

Colonial museology and the Buddhist chronicles of Sri Lanka: agency and negotiation in the development of the palm-leaf manuscript collection at the Colombo Museum.

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Abstract

The roles of colonial museums in South Asia have been understood in terms of the dissemination of museology within the British Empire. This has often underplayed the participation of local intellectuals in the formation of museum collections, and thus has not recognized their agency in the creation of knowledge and of longstanding cultural assets. This article addresses this in part through an historical case study of the development of the palm-leaf manuscript collection at the Colombo Museum in nineteenth century Ceylon. The article focuses on the relationships between Government aims, local intellectuals and the Buddhist clergy. I argue that colonial museology and collecting activity in Ceylon ought to be understood as a negotiated process and a number of reasons for this are discussed. This article contributes to an area of museological research that is exploring the roles of indigenous actors in colonial collecting and museum practice in South Asia and broader geographical contexts.

Keywords: Colombo Museum, collecting, Ceylon, Buddhist heritage, colonial museology

Introduction

The palm-leaf manuscripts created by Buddhist monks in Ceylon over many hundreds of years were disseminated widely, and in the nineteenth century they became of interest to British collectors. These manuscripts were made of densely bound palm-leaves and inscribed in Sanskrit, Sinhalese and a range of other languages that chronicled the mythology and history of the place. Those most revered contribute to the Pali Buddhist canon, while the 1,600 years old *Mahavamsa* (the book of the great lineage of the kings) is regarded as a national chronicle (De Silva, R. 2005: 1). British and Ceylonese expertise in the interpretation of the manuscripts (outside the Buddhist clergy) was attained by orientalist scholars and government agents many of whom were members of the *Royal Asiatic Society – Ceylon Branch* (RASCB). Through their publications it became increasingly evident to the English-speaking world that this literature was of both historic and religious significance to the people of Ceylon.¹ This led to the establishment of an official Government repository at the Colombo Museum that was intended for public reference.

The British government had formally agreed to protect the rights of Buddhism in the Kandy Convention of 1815; and this spurred orientalist activity that included the fostering of the linguistic skills that were needed for the administration of government business. In Volume 1 of his popular 1859 account of Ceylon, James Emerson Tennent, a former Colonial Secretary and second President of RASCB (1846 and 1848), stated the significance of the palm-leaf manuscripts. He wrote that those interpreted in the 1820s 'vindicated the claim of Ceylon to the possession of an authentic and unrivalled record of its national history' (Tennent 1859: 315). He also described the process through which some key manuscripts were made available to the young civil servant George Turnour (born in Ceylon in 1799) who was then able to create English versions of Pali.² He had the assistance of 'a learned priest through whose instrumentality he obtained from Wilhara, at Mulgiri-galla, near Tangalle (a temple founded about 130 years before the Christian era) some rare and important manuscripts' (Tennent 1859: 312-314). This transaction between a British colonial agent and a Buddhist high priest

was a precursor of the negotiations and collecting activities undertaken later by Ceylonese participants in the development of this collection.

This collecting activity was the consequence of colonial government policy and its initial development relied in part upon social and administrative structures that had survived from the Portuguese and Dutch administrations. In 1870, the *Government Oriental Library* (GOL) was conceived to provide an accessible repository for important palm-leaf manuscripts, and in 1876/7 the infant collection was transferred to the brand-new Colombo Museum, which had also become the custodian of the library of the RASCB. Over the course of the following century the collection grew to be the largest of its kind and the Colombo Museum currently holds upwards of 5,000 palm-leaf manuscripts.

Drawing on a range of historical sources between 1850 and WWI, this article focuses on the development of this collection in the period of British high Imperialism during which the Colombo Museum became a respected scientific and cultural institution. In this period of relative political stability the collecting process was nevertheless dynamic and over several decades was characterized by both cooperation and resistance. The article therefore contributes to a field of research that is exploring the complexities of similar activities in other British colonies. In recent years this has focused on scientific, military and missionary campaigns often led to the transfer of items from one place to another. The more sensational, heroic or unethical aspects of frontier collecting have, for example, been critically discussed in a number of contexts (Thomas 1989; Griffiths 1996; Coombes 2004; Fforde 2004; Gardner 2006; Wintle 2013). Detailed case studies analysing collecting in Asia and its consequences have illuminated the contestation concerning Buddhist religious items, which were acquired by British museums during the nineteenth century. For example, Tythacott has shown how sacred sculptures acquired in China were subjected to shifts in meaning through their commodification and display at international exhibitions (Tythacott 2011). Mathur has explored the issue of the repatriation of Buddhist relics acquired in India, in a case study of the pressure faced by the Victoria and Albert Museum in the closing years of the Empire (Mathur 2007: 133-164). These lines of research raise interesting questions concerning the interpretation and ownership of palm-leaf manuscripts held by museums outside Sri Lanka that are touched on here, in particular their complexity as museum items of both historical and religious significance.

The personnel associated with colonial museums and libraries are often seen as actors performing a hegemonic role within a larger British Imperial system, as museums were essential to the operational networks through which information and objects were exchanged.³ The roles of British agents in the *settlement* colonies of Australia, Canada or New Zealand (including more recently Singapore) are well understood. The 'Cathedrals of Science' investigated by Sheets-Pyensen in a pioneering study demonstrated how some museum personnel were coherently integrated into national and international knowledge networks, including British India (Sheets-Pyensen 1988). And, influential writers on museology and Empire, Bennett and MacKenzie have, while taking distinct approaches, detailed the importance of administrative and professional networks to the prosecution of political objectives and social development. While this study has been informed by Bennett's argument that museums were sites that reproduced and legitimized forms of power that reside within the political and social relationships within colonialism (Bennett 2004: 4), it develops MacKenzie's view that ultimately colonial museums contributed to 'cultural liberation rather than suppression' through creating opportunities for people 'to reconnect with their own pasts' (MacKenzie 2009: 16). Pieterse and Parekh made a similar point that colonial policy encouraged people to 'dig deep into their past' and reinterpret their cultural resources. The authors concluded that 'colonial intellectuals played as vital a role as the colonial masters in structuring and shaping the influence of colonial rule' (Pieterse and Parekh 1995: 2).⁴

This article therefore contributes to an understanding of the extent to which local intellectuals in the service of the Government nevertheless had agency in the formation of colonial collections. This example of colonial collecting activity, therefore, joins a branch of interdisciplinary research that has recently focused on assessing the extent and importance of local participation in the core activities of museums and exhibitions in nineteenth century India (Tillotson 2004; McKeich 2008; Ray 2014). Actors in Ceylon associated with the development of the palm-leaf manuscript collection – curators, librarians and others of their

circles – acquired items through a range of means that are discussed here. Critically, it is argued that in this case the establishment and development of this palm-leaf manuscript collection required negotiation between Government representatives, local intellectuals and the Buddhist clergy. The governance enabled this negotiation to be pursued by a handful of elite Ceylonese intellectuals whose activities provided them with opportunities to influence the shape and interpretation of the collection.

These processes in Ceylonese museology have been little understood but this research supports the argument put by Peabody that the creation of forms of knowledge in colonial India 'entailed considerable collaboration' (Peabody 2012: 1). In the recent historiography of British colonization in Ceylon Sivasundaram has focused on processes of knowledge acquisition, arguing that understanding the processes of mediation is a way of understanding how longstanding knowledge systems and practices were subsumed or harnessed within colonialism. He has shown that British archaeologists were only able to map the fifth century ancient city of Anuradhapura through gaining access to local information (Sivasundaram 2007). Similarly, Blackburn has investigated the interactions between the British and the Buddhist clergy, who demonstrated expedience and resilience, and found that 'new imported discourses and forms of social identification did not always replace those that existed previously' (Blackburn 2010: xii). A discussion of these dynamics, motivations and social processes of the past is relevant to current practices in Sri Lanka as national identity is closely bound to Buddhism with the highest heritage significance accorded to temples, archaeological sites and movable cultural heritage connected to its practices. Thus, in turn, recent Government-led conservation activities have required sensitive negotiation with the traditional custodians (Wijesuriya 2000; de Silva 2005: 217-221).

It is noticeable that historical museology of Ceylon has received little critical attention. The centenary of the Colombo Museum stimulated a blossom of celebratory interest in 1977 that included a detailed history of the organization undertaken by P.H.D.H. De Silva, Bandaranayake, Bastiampillai and others, but soon after this interest appears to have waned (De Silva, P H D H. 2000). It may be that changes in the political system led to a shift in the allocation of government resources away from museums to a focus on Buddhist cultural heritage sites (represented by the establishment of the Cultural Fund and Cultural Triangle) that were more immediately aligned with nation building and national identity. Recently, however, McEvansoneya has provided an account of the establishment of the Colombo Museum and the central role of Governor William Gregory, although the participation of non-British intellectuals in the Government's collecting activities is not discussed there (McEvansoneya 2012). This article therefore, foregrounds Gregory's support for the participation of Ceylonese intellectuals in the Government's collecting and curatorial activities.

This account begins by introducing the RASCB and its close relationship with the Colombo Museum, which established an important framework for local intellectual participation. It then focuses on two approaches to collecting that occurred simultaneously in Ceylon during the British period; those activities pursued by the Government and those of private individuals. This draws attention to the personal interests of some British agents, most notably those of civil servant Hugh Neville that resulted in the export to Britain of a large number of palm-leaf manuscripts. This is seen as an influence on the decision made by the Government of Ceylon to establish a repository of palm-leaf manuscripts in Colombo. The Government's preservation objectives are detailed through relating the foundation, aspirations and activities of the GOL which, following the retirement of the first curator of the collection, Louis de Zoysa, was folded into the Colombo Museum. This section describes the actions of this participant and discusses his interactions with the Buddhist clergy. The aim to house historic and religious manuscripts in an alternative site – the public museum – to enable greater citizen access than was then available at Buddhist temples was contentious. It is, therefore, acknowledged that while this collecting activity may have been infused with a noble civil intent it may also have been a way to 'make use of the knowledge of religious institutions', an interest that Bayly observed of the British in India, was an operation they had found 'particularly difficult' to achieve (Bayly 1993: 36).

Critical, therefore, is the discussion that follows of the emphasis Gregory and others placed on the need to pursue a systematic and mediated collecting methodology. The discussion of this demonstrates a concern to integrate local intellectuals and the Buddhist clergy into the

collecting process. This included devolving responsibility for the identification and selection of manuscripts to representative regional committees and resourcing fieldwork by local experts. The Ceylonese intellectuals involved in this process sought to identify and acquire the unique manuscripts held in monastic libraries, often working singlehandedly in their negotiations with circumspect Buddhist monks. However, as a consequence of some resistance the initial results were mixed and the process stalled, requiring that a revision and recommencement of this collecting activity by the Colombo Museum in 1880s.

The last section of the article draws attention to the provision of access to the collection of palm-leaf manuscripts at Colombo Museum. It shows how, at the turn of the twentieth century, the collection continued to be shaped by the participation of local expertise and its users. The visitor records from this period report that Buddhist monks were amongst those visitors who frequented the public repository that was centrally located in Cinnamon Gardens.

Local scholarship: the Royal Asiatic Society – Ceylon Branch

The administrative and social frameworks that enabled opportunities for local participation in the development of the Government's palm-leaf manuscript collection are introduced here through a discussion of some aspects of the intersection between the RASCB and the Colombo Museum. The first an elite organization of scholars and the second conceived as public resource. This coalescence begins in the 1870s but some historical background is necessary.

The RASCB was founded in 1845, following the Bengal Branch, to foster English language research by a select membership. Over many years British orientalist interested in the documentation of palm-leaf manuscripts were involved: for example Hugh Nevill was a short-lived Honorary Secretary (1868–1869). In the diminutive scholarly world of Colombo, the role of secretary became an important pivotal position and was subsequently performed in turn by Colombo Museum librarians Frederick H. M. Corbet (between 1886 and 1893) and Gerard A. Joseph (between 1893 and 1922), who were both engaged in the development of the collection of palm-leaf manuscripts. In the early years, however, the first generation of European contributors to the RASCB were closely associated with the missionary activities of the Christian Church. These members contributed research papers to the Society's journal that often dealt with local religious practices in a less than sympathetic manner. Exceptionally, Simon Casie Chitty, a linguist, civil servant and ultimately a District Court Judge became a member of the RASCB at its inaugural meeting in 1845. He was the author of *The Ceylon Gazetteer*, 1834, the first book written in English by a Ceylonese (Uragoda 2011: 39–40). By the late 1850s, scholarly papers by an emerging group of local intellectuals started to appear in the Society's journal, and their participation grew slowly over the following decades. In the main, these Ceylonese were members of the higher castes (both Sinhalese and Tamil) and their participation reflected the persistence of caste as method of classification and distinction that was inherited by the British (De Silva, M.U. 2005). Apart from their interests in the history and cultures of Ceylon, they often had close connections to the government or may have worked in the civil service.

The President of the RASCB for much of the period with which this article is concerned was the Right Reverend R. S. Coplestone, the Bishop of Colombo (served as President between 1885–1901).⁵ To appreciate the attitudinal change that had occurred over the previous 50 years it is useful to take note of the address he made on the occasion of the Society's Jubilee in 1895. In his speech to a congregation at the Colombo Museum, Coplestone reflected on the 1840s and 1850s and stated that the negative attitudes expressed towards the Buddhist and Hindu religions were no longer representative of the views of the Asiatic Society. In his opinion, the membership profile of the organization had evolved, and at the close of the nineteenth century was neither exclusively European nor Christian, as he said:

In stead of being a Society of European Christian visitors, interested as visitors, in an Island to which they did not belong, we are now a Society of studious people separated by many distinctions of race and association, but all keenly interested in whatever belongs to Ceylon, whether bound to it as the scene of our duty or by still stronger ties of fatherland. (Coplestone 1895: 73–74)

The public expression of this shift in attitudes by a leading clergyman is important because it shows that in the process of knowledge creation in this elitist English-speaking organization it was not impervious to local participation. Coplestone's view reflected a degree of imperial security and also recognized that local intellectuals (including non-Christians) had meaningfully contributed to scholarship over the previous 20 years.

The RASCB promoted the concept of a museum but the idea was not pursued before the arrival in Ceylon of William Gregory as Lieutenant Governor (he served between 1872 and 1877). In 1877, the Sri Lankan historian Bastiampillai argued that the establishment of the museum was largely the result of his personal commitment (Bastiampillai 2000). Gregory was a skilful politician and he welcomed an alliance with the Asiatic Society, quickly becoming its Patron. As a British parliamentarian, he had participated in debates concerning the role of museums as a means of social development (and their management) that was flourishing in central London in the middle of the century. He was Chairman of the parliamentary review of the British Museum, 1860 and, later in that decade, was appointed to the Trustees of the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square (Bastiampillai 2000: 31). In the 1890s, Gregory was fondly remembered by colonials within the circle of the Asiatic Society as a 'critic' of the London museum scene (Coplestone 1895: 74).

Gregory envisaged a museum that could influence the shape of society through performing an educative function. In this, he was aligned with the reform agenda of the innovative and entrepreneurial Henry Cole, the first Director of the South Kensington Museum, whom he counted amongst his associates (Bonython and Burton 2003: 238). This was evident when he addressed the Legislative Council of Ceylon where he stated that a museum should 'not be a mere random collection of miscellaneous objects, but a scientific teaching exhibition, which while ministering to the amusement of many, may convey instruction to all who seek it' (Bastiampillai 2000: 32). It is notable that the report prepared by a select committee of the Legislative Council on the *Public Museum Bill, 1873*, recognized Gregory's personal museum experience and recommended that 'the management of the institution should be entrusted to a responsible committee of scientific men, to be chosen by the Governor' and that 'it is expedient to leave the entire control of a working institution like this, in its infancy, with the Governor and the Executive Government' (Legislative Council of Ceylon 1874). This meant that Gregory was to play a central role in the planning and operations of the Museum and the development of its initial collections. It is telling too that during his residency in Ceylon his work in support of the development of collection of palm-leaf manuscripts was something that he believed was most significant. In his autobiography (published posthumously), where the Colombo Museum is given surprisingly little attention, he proudly includes a transcript 'on a subject of great interest, and which had previously been sadly neglected: I mean the preservation of the ancient literature of the country' (Gregory 1894: 335–336).

The Colombo Museum was conceived and designed as an operational building for the public that aimed to contribute to social development through the interpretation of its collections. In 1886, the first visitor guide was published. In what amounts to an official statement of purpose the first Director, Amyrald Haly (a zoologist by discipline, who served between 1875 and 1902), wrote in the opening paragraph of the 'Introduction':

The collections of objects of antique, local, and general interest which are exhibited in the Colombo Museum are intended to illustrate solely the products of human ingenuity and cultivation, and the forms of nature as manifested in the Island of Ceylon and its dependencies. With few exceptions, which are specially noted where they occur, nothing is shown in the galleries which has not been found in the country or in the surrounding areas. (Willey 1905: B)

This statement aligned with the interests of the RASCB and may have informed F. A. Bather's 1893 observation (and designation of a new museum type) that 'colonial museums' were primarily concerned with assembling and presenting collections of local specimens (Sheets-Pyenson 1988: 10–11). The collections formed before WWI encompassed a range of historical, archaeological and folk material of Sinhalese, Tamil and Dutch origin, and a continuous effort was made to collect and display biological specimens of flora and fauna. Palm-leaf manuscripts fitted well: the medium of the manuscripts was specially prepared palm-leaf (*ola*) and thus

these 'books' represented the interdependencies of culture and nature. The 'finest specimens' were obtained from Buddhist monasteries where that had been made in monastic traditions that had preserved Pali in a literary Sinhalese form (Joseph 1895: 270), and they were also sources of the historical chronicles of the Island. Director Haly was very ambitious in his vision for the development of the Museum's collections and thought that it should aim for 'nothing less than absolute completeness' (Haly and Corbett 1889: 15).

The establishment of the Colombo Museum can be seen as an ambitious imperial project that promoted an epistemological knowledge system, albeit in an enlightened way. As will become clear, however, Gregory's support of the local scholars who had participated in the activities of RASCB was an essential aspect of the governance and social context that enabled the early development of the collection. This was pursued in response to the much less Ceylon-friendly collecting activities pursued by some others.

Streams of colonial collecting

The need to distinguish between forms of collecting is central to this analysis. It is no secret that some colonial collecting activities tarnished the reputations of British agents. Even so, Haly and his colleagues considered themselves part of an elite profession that after 1889 was represented by the Museums Association. In the next generation, Gerard A. Joseph curated the palm-leaf manuscript collection with the Assistant Librarian H. M. Gunasekera.⁶ In his role as Acting Director of the Colombo Museum, Joseph gave a public address in 1906 in which he presented an overview of the role of public museums. In this address he drew on current museum theory (and echoed Gregory). For example, he restated John Edward Grey's axiom that museums should enable instruction and amusement and provide the opportunity for the study of specimens; and concerning the role systematic collecting and the effective organization of collections, he also cited William Fowler saying that private collectors were often motivated by the pleasure of acquisition but 'Museums collections are formed to advance or increase general knowledge' (Joseph 1906: 1). He used the example of the palm-leaf manuscript collection to illustrate the benefits of museum collections, suggesting that its value as a resource had been proved because 'many knotty points in Ceylon History have been settled by the books in the Museum Library which have proved invaluable to the student and inquirer' (Joseph 1906: 3).⁷ In presenting the role of the museum, he thus reinforced the need to make a distinction between the actions of individuals that were often for personal gain and the collecting goals of public museums that were for the benefit of society.

At times, however, it is difficult to distinguish between types of collecting activity in colonial Ceylon as transactions were often conducted in the murkiest of backwaters with little documentation. Concerning the acquisitions from temples, it is important to recognize that Buddhist monks were not averse to selling items (Coomaraswamy 1905: 6). This indiscretion (and commodification) touched the Museum as well. For example, in 1879 Haly reported to Gregory that he had acquired for the Museum, 'A fine collection of coins and some interesting Bronzes ... purchased last year from the priests at Dondera Head' (Haly 1880). Although there is little detail, this example supports other evidence that during this period the temple libraries in which palm-leaf manuscripts were preserved were fractured and Europeans were able to acquire many items. This inconsistent and opportunistic foraging had serious ramifications for the interpretation of the Island's history. Whilst palm-leaf manuscripts had been copied and circulated for over 2,000 years, it is certainly not the case that duplicates of all manuscripts were available. Nor was it accepted that all manuscripts were accurate or accredited copies. Furthermore, it was not easy for the uninitiated to read them and to make learned assessments of their values (Alahakoon 2012). Seen in terms of the potential loss of information, unfettered ignorant collecting was a very serious threat to the preservation of this corpus of literature.

The curators of the GOL and the Colombo Museum were relative latecomers to the collecting scene in Ceylon – by almost half a century. The imperial blind-eye to opportunistic collecting can probably be said to have begun with the activities of Sir Robert Brownrigg, the third British Governor of Ceylon (1813–1820). During his tenure, he oversaw the annexation of the Kandyan Kingdom and the subsequent negotiation of Kandyan Convention of 1815, in which the rights of Buddhism were ordained (Ralapanawe 2011). Nevertheless, Brownrigg

amassed a substantial war-chest of cultural and religious material, including the eighth century A.D. gilded bronze sculpture, known as *The Bodhisattva Tara*, which he presented to the British Museum in 1830. This sculpture is currently a key-object on display at the entrance to a South Asia court of the Museum, where the interpretive label says it was 'found on the East coast of Sri Lanka between Batticala and Trincomalee'.⁸ Included in Brownrigg's collection were 'numerous Cingalese Books' that were unceremoniously advertised for sale in the contents of his country house in Monmouthshire in 1833 (Jones 2006). The subjects and current locations of these are unknown. Right up to the end of the century Government Agents continued to derive advantage from their positions of authority. In 1897, G. A. Baumgartner boasted in his diary of an encounter with a temple caretaker at Kataragama in the south: 'I got him to hand over this little crystal antiquity to me for a time, on my promise to restore it to the dagoba and I have it'. The diary includes a simple line drawing of the item captioned: 'Crystal dagoba actual size. Sold to the Colombo Museum August 1897' (Baumgartner 2004: 73-74). This certainly seems like a sly deception; and the details of the transaction were apparently glossed over by Director Haly.

Perhaps the oldest collection of manuscripts outside Sri Lanka contains over 1,000 items and is held in the Royal Library in Copenhagen. It was acquired by the Baptist missionary and linguist Rasmus Rask (1787–1832) and presented to the library in 1822. A Buddhist monk who had converted to Christianity (Kapugama Dharmakkanda) collected these manuscripts and he presented the collection to Rask, apparently 'to demonstrate his zeal' (Gunawardana 1997: 290). This kind of transaction underscores the impact of missionaries in the dislocation of cultural material; further complicated by the publication of catalogue in *Latin* in 1846 (Nordstrand 1958: 139). In the 1950s, Colombo Museum librarian, C. E. Godakumbura, became the first Ceylonese expert to review this collection, dating one manuscript to 1707. He provided advice on conservation and prepared a revised catalogue that was published posthumously over 150 years after the collection was exported (Godakumbura 1980).

To acknowledge the extent to which manuscripts were removed from Ceylon in the nineteenth century, it should be appreciated that other sizable collections survive in European repositories that include the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris (Liyanaratne 1983) and the National Library of Russia, St Petersburg (Handurukande 1990). In Great Britain, research has been undertaken to identify the contents of numerous collections. For example, a catalogue of Sinhalese manuscripts held in the India Office Library was published in 1981 (it had been compiled between 1950 and 1962). This included additional references to stronger collections in the Royal Asiatic Society (London), the School of Oriental and African Studies, and to the Hugh Nevill Collection at the British Museum. While Ceylon was not administered under the India Office, a reviewer in England was impressed that manuscripts had found their way there that had been collected by British orientalist scholars 'intimately linked with Sinhalese studies'; in particular 'George Turnour (1799–1843), the first editor of the *Mahavamsa*, and R. C. Childers (1838–76), who compiled the first Pali dictionary' (Bender 1982: 682). The work of these men (Childers served in the Ceylon Civil Service between 1856–1864) was critical to the early documentation of the sources of local knowledge and to the provision of linguistic tools for construction of an historical interpretation of Ceylon. Drawing attention to the dislocation of these manuscripts from their traditional custodians (in which these scholars had a role), the Sri Lankan reviewer G. D. Wijayawardhana, advised that the particular value of the India Office catalogue lay in its descriptions of manuscripts that contained several *unpublished* texts (Wijayawardhana 1980: 185).

Hugh Nevill was a member of the RASCB and served as Honorary Secretary from 1868–1869 before returning to England via India in 1875. As a civil servant, he made the most of the opportunities this afforded him to accumulate a substantial collection of palm-leaf manuscripts (and other sacred objects), as well as to indulge his passion for ornithology (Nevill 1870–71; Nevill 1886). Nevill's position enabled him to refine his connoisseurship, and some years after his work in Ceylon was completed he founded and edited *The Taprobanian*, a journal dedicated to Ceylonese orientalist studies. This publication provided a forum for his own opinions and recollections and it contains many forthright contributions by *the Editor* on a range of issues. His 1887 article 'The Historical Books of Ceylon' warns that the significance accorded to the interpretation of some key texts by scholars may have distorted the understanding of the

history of the Island because other early sacred works had been lost in past centuries (Nevill 1887a). The apparent incomplete historical record meant that the search for undocumented texts was integral to manuscript collecting.

During his residency in Ceylon, Nevill proved to be a very adept collector who used informants to help source rare manuscripts. In this reminiscence, he provides an indication of one of his acquisition methods (although it remains unclear whether he required on-ground interpretive assistance to undertake the transaction). As he wrote in 1887:

Report reached me of a valuable record that existed, kept in hereditary and exclusive possession by an old family in the district of Nādu Kādu [Eastern Province of Batticaloa] ... After several attempts I succeeded in getting the MSS, copied by the owner, in exchange for a copy of another MSS, in my own collection. (Nevill 1887b)

This transaction occurred outside a Buddhist monastery and appears to be an equitable and noncorrosive exchange. However, in the process of procuring over 2,000 manuscripts Nevill worked in a private capacity and thus he was free to take 'his library' back to England with him. In *The Taprobanian* he later related some instructions on the formation and cataloguing of collections of this type (Nevill 1888). It is acknowledged that he donated at least one manuscript to the Colombo Museum before 1901 (Joseph 1901: 15). Nevertheless, most of the collection was deposited in the British Museum and, along with the Victoria and Albert Museum, it purchased many bronzes and ivories from the estate. Between 1987 and 1995, the British Library published seven volumes of the *Hugh Nevill Collection of Sinhala Manuscripts*, further underlining its importance as the most substantial collection of its kind outside Sri Lanka.

The issue of the location of this material outside Ceylon started to emerge in the early twentieth century. For example, Ananda Kentish Commaraswamy (1877–1947) who had worked with the Colombo Museum and actively promoted South Asian traditions of art and craft, noticed poorly displayed sacred items in British Museum and gently suggested that these objects would be better understood in Ceylon (Coomaraswamy 1914: 7). During the period of decolonization, the Director of the Colombo Museum, P. H. D. H. de Silva, began to document exported material, and in the *Preliminary Catalogue of Ceylon Material in Foreign Museums*, 1970, he noted of the British Museum that, 'In the reserve collection I understand that there are over 750 objects in the Neville (sic) Collection alone and many other antiquities, many masks, many ancient coins and over 4,000 palm-leaf manuscripts' (De Silva, P.H.D.H. 1970: 45). The 1975 published version of this inventory repeated the claim that there were 4,000 palm-leaf manuscripts in the British Museum from Sri Lanka (De Silva, P.H.D.H. 1975a: 265). In 1975, the Director of National Museums said that the loss of palm-leaf manuscripts (and art treasures) to more affluent countries was a problem that continued to threaten the preservation of cultural heritage in Ceylon (De Silva, P.H.D.H. 1975b: 228).

It makes sense that private collecting activity underpinned early orientalist scholarship in Ceylon but self-interest and triumphalism also played a part in the accumulation and transfer of items throughout the nineteenth century. Colombo Museum acquisitions were also opportunistic. Specifically concerning palm-leaf manuscripts, it is notable that Nevill's period of service as Honorary Secretary of the RASCB coincided with the push for a publically accessible repository by the Ceylonese intellectual James d'Alwis. The two men knew each other from their involvement with the RASCB, and it would be interesting to know whether this initiative was something in which Nevill had a guiding hand or played a role beyond inadvertently drawing attention to the urgency of addressing the loss of manuscripts.

Local agency: the Government Oriental Library

The development of a repository of palm-leaf manuscripts was an experiment in orchestrated collecting where the motivation differed from the private collecting that also occurred in Ceylon. As will be explained here, the success of this Government-led activity required local linguistic, scholarly and cultural acumen; thus Ceylonese intellectuals were central participants. On the other hand, the Buddhist clergy, who were the custodians of rare manuscripts, maintained their role in protecting their monastic libraries. In their negotiation with the Government representatives they often demonstrated resilience and, therefore, contributed to a mediated outcome. In

1895, Joseph reported this to the Library Association of Great Britain, saying that 'It is almost impossible to collect MSS. or borrow them for transcription without enlisting the sympathies of the various priests and native gentleman' (Joseph 1895: 272). This section, therefore, discusses the processes of negotiation that enabled access to the manuscripts. As is indicated by the long-term growth of the collection, these efforts were to some extent successful; acquisitions were listed in the Colombo Museum Administrative Reports and catalogues of the collection were published in 1876 and 1901. Palm-leaf manuscripts were featured in Colombo Museum visitor guides published in 1895, 1905 and 1912.

In 1938, the Colombo Museum received a grant from the Carnegie Foundation to enable the publication of the *Catalogue of Palm-leaf Manuscripts in the Library of the Colombo Museum Volume 1*. This catalogue contains transcripts of a number of key Government documents and related correspondence pertinent to the establishment of the GOL, which I have referred to in this article. This catalogue draws on the work of the noted orientalist scholar James d'Alwis, who was a member of both the RASCB and the Legislative Council (1864–1875) and instrumental to the conception of the Library. It is related that the British Government was nudged into action by the applause the French Vice Consul of Ceylon received when his collection of manuscripts was received in Paris. The *Saturday Review* (London), 28 July 1866, asserted that the 'English Government' had failed 'to collect these interesting relics of an ancient Literature, to deposit them in our Public Libraries, and thus render them accessible to Oriental Scholars' (De Silva, W.A 1938: vii). (In part this was addressed later with the acquisition of the Nevill Collection.) This newspaper commentary demonstrated that the manuscripts were of interest beyond elite scholarly circles.

In Ceylon, the Government interest in collecting began in earnest in 1869 and was aligned to a wider interest in the documentation and preservation of the Island's other material records that was initiated by Gregory's predecessor, Hercules Robinson (served between 1865–1872). An Archaeological Commission led by J. G. Smither (the architect of the Colombo Museum) had already been established to consider the conservation of 'ancient architectural structures and other works of art' (Devendra 1959: 23). There was a naïve perception that the Government was well equipped to solicit the widespread cooperation of the custodians of the manuscripts. Most important was the availability of translators with specialist linguistic expertise and a supporting system of regional Government Agents, whose jurisdictions encompassed important sacred sites and temples. The proposed collecting activity was, therefore, technically enabled by the existing administration, although the expectations were probably overly optimistic.⁹

Ceylonese of the highest standing who acted as mediators between the European civil servants and other people were given the title *Mudaliyar* and they were 'regarded as trusted and indispensable auxiliaries' (Mills 1945: 28). A key agent in the GOL was Louis de Zoysa, whose importance as a scholar and civil servant – he was an early contributor to the RASCB journal – has been noted by others but never contextualized sufficiently within the discourse of museology. As Coplestone had implied in 1895, De Zoysa (a Christian) was one of a select group of trusted 'officers of Government, about whom it might be taken for granted that they would look at most matters from the European point of view' (Coplestone 1895: 74). In 1862, he had been promoted from his position as *Mudaliyar* of the Bentota Valallaviti Korale to a second rank position in the civil service as translator to the Colonial Secretary. It has been argued by M. U. de Silva that despite his academic credentials he was overlooked for the key Government position as Chief Translator of the Government of Ceylon (*Maha Mudaliyar*) on the basis of his caste (he was *Salagama* caste rather than the customary *Goyigama* caste). In defence of the appointment process, it was argued that De Zoysa might not have been able to command the necessary respect of the people (De Silva, M.U. 2005: 58). Nevertheless, in 1869 De Zoysa was consulted on the idea of undertaking a survey of the contents of Buddhist monastic libraries. His response reaffirmed a perception that the manuscripts were difficult to access and that their significance was often unappreciated by the custodian monks.¹⁰ His tone reflected his exalted position as a senior Government mediator and scholar as he wrote 'there is every reason to believe that many important historical and other works which are not now accessible to the learned may be bought back to light' (De Silva, W.A. 1938: vii). Subsequently, this rationale of neglect was frequently cited in support of the development of a more accessible public collection.

James d'Alwis undertook the first survey of palm-leaf manuscripts that were kept in a range of temple libraries (De Silva, W.A. 1938: vii). His fieldwork was supported by an instruction that appeared in the Government Gazette in July 1869 advising Provincial Government Agents to assist with process. d'Alwis's report provided an inventory and description of some manuscripts and additionally he envisioned a cultural development opportunity and used his status as a member of Legislative Council to promote the concept of establishing a Government-funded repository of palm-leaf manuscripts. He provided an estimation of the required space, suggested the most appropriate fit out and nominated a suitable salary for the Librarian. Although it was unfortunate that he passed away soon after completing his appraisal (Malalasekera 1958: 7), in 1870 the Legislative Council voted the expenditure to establish the facility and Louis de Zoysa was appointed the Librarian.

The choice of actors in this establishment phase of the GOL demonstrated the increasing responsibility local intellectuals were given in achieving the aspirations of the colonial administration. The Government aimed to provide an alternative means of access to the knowledge contained in the manuscripts, but it required the contribution of local intellectuals to achieve its aims. The position of Librarian required scholarly judgment and it was an appointment for which De Zoysa was well prepared. From the late 1850s, he and d'Alwis had been prolific contributors to RASCB journal where for many years their articles often appeared in close proximity. De Zoysa's articles covered a range of different topics, some drawn from manuscript sources. In Volume III (1856–58), his first contribution was titled: 'Account of the Works of Irrigation constructed by King Parakrama Bahu contained in the 68th and 79th Chapters of the Mahawansa, with Introductory Remarks' (De Zoysa 1856-58). While GOL Librarian, he contributed English-language translations of 'Specimens of Sinhalese Proverbs' (De Zoysa 1870-1).

When Governor William Gregory arrived in the Ceylon in 1872 he found a level of Government interest in palm-leaf manuscript collecting and scholarly interpretation. He supported the continuation of De Zoysa's work translating the *Mahavamsa*, which had been commissioned by his predecessor (Blackburn 2010: 70-78). He also supported the Government expenditure on the acquisition of palm-leaf manuscripts and saw the benefits of such a repository for increasing the agency of local intellectuals. In an address to the Legislative Council in 1875, he reiterated the rationale for pursuing the programme at a time when progress seemed to have been floundering:

I am confident you will agree with me that it is highly expedient to make an effort to preserve the ancient records of Ceylon. It is a duty we owe, not merely to the large and annually increasing number of students of Oriental history and of Oriental philology, but to the natives of the Island, many of whom have already widely distinguished themselves by antiquarian research, many more of whom will devote themselves to it, if facilities for study be afforded. With this object, for some time past, the Government has annually spent a small sum in procuring copies of all books of interest, which are still in existence in Temple Libraries. (Haly and Joseph 1889: 11)

Despite his sense of racial superiority, Gregory seems to have been a benevolent cultural missionary. He was actively interested in pursuing a modern means through which local people could access and study the chronicles of Ceylon, the sources of Sinhalese history.

De Zoysa had set to work quickly at the GOL and an acquisition process was established that aimed to bring 'authenticated and endorsed' Sinhalese language Pali commentaries and historical material into the collection. In the early 1870s, 30,000 rupees were spent on the purchase of some manuscripts and the copying of others (De Silva, W.A. 1938: xi). The methodology was designed to ensure the authenticity of each manuscript through a high level of local participation and, in some cases, the copies of manuscripts obtained by the GOL had been recently revised and authorized by the clergy. For example, in the Sabaragamuva Province in 1872 some were 'copied by L. C. Vijesinha from books revised by the assembly of learned Bhikkhus held at Palamadulla in the Buddhist Era 2411 (1868)' (De Silva, W.A. 1938: xii). Essentially, however, the majority of manuscripts were identified and acquired through two methods. The first was through the administration of a structured committee system and the second was through the individual research efforts of local experts.

In 1870, a committee system was established to provide a conduit for the acquisition of copies of rare and important manuscripts. This included a Colombo-based management committee and regional committees convened under the guidance of Government Agents that consisted of influential monks and laymen. These acquisition committees were quickly established in Sabaragamuva Province (which includes Anuradhapura), Galle and Matara, and they were charged 'in the first instance' with the important task of securing 'the important literature of Buddhism' (De Silva, W.A. 1938: xi). However, the extent to which these district committees engaged with the process was variable. From De Silva's 1938 catalogue, it is possible to extract some data that helps us to understand the effectiveness of this system. Between 1870 and 1873 the Galle Committee embraced the task most meticulously. The catalogue indicates 29 records of manuscripts that were copied under the supervision of Bulatgama Dhammalankara Sri Sumanatissa Thera expressly for the GOL. Additionally, two manuscripts were purchased. In 1874 and 1878 a further four manuscripts were copied and forwarded to Colombo. In Matara, there appears to have been less commitment and the District Committee (chaired by E. R. Gunaratne, *Mudaliyar*) sent a small group of perhaps eight manuscripts (at least four are dated) in 1870 and 1871. Only one manuscript appears to have been received from Anuradhapura in 1872.¹¹ Thus, the largest group of manuscripts acquired through this committee system came from Galle. Other manuscripts acquired before 1877 are not captured by this assessment but nonetheless it is clear that the committee system delivered a disappointingly small yield and the results illustrate the difficulty the Government had in enforcing a prescriptive management system for the acquisition of items held in Buddhist temples.

As a result of this, De Zoysa started to visit regional temples to examine manuscripts and identify rarities. He applied a method of field collecting that required physical stamina, specialist knowledge and systematic analysis, which Joseph reported was 'carried on with vigour for some years' (Joseph 1895: 272). De Zoysa believed (perhaps, arrogantly) that it was 'essentially necessary that all the Manuscripts in their [priests'] possession, should be inspected by competent persons' (De Silva, W.A. 1938: x). He travelled widely and, when persuasive enough, was permitted to enter the temple libraries and examine the contents. In 1873, he visited Ridi Vihara where, according to H. M. Gunasekera, he discovered 'one of the most learned and elaborate works on Pali grammar. Copied from a very ancient MS, supposed to be about 400 years old' (Joseph 1901:19). By 1875, De Zoysa's exploratory activities had gained some notoriety and it was reported in the *Ceylon Times* that he saw a large collection of manuscripts in the North-Western Province at a temple at Warawala, situated in Mahagalboda Korale, which were 'superior to any he had seen in any other temple' (Anon 1877).

Apart from the acquisitions made for the GOL, the results of De Zoysa's fieldwork were published posthumously in *A Catalogue of Pali, Sinhalese, and Sanskrit Manuscripts in The Temple Libraries of Ceylon*, 1885. In this catalogue, De Zoysa sought to demonstrate his curatorial acumen and he wrote of one manuscript, which he had identified when following George Turnour's footsteps in the deep south: 'This work was unknown to the learned until I discovered it in 1875 on my inspection of the ancient library of Mulgirigala cave temple in Giruwa pattu, Southern Province' (De Zoysa 1885: 24-25). In this catalogue, each manuscript appraised by De Zoysa is listed by title, and the record includes the field 'Place of Deposit' in which each of the monasteries possessing a copy is listed. In a number of entries he has noted copies in the GOL alongside temple libraries, and as well he used the designation 'common'. It is interesting too, that there are some manuscripts included where the location is solely his personal library (De Zoysa 1885: 16-17). This catalogue was not completed at the time of his death but it was considered a research triumph. In a brief appraisal of De Zoysa's work in 1928, Malalasekera wrote in *The Pali Literature of Ceylon*: 'The results of his mission were not inconsiderable ... Perhaps the greatest find was a copy of the Sinhalese gloss on the Dhamma-pada, which, excepting the Mihintale Inscription, is the oldest known specimen of Sinhalese prose' (Malalasekera 1958: 8). De Zoysa had made his mark.

While his fieldwork was altruistic, perhaps unsurprisingly, the level of exploitation in colonial collecting activities had left a bitter legacy in some districts, and resistance from the Buddhist clergy was often frustrating. This was especially so in the south of the country, where the effectiveness of the Matara acquisition committee had also been limited. Gregory felt that it was necessary to report this obstruction to the Legislative Council:

As the Government is solely animated by the desire of preserving from destruction all that remains of Sinhalese literature, and has never wished to deprive the Temple Libraries of their manuscripts, but has only sought to get them copied, I regret that De Zoysa Mudaliyar was met by unworthy and jealous feeling at some temples, especially in the Southern Province near Matara, and refused access to the books preserved in them. (Haly and Joseph 1889: 11)

This resistance seems to have hardened Gregory's support for the participation of local intellectuals in this collecting activity. De Zoysa himself felt that the suspicion levelled at him was not a consequence of his Christianity. It was more likely to have been a reaction to the poor or corrupt collecting practices that had followed the international interest in these manuscripts, coupled with brinkmanship, in that the exclusive authority that the monasteries had over many centuries to interpret the chronicles, was being systematically undermined.

Despite the resistance De Zoysa encountered, he was clearly one of the distinguished 'native' researchers to whom Gregory referred. Nevertheless, dejected perhaps and with failing eyesight, De Zoysa completed his work with an inventory of the collection in preparation for it being housed at the Colombo Museum. At this point, the collection included '188 volumes containing 209 distinct works' (De Silva, W.A. 1938: xi). De Zoysa was clearly instrumental in establishing the Government's manuscript collection and securing many important items for it, and in recognition of his achievement in 1879 he received the honorary title of *Maha Mudaliyar* from Governor James Robert Longden, who had replaced Gregory (Longden served between 1877 and 1883). In 1882, he wrote to the Colonial Secretary comparing his own achievements with those of Turnour:

The dates I have collected, I think, will be useful in any future re-adjustment of Sinhalese chronology which has been fixed by the late Mr. Turnour in his *Epitome of the History of Ceylon*. In compiling the last mentioned work the learned author, it would appear has made use of six historical works only, but my list contains nearly forty historical works or historical notes. Some of these, it is true, are not histories, strictly so called, but they contain important historical data which may be utilized in compiling a comprehensive History of Ceylon from native annals. Many of these have never before been brought to the notice of European scholars, and I think if analyses of these works are made they will form a new and important contribution to the history of Ceylon. (De Zoysa, 1885: 1)

In the last years of his life, De Zoysa contributed to the translation of the *Suluwansa*, which Nevill recognized was 'carrying down the annals of Ceylon from the Mahawansa of Mahanama' (Nevill 1887a: 36). In 1884, he died in poor circumstances having apparently 'spent his wealth on literary pursuits to the neglect of his personal affairs' leaving his widow and children in financial distress (De Silva, M.U. 2005: 58). Nevertheless, his reputation remained in tact and in 1906, in the *Ceylon National Review*, the journal of the Ceylon Social Reform Society, De Zoysa was described by A. M. Gunasekara, *Mudaliyer*, as 'the great Oriental Scholar' (Gunasekara 1906: 131).

Revitalization: the Colombo Museum

This account now focuses on the Colombo Museum's role in the development of the palm-leaf manuscript collection. It starts by recognizing an initial phase during which the collection was a low priority. It then considers the revitalization of the Museum's collecting activity in this area through supporting the individual initiatives of British staff members and their interest in utilizing and fostering local intellectual agency. During the period discussed here, Arthur Willey, a zoologist who also had an interest in ethnology, replaced Haly who in 1901 had completed over 20 years as Director (Willey served between 1902 and 1910).

The development of the collection was stalled after the retirement of De Zoysa. This is unsurprising given the level of expertise and enthusiasm required for undertaking the fieldwork. But there was also clearly a need to address a broader range of matters at the new Colombo Museum. In 1875, Haly was an ill-prepared incoming Director, whose expertise was in natural history. He wrote to his mentor Albert Günther, the Keeper of Zoology at the British Museum:

'His Excellency is very proud of it [the museum]. I shall be glad when I can get installed in the building and begin work. At present I really know nothing, nor what they intend to do' (Haly 1875). The challenges of establishing the Museum were exacerbated by a lack of professional staff that were experienced in amongst other things the arrangement and interpretation of a wide range of perishable specimens and other curious objects.¹²The palm-leaf manuscript collection that was of religious and historical significance became a low priority, and despite the Government's intention that it be an accessible resource, it was easily stored behind closed doors. In the event, the collection was located in the Colombo Museum Library, which was given equal prominence to the galleries on the opposite side of the Central Hall, just inside the entrance of the Italianate colonial building.

In the mid 1880s, the collecting of palm-leaf manuscripts began again in earnest under Frederick H. M. Corbet (Anon 1886: 123). He had studied languages and worked as a private legal secretary before joining the Colombo Museum in 1886 where he pursued an ambitious goal to progress the development of the collection. In 1887, he wrote that 'it was deemed advisable, to make a new departure in the policy of the Library, and to begin again, in connection with this institution, the active search for ancient manuscripts' (Haly and Corbet 1889: 12). Nevertheless, he too encountered resistance and reported that the Buddhist priests were 'as a rule, too jealous of their possessions to lend them, fearing either the volumes will be confiscated by the Government or lost by those to whom they are entrusted.' He had also received 'numerous complaints' that important manuscripts continued to be appropriated by outsiders. Perhaps, unusually, but also illustrative of the complexities of colonial attitudes, Corbet voiced his respect for the concerns of the custodians despite the difficulties this presented to his own collecting ambition writing that 'it is not to be wondered at that they should be wary of exposing their remaining literary treasures to a similar fate' (Haly and Corbet 1889: 12). Whether or not Haly agreed with this level of sensitivity is unclear but it appears that the Director and the Librarian often bickered publically and, in 1891, while Corbet was attending the International Congress of Orientalists in London, a member of the Museum's advisory committee resigned and instigated a discussion concerning the possible separation of the Museum and the Library (Sri Lanka National Archives 1891).

In the event, collecting activity was restarted and local participation was once again critical. A determining factor in this rejuvenation was the appointment of the young scholar D. M. de Silva Wickremasinghe to the position of Assistant Librarian. Wickremasinghe is mentioned briefly in P.H.D.H. de Silva's 1977 account of the Museum's history, but his contribution and significance in the development of this collection is understated there (De Silva, P.H.D.H. 2000: 79). In his role at the Museum, Wickremasinghe undertook similar fieldwork to that which was pioneered by d'Alwis and De Zoysa and visited many temples that had previously been neglected (Malalasekera 1958: 9). He achieved some notable success and Corbet was able to report that his colleague had been able to 'add many important and valuable works to our collection, some of which were previously unknown' (Haly and Corbet 1889: 12). With respect to understanding the negotiating process that was used by Museum staff, Joseph's 1895 description is insightful:

To secure old MSS, it is necessary to communicate with learned Buddhist priests, and other owners of books throughout the island beforehand. A purchase or the loan of them for transcription may then be effected ... It is expedient in some instances to fortify oneself with strong letters of introduction, and to go to the very spot and make a personal application for rare books, for many of the priests and headmen in the country are so suspicious that nothing short of this will enable one to get even sight of the books he wants. Europeans are not generally afforded as ready access as native gentlemen are, in fact the owners have a dread of the European, being under the false and foolish impression that he comes to carry away their antique treasures! (Joseph 1895: 272)

At a meeting of the Library Association in Dublin here was a British colonial agent explaining a collecting process that was developed by local intellectuals to address particular religious and cultural circumstances in Ceylon.

Corbet encouraged his colleague to travel abroad and Wickremasinghe pursued a scholarship to study archaeology in Germany. In 1895, his knowledge and expertise was appreciated internationally when he was engaged by the British Museum in 'classifying and arranging the Sinhalese manuscripts' (Haly and Joseph 1895: 10). He compiled the *Catalogue of the Sinhalese Manuscripts in the British Museum* that was published in 1900 (Wickremasinghe 1900). The catalogue's introduction was praised by Malalasekara as 'by far the most authentic account of the literature of Ceylon hitherto published' (Malalasekara 1958: 9). Wickremasinghe continued to develop a distinguished academic career first at Oxford and then as a Professor of Sanskrit and Pali at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London. He remained associated with the Colombo Museum through his role as an editor of the journal *Spolia Zeylanica*, which was launched by Willey in 1904. Wickremasinghe retired in Ceylon in 1933 (Uragoda 2011: 307).

The collecting activity that aimed to preserve and catalogue the chronicles of Ceylon as a public resource began with the establishment of the GOL and was continued with some success by Corbet and Wickremasinghe at the Colombo Museum. Their relationship demonstrates that in some circumstances a high level of trust, respect and cooperation existed between British agents and local intellectuals engaged in key museum activities at this time. After 1893 when Joseph was appointed further initiatives were introduced to manage the collection. These included addressing some conservation issues (Haly and Joseph 1895: 11) and, under Willey, the introduction of an officious museum policy to restrict the international loan of manuscripts, 'owing to the loss the Colony had sustained by the removal of manuscripts from the Island' (Willey and Joseph: D10). The Government Translator, Gunasekera *Mudaliyar*, performed the role of Assistant Librarian and assessed the significance and authenticity of the manuscripts offered to the Museum (Spence and Joseph 1902: 7).

Access to the chronicles

British colonial museums in South Asia were conceived as public educational and social facilities and they were administered as government concerns by the civil service. This has made them sites for appreciating experiences of modernity and the shaping of culture. Nair has interpreted the proposal for a public museum in India made in 1843 as representing an altruistic desire of the state to engage with a broad cross-section of society. At a time when 'larger society remained deeply stratified and divided', the public museum promoted 'access to all [people], irrespective of class, race, caste or gender' (Nair 2007: 61). There are some parallels here with Gregory's vision for the Colombo Museum; nevertheless, in practice, the activities and incidents reported annually by the Museum's Directors show that it often struggled to fulfil the research, preservation and interpretation roles that were envisaged for it. And, by 1898, reported F. A. L. in the journal *Science*, the museum was barely meeting running costs and the 25 year-old building was in need of attention; a situation 'to be deplored' for 'the Official Museum of Ceylon' (FAL 1898: 446).

Despite these difficulties, the Colombo Museum Administration Reports from this period contain some useful data concerning the annual visitation that suggest that it was gaining some traction. After a decade of operation in 1887, there were 84,321 visitors of whom 71,470 were 'natives' (so called), 4,165 European residents and 8,677 strangers. Visitation continued to climb slowly and in 1895 there were 113,339 visitors, which included 104,889 'natives'. In 1909, the 'estimated total' number of visitors was 253,261 (unspecified). It is obviously difficult to assess the accuracy of these figures and the extent of meaningful engagement because little qualitative detail has emerged about the individual experiences of local people.

It is, therefore, perhaps more useful to focus on the development and assessment of specific initiatives, and in this case the interrogation of the development of the palm-leaf manuscript collection shows how the participation of local expertise and the Buddhist clergy was critical to its establishment. By 1901, this participation and negotiation between actors had resulted in the acquisition of 474 items.¹³ This was a modest number of items in comparison to the Nevill collection at the British Museum. Nevertheless, in the main, the Colombo Museum provided a local resource containing authenticated manuscripts and it welcomed monks and laymen to the Reading Room to use the collection. By 1889 there were 390 visits to the library

by Buddhist monks, which was a fair percentage of a total of 2,198 recorded library visits (Haly and Joseph 1889: 10-11). In 1901, 123 manuscripts were used by visitors and Joseph reported that the 'Saratha Sangraha was frequently consulted by Buddhist priests and extracts from it taken.' Further to this he wrote that, 'Another reader is gradually making a copy of the whole work', and also that these knowledgeable visitors also participated in the development of the collection through identifying gaps in the collection (Spence and Joseph 1902: 7).

For other visitors (strangers), access to the collection was promoted in the first illustrated museum guide of 1905:

The Library contains an exhaustive assemblage of books bearing directly or indirectly upon the religion, agriculture, archaeology, and natural history of Ceylon. There is also a valuable collection of native literature in the form of Ola Manuscripts, relating in one form or another chiefly to the Buddhist Scriptures. These documents are written in Sinhalese characters by hand with a pointed iron stylus, upon properly prepared slips of palm-leaves called "ola," and are composed either in Sanskrit, in Pali, or in Elu, the pure Sinhalese language ... The manuscripts are often consulted by Buddhist priests and other readers who frequent the Library, and may be inspected, if desired, on application being made to the Librarian. (Willey 1905)

Thus, this collection that had been formed through negotiation contributed to the official representation of Ceylon, which was a key role of the colonial museum.

Conclusion

The Government of Ceylon had a formative role in establishing an archive of palm-leaf manuscripts that was intended to augment the closed libraries of Buddhist temples. This may have mirrored collecting activities by Imperial agents in other colonies, but the local circumstances that characterized this collecting activity were unique. The development of the collection of palm-leaf manuscript collection in Ceylon required a sustained negotiation between Government representatives and the Buddhist clergy, which means that this collecting activity was shaped through local social and cultural relationships. This Government-fostered enterprise bore little resemblance to an aggressive military campaign.

The documentation and acquisition of manuscripts of religious significance required sensitive negotiation with the Buddhist clergy, who had been bruised by poor collecting practices. In this process the Buddhist clergy attained a degree of agency in the shaping of this collection through their resistance and insistence on adherence to respectful protocols. Whilst the committee system ultimately floundered, the hard-working Galle Committee illustrated that in some jurisdictions the Buddhist clergy supported the establishment of the GOL and were willing to participate as gatekeepers, mediating access to their possessions and allowing them to be copied or acquired. In other locations and circumstances the Buddhist clergy provided access to the contents of temple libraries for individual researchers.

This account, therefore, demonstrates that negotiation was critical to this colonial collecting activity in Sri Lanka. In this, the role of local intellectuals was paramount. Governors, members of the RASCB, the Museum's directors and curator-librarians all recognized that the formation of this specialist collection material required the participation of an elite group of local intellectuals. In turn these individuals, amongst them De Zoysa and Wickremasinghe, demonstrated their agency in the prosecution of collecting activities, including the processes of research and appraisal. They shined in their individual efforts and ultimately contributed to the interpretation of Ceylonese history through their publications and professional appointments. In this, they were certainly citizens of the Empire, who willingly participated in a British museum system, but one, which in this case, was highly pragmatic and supporting of their scholarship. In these circumstances, local intellectuals seized the opportunities to review and revise the early nineteenth century approximations of Ceylonese historical events and contributed to the emerging shape the Island's cultural heritage.

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Notes

- ¹ See, Wickremeratne, A.:1985
- ² George Turnour published this in 1837 as *The Mahavamsa in Roman Characters, with translation subjoined, with an introductory essay on Pali Buddhistical literature. Vol. 1 containing the first thirty eight chapters*, Colombo: Cotta Church Mission Press. Part 2 was completed by L. C. Wijesinha Mudaliyar and published in 1889 by the Government of Ceylon. *The Mahavamsa Part II containing Chapters XXXIX to C*, Colombo: Government Printer.
- ³ See also, Byrne, S. et al (eds) 2011 *Unpacking the Collection: Networks of Material and Social Agency in the Museum*, New York: Springer.
- ⁴ See also, Benjamin, N. et al (eds) 2006 *Intermediaries, Interpreters and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa* University of Wisconsin Press: Madison.
- ⁵ Coplestone wrote the 500-page book *Buddhism primitive & present in Magadha & Ceylon*, Longmans Green and Co Ltd, London, 1892.
- ⁶ In 1901 H M Gunasekera prepared the *Catalogue of the Colombo Museum Library. Part 1. Pali, Sinhalese, and Sanskrit Manuscripts*.
- ⁷ For a later appraisal of the historical value of some manuscripts in the collection see, Kulasuriya 1978.
- ⁸ My italics. Label photographed in 2010. 'Given by Sir Robert Brownrigg GA 1830-6-12.4'.
- ⁹ This has a relationship Buddhist Temporalities Law, See, Ralapanawe 2011.
- ¹⁰ This view of the clergy maintained currency and was repeated in Malalasekera 1958: 308.
- ¹¹ The number of manuscripts from Anuradhapura district increased substantially under the H.C.P. Bell, the Director of the Archaeological Survey of Ceylon, and more than 40 manuscripts were acquired between 1894 and 1914.
- ¹² Haly's priority was the natural history collections and he struggled for many years to improve the preservation and display of specimens, and to bring the interpretation in the galleries into line with scientific research. See, Sweet 2010: 100-112.
- ¹³ Forty-one items were catalogued as *Canonical Scriptures of Buddhism* and a further 179 items as *Commentaries, Scholia, and other Religious Works*. There were 85 *Historical Works and Legendary Tales*; nine *Medical Works*; 65 *Grammatical and Philological Works*; 60 *Poetical Works* and 35 *Miscellaneous Works* (Joseph 1901)

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