

The Changing 'State' of the Frontier

Michael Woost

Five years ago, a few days after the Vesak holiday, I bade an emotional farewell to the community of people in the Moneragala District among whom I had made my home for the greater part of my year and a half stay in Sri Lanka. At that time I had lived in the village as an Anthropologist doing research on community development and the problems faced by families forging out into the frontier of "development" out on the margins of what is commonly thought of as "the state" (though I am still not clear as to what that object really is). On April 25, 1992, I made another journey back to this same village, a journey in some ways as sentimental as the one I had made five years ago. The occasion was a special one for both the villagers and myself, but not for the same reasons. For myself, I was going back to the place I had left behind, clutching memories that were caught up in a confusing web of nostalgia and the realities of social change. For the villagers the following day was to be the official opening celebration of their community as one of the "Re-Awakened Villages" of the 14th Gam Udawa Celebration.

The bus was scheduled to leave at 7:15 A.M. and I managed to get a seat right in front, across from the driver, where I would have a bird's-eye view of the countryside as we made our way to Wellassa. That I would be battling nostalgia along the way was apparent in the fact that I was even looking forward to the long bus ride that lay ahead.

Street rituals

The first thing I noticed that was different from before was the new street ritual that seems to have taken Sri Lanka by storm. Here I refer to the street races that have taken the fancy of village, town and city dwellers. By 8:30 or 9:00 that morning the races were well underway, another *perahera* of sorts, competing for space in a street already crowded with buses, cycles, bicycles, ox-carts, cars, lorries and pedestrians. Policemen re-directed traffic and car-loads of youth sped by ordering vehicles to the side to make way for the competitors. Then came the runners, shoeless and soaked from sweat and the pans of water onlookers doused them with as they ran past. The runners

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were followed and coached by other youth on bicycles/motor-bikes (some even ran alongside the runners themselves, a practice I found difficult to understand) and in general the street was clogged with vehicles and people all with different goals and motivations. This was obviously a source of frustration for our driver as well as fellow passengers since it was slowing our pace considerably. In fact, later in the day the conductor had mentioned that the races had added an hour to our trip.

In spite of the races we made it to Avissawella, making a quick stop to drop some coins in the collection box at the temple, and then moved on towards Ratnapura. I did not notice many changes through this region other than the greater number of vehicles on the road and the aforementioned races.

The changes only became apparent after Ratnapura, as we came upon the outskirts of the agro-metropolis of Embilipitiya and the area around Uda Walawe. The most obvious change was the condition of the roads. At least as I remember it, a great deal of the route through this area and further on towards Thanalmalvila was made up of narrow gravel roads, full of potholes and exceedingly dusty in the dry season. Now the roads were metalled throughout and sufficiently wide for two buses to pass with relative ease. Another difference was that there were many more people living in the area than I remembered. There were more houses, more bus halts and shops, whereas previously the route was marked more by the absence of signs of human habitation. People still got down on lonely stretches of road, but now there were also many junctions from which other roads branched off, presumably leading to other new settlements.

As we travelled through these newly inhabited areas, we proceeded at a fairly rapid pace, something not possible, even unthinkable, five years earlier given the rutted road that it once was (it was still not Galle Road by any means, but the change was nevertheless quite significant).

Disappearing frontier

All this is to say that the frontier is disappearing; it is being transformed by the routines and rituals of state formation that seem to be making an indelible mark on the countryside. Such routines and rituals include in-migration, the regularization of encroachment, development work in all of its forms and practices,

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the introduction of new cash-crops like maize, sugar and tobacco, and, yes, even the weekend foot-races which can arguably be interpreted as yet another ritual binding individuals from all parts of the country into a community of citizens participating in similar rituals in different localities. These and other new processes and practices are incorporating an area where once many people had gone to escape the moral regulation of "the state", ostensibly to start a new life in a relatively unencumbered social, political, and geographic space.

This kind of change was most in evidence in the town of Buttala, home of the regional *Gam Udawa* exhibition center. As the bus made its way into town, I was immediately struck by the level of activity, the hustle and bustle on the main street through town. It was clogged with vehicles of all shapes and sizes and everyone seemed to have somewhere to go in a hurry. I remembered this place as a rather sleepy, yet somewhat modern, outpost that catered to people working at Pelwatta Sugar Corporation as well as pilgrims on their way to Kataragama. The situation had clearly changed in that respect.

Gam Udawa

Yet the greatest surprise of all was lurking on the outskirts of the expanding town (no longer was it simply a junction on the way to somewhere else). For on the eastern edge of the town was located a gargantuan construction site walled in on all sides. There, within those walls, the *Gam Udawa* Exhibition Center is under construction by laborers drawn from far and near. Where once the prospect of mining for geuda brought many newcomers to the region, now *Uda Gam* is the big recruiter of migrants. What is more, local people later told me that formerly dedicated "gemmers" have now abandoned their search for fortune in favor of the steady, yet temporary, work on the *Uda Gam* construction sites (which include not only the exhibition center, but also individual villages that are part of the program). It was also noted that part of the reason for this shift in employment was due to the fact that the fines for illicit gem mining had been substantially raised and enforcement of the laws had been beefed up as well. Discouraged miners were thus happy to have *Uda Gam* employment to fall back on even though some were said to be complaining that once the construction work was over they would again be compelled to resume their activities in the jungle.

The paradox in this lies in the fact that such people now labor at making such a return to the jungle difficult, for they themselves are, in effect, helping to extend the reach of "the state" into places "it" previously had difficulty in going. In addition to making it easier for villagers to get their produce to market, the new roads that come with this kind of development make it much easier to enforce the law and for officials to know what is going on in areas that were previously rather inaccessible.

This was in some ways the case with the village of my destination. Earlier the settlement (now a re-awakened village) was composed of families who migrated from other parts of the

Island to forge a new life on the frontier. This took place slowly over a period of about 30 years.

When I left there five years ago, there were no roads to the village and travelling there was generally accomplished on foot or on bicycle, though it was possible to take a vehicle as far as the school yard provided one was willing to risk damage to said vehicle. Villagers had periodically tried to mend the road (though how one mends what does not exist I was never sure), but for the most part there was little they could do on their own, since the road was cross-cut by numerous small streams and gullies which in the wet season made up-keep a difficult job without heavy equipment. What they needed were culverts and culverts they now have, with a road to match.

Travel in and out of the village is now much easier, something I immediately noticed after I got down at Moneragala and was myself travelling by jeep to the village. And along the way we were passed by a number of other vehicles as well. It was already seeming to be a well-travelled road.

What the villagers also have now are new houses. In fact, the houses they have constructed under the *Gam Udawa* campaign have entirely changed the face of the village. Family homes were previously nearly all of the wattle and daub/illuk thatch variety, comfortable homes, if not so modern looking as the new ones. Yet to have a tiled roof was even then a marker of status which only a few homesteaders could boast, though nearly everyone expressed the desire to have one.

Now all of the wattle and daub house are gone (except for a few holdouts) and in its place are the newly built homes with lime stucco and tile roofs. Most of the homes are of very uniform construction, except in the case of a few families who have tried to make variations on the common architectural theme in an effort to set themselves off from the herd. Thus the status markers remain, though in new forms. In this sense, becoming developed has not alleviated the struggle for a sense of community devoid of various forms of social differentiation.

The other feature to note is that there are now roads leading up to the houses. Previously only rugged footpaths or cart-tracks led up to the houses, some of which were situated out of sight from the main path, even in the jungle itself, while others were located at the end of paths walled in by *illuk* grass. However, not all of the new homes had such ready access to their doorstep and this was a source of displeasure for the families concerned. For them development was not yet complete.

In any case, when I finally arrived in the village about 5:00 P.M. that evening (the bus ride ended up taking only 8 hours), I was quite amazed to see what was going on there. All sorts of vehicles were going hither and yon, while countless labourers were busy at doing the work of developing the village in addition to putting up decorations for the ceremony that was to take place in the morning. There was heavy equipment at work; there were people carrying wood, shovelling earth, painting

houses and fences; water trucks were spraying roads. And from the look of things this development work would go on until late in the night (which it in fact did). I found it difficult to find familiar faces in this maze of activity. But here and there I noticed old friends and acquaintances hard at work, with serious looks on their faces (after all the celebration was to take place the next morning and it seemed that much work was yet to be done).

I spent the night in the house I had occupied during my stay in the village. It was one of the few wattle and daub houses left. Compared to the other homes, mine was now very low in status. But since it was on the school grounds workers were busy painting over the mud to make it look somewhat more in tune with its surroundings. Before going off to bed, I sat outside until about 10:00 watching vehicles come and go. At one point there was even a government bus that went by, heading back to the main road. This was something I had never witnessed from the garden of my village home. My friend who had travelled with me remarked that the road into the village was as busy as Galle Road. Though this was clearly an exaggeration, I agreed.

Efficient state

The next day the activities were resumed before daylight. I do not know for sure if they even stopped since work was still going on at about 11:00 the previous night when I went to sleep. By 9:00 A.M. lorries and bus loads of people started arriving for the ceremony until there was a crowd, the likes of which was never seen in this village. The road, the school and the newly constructed community center were decked out in all sorts of decorations and marching bands took their position as officials gathered at the newly erected arch to meet the Minister when he arrived. He made his entrance at 10:00 sharp amidst the bustle of onlookers and security people assigned to oversee the event. The whole thing was over in about 45 minutes and the Minister and the crowd (including many of the villagers themselves) were whisked off to the next sites (there were two more to be opened that day, with the last one being the main celebration site).

I stayed behind to talk to some old friends. While there I saw the contractors busy taking down the decorations that marked the village as a special site. Within 45 minutes the decorations and the contractors were gone and the village looked deserted. In fact, after all of the activity of the past 24 hours, the silence there was almost eerie. As I walked about the village, I was glad to see the contractors had decided to leave behind the new houses, the community buildings and the newly enlarged tank bund.

The point of all of this is that the spatial, social and political arrangement of the frontier all along the road to Wellassa is being radically altered. Where earlier the processes of state formation were very marginally present, they were now in evidence on a daily basis. Fewer and fewer communities are now beyond the pale of these routines and rituals.

Village-nation

What is significant, then, is that development is the set of activities that is largely responsible for this integration of the frontier and its pioneers into the larger moral community of the nation. This is viewed positively by many inhabitants who see the new roads as facilitating connection with the market, while the new houses and community buildings mark the arrival of a more "urbanized" environment. Other people lament the passing of a time when life was relatively unencumbered by the larger processes of community that now impinge upon their daily lives. Some note the new obligations they have to "the state" that yield a new sense of urgency to their lives—the home loans that must be repaid, the new political indebtedness to those who have brought these changes to their village, the increased travel through their village which will bring many strangers to their doorsteps, leading some to worry about an increase in crime or further complications in village-level politics. In that, there seems to be a feeling in some quarters that some aspects of their sense of community, whatever its previous problems, has been lost.

What all of this means is that development is filled with conflicting desires and emotions, with trade-offs of various kinds. From the point of view of the people who want and desire what development offers (the manufacture of this desire and its reproduction is a whole other issue in itself), the process of becoming developed is an ambivalent one, filled with uncertainties, worries and sacrifices that they do not take lightly. Some even wondered if they had given up too much to become developed like the other villages they heard about or visited (one man lamented that he had sold off his tractor, oxen and motor-bike to build his house). Furthermore, I suspect these same feelings of uncertainty are probably experienced by the hardworking local officials who are trying under difficult circumstances to bring development to the villages of the area. Yet they, like everyone else, must work within the parameters and agendas for development that are available, parameters and agendas that are not always of wholly indigenous construction.

This makes me think back to the expression I saw on one of the boys running in a race near Ratnapura while enroute to Wellassa. As our bus moved past him he had to jump to the side of the road to avoid being scraped by the side of the bus. He looked up at me as he broke his stride with a look of astonishment on his face. I imagined that at that moment he was wondering why he was risking life and limb to run in the street just to be part of what everyone else across the country was doing. The moment was broken when an onlooker rushed up and doused him with a pan of water and set him back to his task. Given "the state" of things, what else was there to do, what alternative was there on the horizon?