadasa and S. W. R. de A. Samarasinghe (eds), *The Vanishing Aborigines* (International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 1990).
3. Nandadeva Wijesekera, *Veddās in Transition* (M. D. Gunasena, 1964), 150.
4. Édouard Glissant, *Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity*, trans. Celia Briton (Liverpool University Press, 2020), 26.
5. *Adi Vasi* was not differentiated as scheduled tribes in Sri Lanka's 1972 republican constitution, unlike in India. The population was believed to have fallen below 1000 persons after 1953 although around 6600 Vāddas were noted by James Brow in his 1978 study of 46 villages of Anuradhapura. *Statistical Pocket Book 2022* (Department of Census and Statistics, 2022), 10, <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/Publication/PocketBook>. Census of population and housing, 2012 (numbers in millions): Sinhalese 15.2; Tamils 3; Muslims 1.9; Christians 1.4; Buddhists 14.2; James Brow, *Vedda Villages of Anuradhapura: The Historical Anthropology of a Community in Sri Lanka* (University of Washington Press, 1978), 40.
6. Following a 1996 land rights appeal in the lead-up to the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the self-identifying community has grown numerically to around 500,000 persons (in 2024). Address of Warige Wanniya to the UN, UNWGP 14th session, Geneva, 1996, <https://vedda.org/wanniyalaeto-un.htm>. See also Lionel Guruge and Jayasiri Jayasekara (eds), *Our Land, Your Laws: Protecting the Rights of Sri Lanka's Adivasis* (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2023), <https://citizenslanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Issue-03-English-Final-2.pdf>; and Uruwarige Wannila Atto, "We Need Legislation to Validate Our Rights," in Lionel Guruge and Jayasiri Jayasekara (eds), *Our Land, Your Laws*, 28–31, 28.
7. H. Nimal Perera, "Prehistoric Sri Lanka," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka* 59, no. 2 (2014): 23–41; S. U. Deraniyagala, *The Prehistory of Sri Lanka: An Ecological Perspective*, 2nd ed. (Colombo Archaeological Department, 1992); Diane Hawkey, "Out of Asia: Dental Evidence for Affinities and Microevolution of Early Populations from India and Sri Lanka," PhD thesis, Arizona State University, 1998.
8. Raj Somadeva, *Urban Origins in Southern Lanka* (Uppsala Universitet Afrikansk och Jämförande Arkeologi, University of Kelaniya Postgraduate Institute of Archaeology, 2006); R. Coningham, M. J. Manuel, C. Davis, and P. Gunawardhana, "Archaeology and Cosmopolitanism in Early Historic and Medieval Sri Lanka," in *Sri Lanka at the Crossroads: From Antiquity to Modernity*, edited by Z. Biedermann and A. Strathern (UCL Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1063/1.2756072>.
9. The island's original Mesolithic ancestors termed Balangoda Man are traced to 30,000-year-old fossils discovered by archaeologists and further discoveries that predate these are ongoing. Kenneth A. R. Kennedy and Siran U. Deraniyagala, "Fossil Remains of 28,000-year-old Hominids from Sri Lanka," *Current Anthropology* 30, no. 3 (1989): 394–99.
10. C. T. Attanapola and R. Lund, "Contested Identities of Indigenous People: Indigenization or Integration of the Veddās in Sri Lanka," *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 34, no. 2 (2013): 172–87.
11. Jonathan Walters, *The History of Kelaniya* (Sri Lanka Social Scientists Association, 1996).
12. European colonisation of the island dates between 1505–1815, successively by the Portuguese, Dutch, and the British.
13. Walters, *The History of Kelaniya*, 101.
14. John Rogers, "Post-Orientalism and the Interpretation of Pre-modern and Modern Political Identities: The Case of Sri Lanka," *Journal of Asian Studies* 53 (1994): 10–23.
15. Gananath Obeyesekere, "The Principles of Religious Syncretism and the Buddhist Pantheon in Sri Lanka," in *Images of Man: Religion and Historical Process in South Asia*, edited by Fred W. Clothey (New Era Publishers, 1982), 15–33, 16.
16. Chandana Jayawardana and Wijeratne Bohingamuwa, *Pali Commentaries and Sri Lankan Society: An Introductory Note* (Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka, 2021).
17. *Dīpawamsa*, trans. Hermann Oldenberg (Williams and Norgate, 1879); *Mahawamsa*, trans. W. Geiger (Oxford University Press, 1912). The Mahavihara was a large Buddhist monastery for *Theravāda* Buddhism in the Anuradhapura kingdom (third century BCE–tenth century CE).
18. K. N. O. Dharmadasa, "Chapter 2: Veddās in the History of Sri Lanka: An Introductory Sketch," in *The Vanishing Aborigines*, edited by Dharmadasa and Samarasinghe, 34–47.
19. *Mahawamsa*, "Chapter 10: The Consecration of Pandukābhaya," 68–76.
20. Bahadur Krishnaswāmi Aiyangar, *Mañimekhalai in its Historical Setting* (Luzac and Co., 1928); *Yālpāna Vaipāva Mālai, or the History of the Kingdom of Jaffna* (anonymous), trans. C. Britto (Asian Educational Services, 1999), xxi–xxii.
21. *Mahawamsa*, "Chapter 1: The Visit of the Thathāgatha," 1–9.
22. C. Rasanayagam, *Ancient Jaffna: Being a Research into the History of Jaffna from Very Early Times to the Portuguese Period* (Asian Educational Services, 1926), 5–6.
23. Karthigesu Indrapala, *The Evolution of an Ethnic Identity: The Tamils in Sri Lanka* (South Asian Studies Centre, 2005), 71, 174.
24. Ptolemy's twelfth map of Asia (second century CE) identifying Sri Lanka as Taprobane was lost and rediscovered in the 1400s, so this information is from subsequent copies.
25. Mahaweli Authority of Sri Lanka, "Historical Background," <https://mahaweli.gov.lk/about%20us.html>.
26. *Mahawamsa*, "Chapter 6: The Coming of Vijaya," 51–54, and "Chapter 7: The Consecration of Vijaya," 65–67.
27. M. L. Sen, *Rāmāyana* (Archaeological Survey of India, 1927).
28. Totagamuve Sri Rahula, *Sālalihini Sandeśa*, trans. Edmund Jayasuriya (Colombo Post Graduate Institute of Archaeology and Central Cultural Fund, 2002).
29. Anonymous, "A Tamil Hindu Vijaya: Yalpāna Vaipāna Malai," in *The Sri Lanka Reader*, edited by John Clifford Holt (Duke University Press, 2011), 26–29.
30. *Yālpāna Vaipāva Mālai*, 1.
31. Gananath Obeyesekere, "Buddhism, Ethnicity and Identity: A Problem of Buddhist History," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 10 (2003): 192–242, 212.
32. *Mahawamsa*, "Chapter 14: The Entry into the Capital," 91–96, and "Chapter 19: The Coming of the Bodhi Tree," 128–35.
33. *Mahawamsa*, "The Coming of the Bodhi Tree," 128–29.
34. C. E. Godakumbura, "Sinhalese Festivals: Their

- Symbolism, Origins and Proceedings," *Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, New Series, Vol. XIV (1970), 91–130.
35. Senake Bandaranayake and Gamini Jayasinghe, *The Rock and Wall Paintings of Sri Lanka* (Stamford Lake, 2006), 13–17.
36. Bandaranayake and Jayasinghe, *The Rock and Wall Paintings*, 11–13.
37. Ja 469, "Mahākāṇḥajātaka [The Birth Story about the Great Black (Hound)] 1859–64," in *The Birth Stories* (Jātaka-aṭṭhakathā), trans. T. W. Rhys Davids et al., 1880–1907. Revised by Ānandajoti-Bhikku, 2003, <https://ancient-buddhist-texts.net/English-Texts/Jataka/The-Jataka.pdf>.
38. Ja 469, "Mahākāṇḥajātaka," 1815.
39. Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Creation of the Hunter* (Sailfish, 2022), 160.
40. Obeyesekere, *The Creation of the Hunter*, 162.
41. Obeyesekere, *The Creation of the Hunter*. James Brow in his 1970s study of Vādda villages in the Anuradhapura district revealed that many engaged in rice cultivation, living alongside Sinhala people. Brow, *Vedda Villages of Anuradhapura*.
42. Gananath Obeyesekere, "The Buddhist Pantheon in Ceylon and Its Extensions," in *Anthropological Studies in Theravada Buddhism*, edited by Manning Nash, Yale University Southeast Asia Studies Cultural Report Series, no. 13 (Yale University Press, 1966), 1–26, 20.
43. Observations at the temple during the mid-2000s.
44. Obeyesekere, *The Creation of the Hunter*, 12–14.
45. Brow, *Vedda Villages of Anuradhapura*.
46. Dharmadasa and Samarasinghe, *The Vanishing Aborigines*; Obeyesekere, *The Creation of the Hunter*, 10–11.
47. Obeyesekere, *The Creation of the Hunter*, 24; C. G. Seligman and B. Seligman, *The Veddās* (Cambridge University Press, 1911), discusses a number of colonial accounts.
48. See Jon Dart, "Chapter 4: The Coast Veddās: Dimensions of Marginality," in Dharmadasa and Samarasinghe, *The Vanishing Aborigines*, 67–83.
49. Gananath Obeyesekere, "Colonial Histories and Vadda Primitivism: An Unorthodox Reading of Kandy Period Texts" (G. C. Mendis Memorial Lecture, 2002), 29.
50. Bandaranayake and Jayasinghe, *The Rock and Wall Paintings*, 21.
51. Walters, *The History of Kelaniya*, 98.
52. Walters, *The History of Kelaniya*, 86–93.
53. Most notably the Uva-Wellsassa rebellion of 1817–1818 and the Matale Rebellion of 1848.
54. Sujit Sivasundaram, *Islanded: Britain, Sri Lanka and the Bounds of an Indian Ocean Colony* (University of Chicago Press, 2013), xvii.
55. Sivasundaram, *Islanded*, 71–81.
56. Rasanayagam, *Ancient Jaffna*, 7.
57. *Mahawamsa*, "Chapter 22: The Birth of Prince Gāmini," 146–54.
58. *Mahawamsa*, "Chapter 25: The Victory of Duṭṭhagāmani," 170–78.
59. Kālinga Māgha, believed to be from what is modern day Orissa, is one of the kings who established the Jaffna Tamil kingdom.
60. Dhanuka Rananjaka Kahandagamage, "Those of the Forest: What Should We Do for the Vedda?," in *Our Land Your Laws: Protecting the Rights of Sri Lanka's Adivasis*, edited by Lionel Guruge and Jayasiri Jayasekara (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 3 January 2023), 21–27.
61. Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger*, edited by Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, Jane Kramer, Benjamin Lee, and Michael Warner (Duke University Press, 2006), 137.
62. Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers*, 42. Brackets in original quotation.
63. See Wivexa Ann-Chatrin Stegeborn, "Nature Conservation, Human Rights, and Indigenous People: The Wanniya-laeto (veddahs) of Sri Lanka," Masters thesis, Washington State University, 1993; Address of Warige Wanniya.
64. Étienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene* (Verso, 2002), 24–30.