WHAT'S IN A NAME? PLURALIZING THE CENSUS

Darini Rajasingham Senanayake

Before the last census in the United States, a national debate took place over identity – individual and national – and its classification. The champion golfer Tiger Woods, who is part African American, part Asian (Thai), part native American and part Anglo was frequently mentioned in this connection. Into what category of ethnic/race identity could Tiger Woods fit in the American census? The debate was about whether mixed or hybrid people like Woods should tick all the identity boxes to which they belonged. Or could Woods only be able to choose a single identity classification (but which one?), or otherwise simply claim the status of "other."

The former option, ticking as many identity boxes as one could claim would lead to numerical irrationality in the American census. There would be more identities than people, was the objection. Finally, it was agreed that people of mixed or multi-cultural descent could claim as many identities as they wanted. The American census was pluralized, numerical irrationality could be sorted out by other means, and America, the land of the immigrants from all over the world, would finally know how many mixed people there were and could be expected down the line. What the census also revealed was the sharp rise of the Latino minority and the news that in some cities, whites were in a minority.

Sri Lanka and the Census

After a twenty-year hiatus and almost twenty years of armed conflict, Sri Lankans will go to the Census in July. The last census was taken in 1971. The census due in 1981 was never taken due to the conflict in the northeast. Previously, the census had been a national event – every ten years, a stocktaking of population and a mapping of people by the government administrative apparatus. It was on the basis of census information that social policy and programmes were designed. The lack of the 1981 census has been a limitation for national policy planning, particularly given the population shifts and transfers caused by the war.

To many people, census-taking is a bureaucratic, technical and statistical exercise that has little to do with everyday life. It entails giving self-evident answers to simple questions, that will enable the government to take aggregate stock of the island's diverse inhabitants. The questions will be about one's identity and its multiple markers: name, age, gender, education levels, literacy, ethnicity, religion, language (asking about caste is not done these days – but was standard in the old colonial census of the early nineteenth century). The answers to the census questions will tell individual and aggregate stories of national progress or regress based on statistical analysis. It will serve as a baseline for social

policy. The census in short establishes objective facts. How objective these facts of identity and achievement might be becomes an issue in light of the contemporary conflict, politics and history.

History of the Ceylon Census

Broadly speaking, the census is an attempt in part to make scientific sense out of human cultural diversity, past and present, by establishing identity in a singular rather than plural manner. The census then is an attempt to classify and make categorical and numerical sense out of the essentially fluid thing we call identity or culture. This problematic of the census occupied the first British designers of the census in the island of Ceylon and still occupies contemporary scholars of ethnicity and identity politics. Human identity, unlike natural phenomena, are simultaneously multiple and cross-cutting and have gender, ethnic, linguistic, religious, and caste elements. How certain types of identity are singled out (ethnicity) while others like class classification are lost in the census is an interesting issue. It is also a political issue.

A number of scholars, including Bernard Cohn, have noted how British colonial census categories invented and transformed old systems of classification and consolidated new ones in the colonies — particularly in India. They note that because it served as the basis for determining race-based representational government, the census was both an instrument in establishing new categories and making them a social reality in colonial Ceylon. Representation after all entails both a question of knowledge (classification) and power (political representation). Hence the connection between knowledge and power that theorists of colonialism and governance have observed: to know the other was also to know how to govern the other. The census and the map served as critical instruments toward working out a modicum of representative government between local elites and British administrators.

The Construction of 'Race'

The first modern census was carried out in Sri Lanka in 1871, at the same time that a census was taken in Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Prior to that, census in Ceylon had consisted of population estimates based on accounts of village headmen of the Kandyan highlands which were then added to the count of the maritime provinces which had been enumerated under the Dutch Governor Van der Graaf in 1789 (Panditharathna and Selvanayagam, 1971). The 1814 and 1924 census provided information on castes and religions in Ceylon. In the early years

"caste" was the primary category used to differentiate between different communities, as was the case in India during the period between 1827 and 1871, no census was held until the census of 1911, the census in Sri Lanka was a fair one.

Until 1824 Sinhalese and Tamils were perceived not as clear-cut ethnic groups but first and foremost as members of a number of caste groups of various sizes. In 1835, a detailed statement of the population was prepared from headman returns and registers of births and deaths. The population was then grouped under the following heads: "whites" (9, 121), "free blacks" (1,194,482), slaves (27,397) and aliens and resident strangers (10,825). These categories were no longer those of castes, but expressed a greater sense of inclusion-exclusion which permeated colonial situations. By the 1871 census the term "race" appeared for the first time along the category of nationality.

In 1871 there were recorded 24 races in Ceylon. There was a certain amount of incoherence in these categories. "Sinhalese" and "Tamil" were races as well as nationalities. Yet the term "nationality" was also introduced to describe groups numerically too small to be called "races"; such as, for instance, Abyssinian or West Indian. The structure of the census which divided Sinhala into low and high country reveal an absence of significant Sinhala-Tamil geo-political polarization during colonial rule. Rather, it indicates that regional differences between groups speaking the same language, as for instance, between the low-country Sinhalas, were more salient than between coastal Tamils and Sinhalas. The salient geo-political borders, albeit colonially engineered, were not ethno-national or between north and south, as is posited in the Pali-Vamsas, but coastal and high country.

The colonial census reveals a systematic simplification of the diversity of the island's people and cultures by scholars and British colonial administrators. At the same time, categorical confusion and indeterminacy in the pre-1871 census also reflects the absence of a modern "scientific," which is to say, race-based system of classification of human cultural differences. When juxtaposed with the later census they reveal a story of how the colonial racial imagination was developed, articulated with reconstituted local categories for marking difference and affinity.

By the 1881 census there was a clear consolidation of communal differences in the colonial census, and presumably racial imagination. There were only seven races left, namely, Europeans, Sinhalese, Tamils, Moormen, Malays, Veddas and Others. The number of nationalities had decreased slightly from 78 to 71 and from then on "races" became the main category of classification as the shifting diversity of the island became more or less fixed. It is a case of "plus ca change" – the more it changes the more it remains the same.

Colonial Attitudes

H ardly surprising then that the Superintendent of the Census, E.B. Denham, should write of Ceylon at the Census of 1911:

> However radical the changes which are taking place in the manners and customs of the country, any attempt to understand the character, prejudices and outlook of an Eastern people must be based on a realization of the innate conservatism of the East.

Edward Said has noted that one fairly characteristic European response to Asiatic societies was the denial of change: the temporai fixing of visual, spatial and racial diversity and intermixture. The conservatism of Asia was a standard feature of orientalist discourse that served to place the natives in the colonies outside time and history. Said has examined the representational structures of orientalism, but it is also arguable that the notion of race which posits international sameness in the face of external diversity and change also enabled the positing of changelessness of Asiatic in the face of obvious cultural hybridity and transformation. Darini Rajasingham Senanayake has argued that race conceptions functioned as a deep and invisible time-line for positing internal or genetic sameness in the face of external changes, mixedness or miscegenation in the colonies.

In Ceylon there was no equivalent term among any of the local languages for the European concept of "race." The Sinhala term for race "jathi/jathiya" was, and still is, used to connote "race", "ethnic" and "nation," not to mention caste. The translation of "race" to "jathi" enabled and enables a certain categorical slippage that permits mapping religious, linguistic and cultural differences along a single over-arching frame of race.

Patriarchy and the Erasure of the Mother and Multiple Identities

Patriarchy literally means the rule of the father, and by implication the erasure of the mother – for many the more important part of one's socio-biological and cultural identity, in everyday life. The convention in the Euro-American world has historically been patrilineage in establishing identity. One takes one's father's name, religion etc. In Sri Lanka, the patriarchal Roman-Dutch law reinforced by English law, meant the erasure of the mother.

One interesting case is that of the mixed population. If one's father is Sinhala and the mother is European, Burgher, Tamil or Muslim, the children are Sinhala. The mother is erased. If the 'mixture' is the same (Sinhala/English), but the father is English and mother Sinhala, the children are 'Eurasian.' This rule applies to the many Sinhala/Tamil/Muslim mixed marriages where patriarchy prevails in terms of the children's ethnic category.

Feminists have thus argued that this is also a constitutive element of male dominance. In any case patrilineal practices consolidated in the colonial period served to erase cultural mixedness, hybridity and multiculturalism and perpetuate the myth of pure ethnic identities.

The process of translation and transformation begun in colonial times put in place the cognitive structures of the configuration of identity politics in Sri Lanka where Sinhalese and Tamils have emerged as singular ethnic groups. For the post-colonial period, communal, or what are now termed ethno-racial or national, identities were mapped on to conceptions of race, thereby changing existing identity configurations. What is clear is that linguistic and religious categories have been consolidated along an ethno-racial fault line in post-colonial Sri Lanka. Thus, despite the fact that Hindus and Buddhists share a pantheon of gods and many common religious practices, they are viewed as belonging to different religions. Likewise, though Sinhalas and Tamils have intermarried over the centuries, Sinhalas and Tamils are construed as exclusive categories in the census.

It is hence imperative that the census in Sri Lanka be pluralized to reflect the diversity, mixed and multiculturalism of the island's peoples also as a means of conflict resolution. For it is arguable that those who are mixed are least likely to do harm to the other, since the other is within us rather than the enemy outside. Let us pluralize the census as one long-term strategy for undoing colonial and scientifically false race-based identity classifications and recognizing diversity within and without us – also as a small step towards reconciliation and conflict resolution.

The False-Truths of Classification.

We recommend a recent film (in Sinhala) called "The Census" based on a short story in Malayalam. As an introduction to the film says," the census-taker in Karoor Nilakanthas Pillai's story *The Wooden Dolls* (1963) tells Nalini, the woman he interviews, that the census is concerned with the 'truth.' The government needs verification on the lives of its citizens, their civil status, professions, age, parenthood, patterns of internal travel etc. But what is the truth, particularly when it comes to the life of this poor woman, living in a rural village in Kerala? This is where the census form, influenced by, and in collusion with an age-old patriarchy which classifies women in particular ways, constructs a sexual division of labour, and genders their roles in everyday life, comes into confrontation with another lived reality, more 'truthful' to the woman in question. Karoor's short story, through the lively, witty and poignant dialogue between the census taker and Nalini, foregrounds this anomaly with subtle irony." It has been filmed in a local setting by Robert Cruz . ∎

IF IT'S FAIR, IT'S GOOD: 10 TRUTHS ABOUT GLOBALIZATION

Amartya Sen

Even though the world is incomparably richer than ever before, ours is also a world of extraordinary deprivation and of staggering inequality.

We have to bear in mind this elemental contrast when considering widespread skepticism about the global economic order and the patience of the general public with the so-called anti-globalization protests, despite the fact that they are often frantic and frenzied and sometimes violent.

Debates about globalization demand a better understanding of the underlying issues, which tend to get submerged in the rhetoric of confrontation, on one side, and hasty rebuttals, on the other. Some general points need particular attention.

Anti-globalization protests are not about globalization: The so-called anti-globalization protesters can hardly be, in general, anti-globalization, since these protests are among the most globalized events in the contemporary world. The protesters in Seattle, Melbourne, Prague, Quebec and elsewhere are not just local kids, but men and women from across the world pouring into the location of the respective events to pursue global complaints.

Globalization is not new, nor is it just Westernization: Over thousands of years, globalization has progressed through travel, trade, migration, spread of cultural influences and dissemination of knowledge and understanding (including of science and technology).