

The Portuguese Cultural Imprint on Sri Lanka

The Portuguese era marked the end of medieval Sri Lanka and the beginning of modern Sri Lanka. It changed the island's orientation away from India and gave it a unique identity moulded by almost 450 years of Western influence due to the presence of three successive European powers : the Portuguese (1505-1658), the Dutch (1658-1796) and the British (1796-1948). The Portuguese cultural imprint can be analyzed by examining : (a) those who claim Portuguese descent (the Portuguese *Burghers*), (b) those who do not claim Portuguese descent but who follow the Roman Catholic faith, (c) those who are neither of Portuguese descent nor follow the Catholic faith but nevertheless underwent a sociocultural transformation. Language is a necessary element in the set of culture. The other elements are subjective and could include religion, food, dress, music and dance.

The interaction of the Portuguese and the Sri Lankans led to the evolution of a new language, Sri Lanka Portuguese Creole, which flourished as a *lingua franca* in the island for over three and a half centuries (16th to mid-19th). Pidgins and Creoles are contact languages ; they evolve when people who do not speak each other's mother-tongue come into contact. Pidgins only survive as long as the interlingual contact lasts and are generally shortlived. The etymon of Pidgin is business. A Creole is a Pidgin which has become the mother-tongue of a speech community. Sri Lanka Portuguese Creole, a subset of Indo-Portuguese (the Portuguese Creole that flourished in coastal India), has been the solution to the inter-communication problems that arose when the Portuguese and Sri Lankans came into contact. In Sri Lanka, miscegenation reinforced the Creole as the *mestiços* (offspring of a Portuguese father and a Sri Lankan mother) were bilingual – they were proficient in the Creole and Sinhala or Tamil. Boxer (1961 : 61) comments that the Eurasians (*mestiços*), or even slave women, kept alive the use of the Portuguese language in places like Batavia, Malacca and Ceylon (Sri Lanka), which were under Dutch control.

In contemporary Sri Lanka, the Creole is limited to the spoken form. The major groups of speakers are the *Burghers* (people of Portuguese and Dutch descent) in the Eastern province (Batticaloa and Trincomalee) and the *Kaffirs* (people of African origin) in the North-Western province (Puttalam) (see map for geographic locations). The Creole speakers do not belong to the

higher echelons of Sri Lankan society and have been marginalized due to the sociopolitical changes that occurred since the Portuguese era ended.

During the Portuguese era, the *mestiços* or *topazes* (etymon Sanskrit *dvibash*, « one who speaks two languages ») were in demand because they served as interpreters. When the Dutch took over the coastal areas and maltreated the Catholics, the Portuguese descendants took refuge in the central hills of the Kandyan kingdom under Sinhalese rule. Tennent (1850 : 72) observes that the Portuguese *Burghers* had been suppressed by the Dutch penal laws and that even under the more liberal British regime they had not aspired to rise above the status that their forefathers had been reduced to. Despite their disadvantaged socioeconomic position, the *Burghers* have maintained their Portuguese cultural identity. In Batticaloa the Catholic *Burgher* Union has played a pivotal role in reinforcing this. The Union is however struggling to finance the in-house English newsletter with Portuguese extracts.

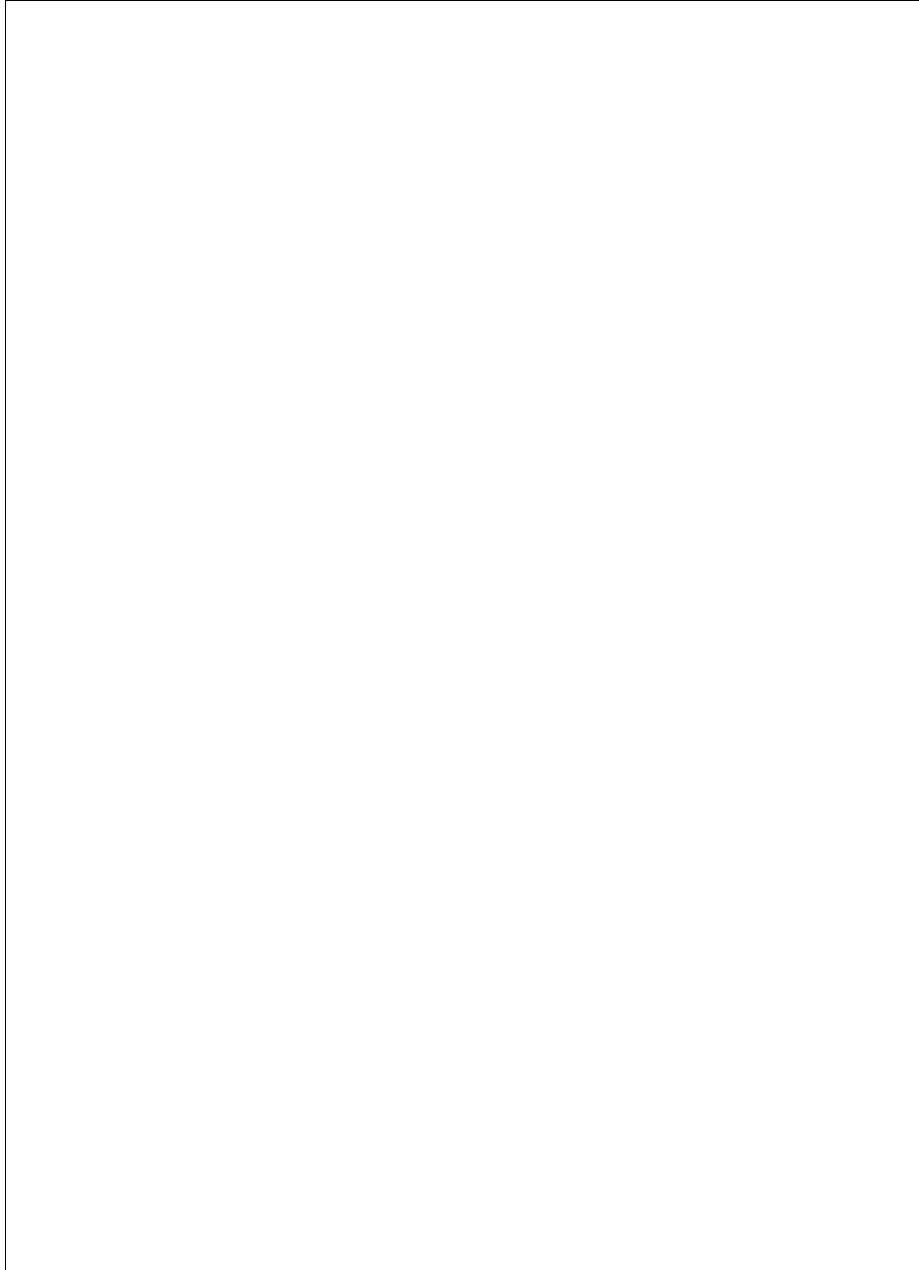
As the Creole was losing ground in the island, many *Burghers* substituted one prestige language (Sri Lanka Portuguese Creole) for another (English). Most of the affluent *Burghers*, whose mother-tongue became English, have emigrated to economically strong English-speaking countries, mainly to Canada and Australia. The World Bank classifies Sri Lanka as a low income country¹. Emigration was inevitable, given the fluency in English of the affluent *Burghers*.

The Dutch *Burghers* and Portuguese *Burghers* contracted intermarriages. Today, many *Burghers* in Batticaloa have Dutch names, but are Roman Catholics and follow Portuguese cultural traditions. Even though the Dutch were more powerful from the outset, they were not able to entrench their cultural traditions in Sri Lanka. Dutch was used for administrative purposes during the Dutch era, but attempts to spread the language proved futile. Instead the Dutch had to learn the Portuguese Creole for home conversation due to their Creole-speaking wives and nannies.

The *Kaffirs*, on the other hand, were brought to Sri Lanka by the Portuguese, Dutch and British, as a part of the naval force and for domestic work. Whatever their African origins, the *Kaffirs* were exposed to and have assumed Portuguese culture. Not surprisingly, there was intermarriage between the Portuguese *Burghers* and *Kaffirs* who belonged to the same culture set; they spoke Sri Lanka Portuguese Creole and were Roman Catholics. The *Kaffirs* are mainly chena cultivators but a few have found employment in the Puttalam Salt Pans, the Puttalam hospital and in local government offices as peons and labourers. Although they have withstood cultural pressures from the other ethnic groups for a long period, they are now blending into multiethnic Sri Lanka due to cross-cultural marriages. The Creole is fast losing ground as a spoken language but the community retain their Portuguese linguistic legacy by singing Portuguese Creole songs on social occasions (Jayasuriya 1995, 1996, 1997). Some *Kaffirs* are emigrating for economic reasons, a phenomenon common to all ethnic groups. The 18,5 million population of multiethnic Sri Lanka consists of 73,95 %

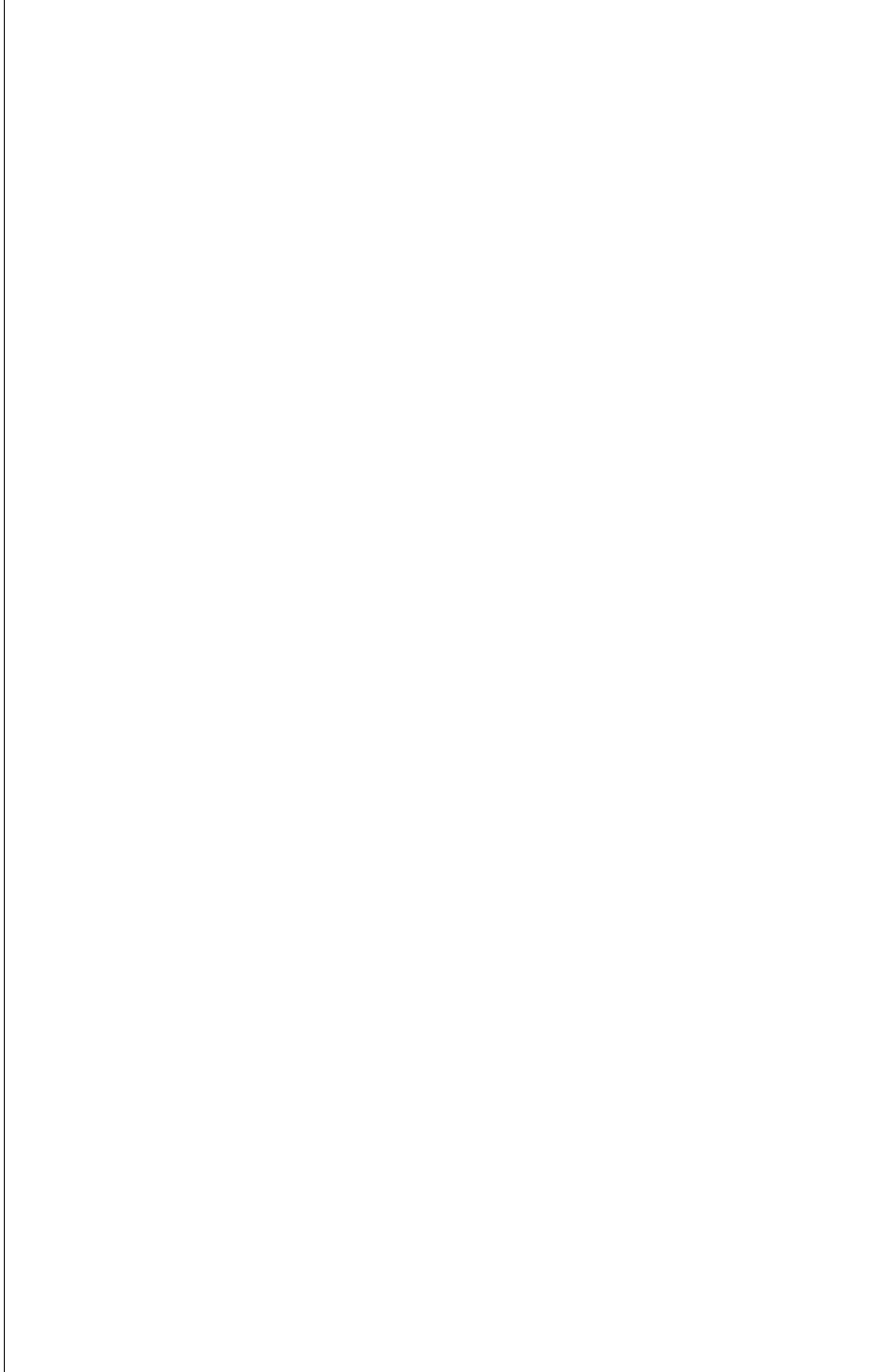
1. In 1997, Sri Lanka had a Per Capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of US\$ 814 and Per Capita Gross National Product (GNP) of US\$ 804. However, in 1997, Sri Lanka reached the world's highest ranking for achieved quality of life above material quality. The United Nation's Human Development Index accorded 0.711 to Sri Lanka, which is forty places above its rank in purely GDP terms.

Sinhalese, 12,7 % Sri Lankan Tamils, 7,05 % Moors², 5,52 % Indian Tamils, 0,32 % Malays, 0,26 % Europeans, Eurasians and *Burghers*, 0,20 % Others (Chinese, *Kaffirs*, *Veddhas*, Indian Moors, Europeans).



Provinces and Cities

2. There are two groups of Muslims in Sri Lanka : the Sri Lankan Moors who are of Arab descent and the Sri Lankan Malays who are of Malaysian/Indonesian descent.



Central Areas of Sri Lanka

The Portuguese introduced Christianity to the island. They granted special favours to those who converted (de Silva, 1994). However, the first Catholics in Sri Lanka were voluntary converts in Mannar Island (off the northwest coast). They invited Francis Xavier who was in India during that time. He was unable to accept the invitation but sent a representative who made voluntary conversions. During that time Mannar was under the control of the king of Jaffna, Chekarasa Sekaran, who ordered the people to reconvert. They refused and the king massacred the Catholics. This had wide repercussions and, instead of eliminating Catholicism, led to the conversion of others southwards down the west coast as far as Dondra. The Portuguese took a top-down approach. Therefore, in 1557, they converted Dharmapala, the king of Kotte, who had suzerainty over the other two kingdoms (Kandy and Jaffna). He was baptised Dom João Dharmapala breaking a 1,850 year-old tradition as a Christian King sat on the Sinhalese throne. Several Sri Lankan aristocrats and others followed the King and converted. The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka, however, was run by the Portuguese, who unfortunately did not train an indigenous clergy. It was a microcosm of the Church in Portugal. Therefore it is not surprising that when the Dutch routed the Portuguese, maltreated the Catholics and forced conversions into the Calvinist faith, the Catholic Church rocked and tumbled and fell to its very foundations. Catholic marriages, practice of Catholicism and Catholic priests were forbidden by the Dutch. The Catholics had to meet in each other's houses in order to practice their faith. At this time, the Catholic Church was at a low ebb and may have completely disappeared had it not been for the work of the Goan priests who stepped into the island to save Catholicism. Father Joseph Vaz came to Sri Lanka from Goa in 1687 and worked single-handedly for ten years. He was known as the « Apostle of Ceylon ». In 1696, he was joined by two colleagues, Father Joseph de Menezes and Father Joseph Carvalho. Father Jacome Gonsalvez followed them in 1705. Father Vaz saw the need to indigenize the Church and ensured that Father Gonsalvez's excellent linguistic skills were employed for producing a catechism and liturgy in Sinhala and Tamil. Today's devoted Catholic community are indebted to the work of the Goan priests.

The Portuguese presence in Asia was generally limited to urban areas but Sri Lanka was an exception (Subrahmanyam 1993 : 216). The institutions that defined the matrix of social interaction with the local context were extended to non-urban areas. The Portuguese have left their stamp on Sri Lankan social administration, society, fine arts and language. This imprint can be traced through the Portuguese lexical borrowings in Sinhala (the language spoken on the island since 483 BC). There are at least a thousand Sinhala words with Portuguese etyma. A complete analysis of the Sinhala lexicon to identify words with Portuguese etyma is yet to be undertaken.

Lexical borrowing occurs when languages are typologically similar (for example between Old English, Norse and French). Portuguese and Sinhala are not typologically similar. Borrowing is unlikely if two languages are divergent and speakers cannot understand each other. Sri Lanka Portuguese Creole, a language which combines linguistic elements from Portuguese and Sinhala, enhanced the Portuguese borrowings in Sinhala. Weinreich (1953) gives cultural influence as a reason for lexical borrowing. Cultural loans mirror what one nation has taught another. The Portuguese borrowings in Sinhala can be grouped into semantic fields :

EXAMPLES OF SINHALA WORDS WITH PORTUGUESE ETYMA

<i>Semantic fields</i>	<i>Sinhala</i>	<i>Portuguese</i>	<i>Gloss</i>
Civil administration	gudam(a)	gudão	warehouse
Judicial administration	petsam(a)	petição	petition
Military structure	bayinettu(va)	baioneta	bayonet
Land administration	tombu(va)	tombo	record/archive
Architecture	rippa(ya)	ripa	lath
Furniture	mesa(ya)	mesa	table
Cuisine	koppa(ya)	copo	cup
Dress	saya	saia	skirt/petticoat
Education	iskola(ya)	escola	school
Flora	pera	pera	pear
Names	Peduru	Pedro	Peter
Music	viyole	viola	viola
Dance	baila(ya)	baile	dance
Religion	anju	anjo	angel

These semantic fields reflect the areas of Sri Lankan socioculture that have been influenced by the Portuguese. The majority of borrowings are nouns. This is not surprising as the most important reason for borrowing is to extend the referential function of a language. Borrowing has occurred whenever the Portuguese introduced a new concept or object., e.g. *bayinettu(va)* (<*baioneta* Portuguese, « bayonet »). Sinhala synonyms with Portuguese etyma are used in preference to their counterparts that existed before the Portuguese era., e.g. *bastama* (*bastão* Portuguese) vs *sarayatiya* (Sinhala) « walking stick ».

The Portuguese era was fraught with turmoil and conflict. The Portuguese intended to be traders and offered the Sri Lankan monarch protection in return for securing the cinnamon monopoly. Later they were drawn into the island's politics due to feuds and schisms in the Kotte dynasty. The Portuguese recognizing their limitations in manpower and resources took a pragmatic approach in their relationship with the Sri Lankans. Miscegenation bred loyal soldiers locally and increased their military strength. Boxer (1961 : 61) remarks that whatever the drawbacks of miscegenation as practised by the Portuguese, their offspring remained loyal to the Portuguese Crown and to the Roman Catholic religion, often long after the Portuguese had withdrawn.

It is not surprising therefore if those of Portuguese descent or those of Roman Catholic faith display Portuguese cultural traditions. However, the Portuguese cultural imprint has not been limited to these two minority groups. Portuguese cultural traits will be perpetuated by the mainstream Sri Lankans who are neither of Portuguese descent nor Roman Catholics. Moreover, so deeply have these influences been absorbed into the daily and unconscious behaviour of the population that it will continue in perpetuity. As early as 1540, João de Barros, the Portuguese chronicler predicted that :

« The Portuguese arms and pillars placed in Africa and Asia, and in countless isles beyond the bounds of three continents, are material things, and time may destroy them. But time will not destroy the religion, customs and language which the Portuguese have implanted in those lands » (Barros 1540).

Sri Lanka is a paradigm of de Barros' statement. The Portuguese legacy is inseparable from contemporary Sri Lankan life. The Portuguese as traders were not saddled with imperial ambitions or status. Perhaps because they sought « Christians and spices », the process of transformation was unconscious. However, there has been a lack of linguistic, hence cultural, analysis of the complicated evolution of this strategically placed cross-over point between East and West-Sri Lanka.

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