

The Doomed King: A Requiem for Sri Vikrama Rajasingha

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Obeyskere, G 2017, *The Doomed King: A Requiem for Sri Vikrama Rajasingha*, Sailfish, Colombo, pp. 409, \$ 20.

The opportunity to make a comment of one of Prof. Obeyskere's works is truly an honour. As an admirer of this scholar, I will attempt to share what I found particularly interesting and important in his latest book titled *The Doomed King: A Requiem for Sri Vikrama Rajasingha* – in terms of methodology, approach, as well as content.

In the *Doomed King*, Prof. Obeyskere critically reviews the received wisdom about Sri Vikrama Rajasinghe. As many may already know, Sri Vikrama Rajasinghe is generally regarded as a cruel and despotic ruler. The Kandyan aristocrats who betrayed him are seen to have been driven to desperation by his atrocities and forced to collaborate with the British in order to rid themselves of a ruler who was proving to be intolerable. What we learnt about the last King of Kandy and much of the scholarship on Sri Vikrama Rajasinghe and indeed the last days of the Kandyan kingdom rely heavily on interpretations of John D'Oyly's Diary and other colonial accounts of the last days of the Kandyan monarchy.

In critically reviewing such wisdom, Prof. Obeyskere raises an important methodological question: How do we know about the past? How is history written? He shows the discrepancies and contradictions in the popular narrative about Sri Vikrama Rajasinghe, and importantly, highlights the limitations of relying primarily on colonial sources in writing history. He shows how over reliance on particular sources for the construction of the past can result in the presentation of events as 'true' or 'historically accurate' without sufficient care for the fact that the sources themselves need to be understood in a particular social and political context. Prof. Obeyskere examines the sources of information based on which D'Oyly wrote his accounts as well as multiple other sources to present a convincing

argument that these sources which fed into constructing a particular image of Sri Vikrama Rajasinghe as a tyrannical, despotic, and unpopular monarch, need to be treated with caution: That is, the sources themselves are not disinterested and are in fact complicit in constructing this image of the King. He discusses how this particular image of the King, especially his relationship with the local aristocracy and the people, feed into justifying the larger British imperial project. In other words, the popular narrative of Sri Vikrama Rajasinghe helps construct the idea that the British did not simply invade and depose a legitimate sovereign in order to expand the British Empire, but rather that they did so in response to the sufferings of the Kandyan people under a cruel and tyrannical leader.

Prof. Obeyskere then discusses other documents that complicate this accepted version of Sri Vikrama Rajasinghe as cruel and tyrannical, utterly despised by his people. Looking at these multiple sources, he presents an alternative version of Sri Vikrama Rajasinghe as a strong, clever, and even visionary leader – beset by rivalries within the Kandyan aristocracy and conspiracies encouraged by the British Maritime administration who were eyeing the takeover of the Kandyan kingdom. The ruthlessness and cruelty, especially the punishments he meted out to his enemies for which the King is best remembered, the details of which Prof. Obeyskere questions, as we are reminded in this book, were also largely conducted within the accepted laws and traditions of the time in dealing with treason. These methods we are also reminded were not very much more brutal than the kinds of laws and traditions that were practiced in similar situations in Europe at that time.

Prof. Obeyskere deals in detail with the brutal execution of Ahelepola's family for which Sri Vikrama

Rajasinghe is best known. The details of the execution rely largely on the writings of John Davy – the British army surgeon who was not even present in the island at the time. Davy arrived in the island in 1816 and the incidents he describes happened between 1814 and 1815. Davy relied on other sources in relating the story of the executions. But Prof. Obeysekere shows how other accounts, which Davy does not refer to, especially Sinhala accounts of these incidents, such as the *Ahelepola varnanava* and the *Kirala Sandesaya*, although virulently anti-Tamil and critical of the King, barely mention the execution of Ahelepola. What is interesting here is how the veracity of the information provided by John Davy is accepted without question by historians and scholars and becomes received wisdom about the King. Prof. Obeysekere in his treatment of the different accounts of Sri Vikrama Rajasinghe and the last Kandyan Kingdom, shows the extent to which various versions were influenced by their own political projects: For instance, British accounts were concerned with presenting a case for deposing a legitimate sovereign and for imposing British control over a foreign kingdom. Sinhala accounts of the time were influenced by the need to present versions of what happened based on loyalties to the different groups of Kandyan families and aristocrats who themselves had vested interests in seeing the king deposed. Prof. Obeysekere also provides evidence to show how the Kandyan aristocracy's resistance to the King and covert support of the British imperial project were influenced by their desire to benefit from trade and to have access to commodities that were being deprived to the Kandyan Kingdom as a result of trade embargoes and hostilities between the Maritime Provinces, which were part of the British Crown Colony, and the Kandyan Kingdom.

The idea that particular versions of events could reflect specific perspectives is of course not surprising. After all, this is the era of 'alternative facts'! What is surprising, and this is why this book is so important, is how often histories get written and transmitted without that critical awareness and how much that impacts our interpretations of people, communities, and events in the here and now. The 'bad press' (as Prof. Obeysekere refers to it) that Sri Vikrama Rajasinghe got, from colonial as well as other scholars and writers, fed into a larger narrative about the Nayakars, their Tamil lineage (which in itself is incorrect), the Tamils as brutal invaders and enemies, of the Sinhalese as a unified bastion of Sinhala rule, disrupted by the misrule of the 'foreign' Nayakars, and a relatively uncritical acceptance of the duplicity and yes, treachery of the local Kandyan aristocracy in their collaboration with British imperialists against a legitimate sovereign, and the glossing over of

the bloodshed and violence of the British rule. So while we accept without question descriptions by colonial writers and administrators of the brutality, savagery, and barbarity of Sri Vikrama Rajasinghe, we also accept the glossing over of the violence of the Colonial power in expanding its rule over the island. For example, the brutal response of the British to the 1815 rebellion is not remembered in history with quite the same horror as the so called excesses of Sri Vikrama Rajasinghe.

This book reveals how much is left unsaid about the role of D'Oyly as a spy, his local collaborators including Buddhist monks, the mercenary interests that facilitated the collaboration between British administrators and the Kandyan aristocracy, and the violence and brutality that sustained the British imperial project. This perspective is important not simply because it shows us how corrosive colonial powers and colonialism were – but how interpretations of history mask complicated and inconvenient aspects of the colonized as well.

A small example may be relevant in this regard: This is in relation to what Prof. Obeysekere describes as the 'myth-model' about the supposed national flag of the Sinhalese. According to this myth-model, the lion flag is identified as the national flag used by Sinhala kings and was hoisted by Rev. Variapola Sumangala, after he trampled the union jack in defiance of the British in 1815. Prof. Obeysekere casts some doubt on this entire incident, but more importantly shows how this idea of the lion flag being the national flag of the Sinhalese from the beginning of the nation has no basis. Contrary to common assertions, there is no description of such a flag in either the *Mahavamsa* or *Culavamsa* or in any *Sandesas*. The symbolism of the lion is certainly important in Sinhala mythology, and kings were often compared to lions (though there are no records according to Prof. Obeysekere of Sinhala kings claiming descent from lions – in fact, they claimed descent from the sun and sometimes the moon or even both), and there were indeed lion flags in many places, but whether it was accepted as the 'national flag' is questionable – even more so when one considers that the idea of a 'nation' is quite recent. The flag of the Seven Korales had a lion – but not a lion holding a sword in its paw. So how did the image of the lion with the sword become accepted as the 'national flag' of the Sinhalese? Prof. Obeysekere argues that the lion with the sword comes from the Coat of Arms of the Republic of the Seven United Provinces after 1584. The same image was found in coins and seals associated with the Dutch, which is found even today at the Dutch Burgher Union! The Sinhalese people of the Maritime Provinces transformed and indigenized this Dutch lion and used it in their areas. Brownrigg used

this flag at the Kandyan Convention of 1815 since both he and D'Oyly were familiar with the use of this flag in the Maritime Provinces. However, no such flag existed in the Kandyan regions. Yet, in popular imagination, the lion flag with the lion holding a sword in its paw is quintessentially linked to the last Sinhala king and the Kandyan kingdom.

During public consultations on constitutional reform recently, there were several public submissions that recommended changing the national flag – especially the image of the lion holding a sword. Those proposals evoked responses that suggested that such an act would be a huge betrayal of the nation. Yet, as we can see, if we dispassionately examine the origins of these symbols of nationhood, we may have to confront some uncomfortable aspects that disrupt the idea of a long and unbroken history of collective unity untouched by any 'outside' and 'foreign' influences. This is what makes work of this nature so important – this is what makes the proper study of history so important as it can impact on the debates and discussions of who we are today and how we imagine and construct our links to the past.

Prof. Obeyesekere's ethno-historical work during the past couple of decades or so has also raised important issues for the discipline of anthropology and even history. One issue that is a sensitive one for anthropology in particular is about the misunderstandings and misperceptions that can arise when anthropologists use their familiar and comfortable frames of reference to interpret and explain different contexts. Can anthropologists speak authoritatively about others? Who has the right to speak about whom? Anthropologists have been agonising over this for years and I suspect will continue to do so in the foreseeable future as well. The other important issue that is raised through Prof. Obeyesekere's work is how to deal with historical material. For him, understanding hidden agendas and the context within which historical material is produced is essential when recreating history. It also raises the issue about how to evaluate conflicting knowledge claims.

In this work as in others of a similar vein, Prof. Obeyesekere questions the claims made by other scholars. How then do we as the readership or even as a community of academics, evaluate these different claims? Robert Borofsky, commenting on Prof. Obeyesekere's work on Captain James Cook in an article in 1997, says that

“intellectual authority tends to reside not in scholarly assertions but in the interactions of scholars with their audiences through time. It is something that gets established through collective conversations. Without such interaction, we can only whistle in the dark, trusting our own impressions of what is (and is not) credible” (p. 264).

In this age of university rankings, and competing 'international conferences' and the culture of publish or perish, this is something we tend to forget: the importance of scholarly interactions, conversations and debates – and the necessity of nurturing the kind of culture and environment that makes those kinds of conversations and interactions possible. This is what makes Prof. Obeyesekere's work so brilliant – he provokes conversations, debates, dialogues, thoughts, and ideas.

Let me end with a quote from the *Doomed King* that I found particularly inspiring:

“Evidence itself can be opaque and that is why our historical and ethnographic accounts are full of holes, lacunae, and that is why our histories and ethnographies are, fortunately, contested and contestable by our colleagues. What we call 'truth' unfortunately is an allusive and illusive deity” (p.270).

Notes

1 Adapted from a speech given at the launch of the book on 17 May, 2017, at the Bandaranaike Centre for International Studies auditorium organized by the International Center for Ethnic Studies (ICES). I wish to thank ICES for this opportunity.

References

Borofsky, R 1997, 'Cook, Lono, Obeyesekere, and Sahlins', *Chicago Journals*, vol. 38, no. 2, pp. 255-282