

The Implication of Indigenous Folk Memory in Lakdas Wikkrama Sinha's Poetryⁱ

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Abstract

The present article examines the place of and search for a pre-colonial poetics embedded in indigenous folk memory in the writing of Lakdas Wikkrama Sinha, a leading postcolonial Sri Lankan poet. The discussion departs from the general assessment of Wikkrama Sinha as being an "anti-colonial" voice, and examines the larger creative vision the writer espoused by re-living a lost Sinhala sensibility and way of life by evoking dramatizations, memory, and rupture that transcend his post-colonial present. In doing so, the present discussion attempts to complicate Wikkrama Sinha's poetic world as demonstrating energy to break away from his contemporaries whose poetics relied on an English sensibility. In anchoring the conversation, the article draws on selected poems from Wikkrama Sinha's debut collection, *Lustre. Poems* – in particular, "Hearts of Granite" and "Memorial" – and later work such as "In Ancient Kotmale" and "Don't Talk to Me About Matisse". The paper drives that the place of indigenous folk memory is crucial for the grounding of Wikkrama Sinha's creative programme and for an in depth reading of his exercise as a writer.

Keywords: Sri Lankan Writing, Postcolonial Literature, Folk Memory, Pre-colonial Memory.

This paper examines a dominant strain in Sri Lankan poet Lakdas Wikkrama Sinha's work: a poetical attempt to recover an ancient Sinhalese historico-cultural consciousness – one which is accepted as lost or dislocated in the present as a result of European colonial domination – through framing indigenous folk memory into his poetic narrative. Acknowledged by leading critics as "the most original of [Sri Lankan English] poets" ([Goonetilleke](#), *Sri Lankan English Literature* 221) and a "most consistent poet" ([Hattotuwegama](#) 24) with a "fairly clear [...] socio-political stand point" ([Canagarajah](#) 152), Wikkrama Sinha is frequently identified in literature classrooms as a leading anti-colonial voice of the generation of writers in Sri Lanka's immediate post-independence. Scholarship has drawn connections between Wikkrama Sinha's approach to art and the anti-imperial thinking of, among others, Ngugi Wa'Thiong'o, Franz Fanon and Abdul Jan Mohamed ([Jayasuriya](#) 142) who were international contemporaries. Wikkrama Sinha produced five collections between 1965 and 1976 before at the young age of thirty-seven he drowned off Mount Lavinia beach in 1978. Included among writers such as Patrick Fernando, Yasmine Goonaratne, and Jean Arasanayagam, Wikkrama Sinha has regularly been

placed as one of the noteworthy Sri Lankan English poets of the 1960s and early-to-mid-1970s ([Canagarajah](#) 156-157; [Parakrama](#) 1). Even as early as 1977, Wikkrama Sinha's poetry was acclaimed as being "most consistently Ceylonese in its material" ([Halpe](#) 452) and, more recently, as being "closer to the Sinhala cultural ethos" than, as implied, most writers with resonant thematic interests (Fernando 1). Singled out as "a generally anti-establishmentarian poet" (Fernando 2-3) with a "schizoid poetic personality" ([Jayatilaka](#) 147), Wikkrama Sinha, as Gamini Hattotuwegama has contended, was "at home in a certain whole environment" which he "absorbed [...] into the fibre of his poetry" ([Hattotuwegama](#) 24); which, in turn, enriched his craft as "a fine exponent of [the] spoken idiom" ([Jayatilaka](#) 147) which Wikkrama Sinha often used to channel a Sinhalese sensibility in a "distinctly Lankan-English" idiom ([Kandiah](#) 92-93).

While, as Annemari de Silva concedes, Wikkramasinha's anti-colonial subject position has generally been acknowledged by his readers (de Silva 82), in recent years, critical literature that engage with this aspect of the poetry has been scarce and infrequent. In addition to a paper (2014) and an unpublished dissertation (2012) authored by de Silva, the most original recent contribution to studies on Wikkrama Sinha is an essay by Nihal Fernando (2015) which, at one level, responds to some of de Silva's claims. Despite a general commentary by critics who draw on Wikkrama Sinha's response to trauma and dislocation caused in Sri Lanka by four and a half decades of colonial government ([Canagarajah](#); [Goonetilleke](#) *Modern Sri Lankan Poetry*; [Goonetilleke](#) *Sri Lankan English Literature*; [Hattotuwegama](#)), the broader cultural and poetic vision of the writer's creative operation remains under-appreciated in the critical department. In a sense, this paper emerges from this gap in the literature with a focus on addressing the palpable anxiety in Wikkrama Sinha's poetic agenda in peddling back over time in search of, and to connect with, indigenous folk memory of pre-colonial times and memories of a way of life destroyed by the advent of European colonialism.

In situating the above-defined arc in Wikkrama Sinha's creativity, one identifies an anxiety in the writer to bring on – albeit through textual creation – a "reversal" of colonial destruction on the Sinhala community. This desire and intent finds expression in the often-quoted "note" appended to Wikkrama Sinha's debut collection *Lustre. Poems.* (1965), also identified by Suresh Canagarajah as the poet's "artistic manifesto" ([Canagarajah](#) 155):

[T]he section LUSTRE marks a phase of Sinhala sensibility – I go on to the exploration of my persona and deadly position: I have come to realize that I am using the language of the most despicable and loathsome people on earth; I have no wish to extend its life and range or enrich its tonality.

To write in English is a form of cultural treason. I have had for the future to think of a way of circumventing this treason; I propose to do this by making my writing entirely immoralist and destructive. ([Wikkrama](#) Sinha, *Lustre. Poems.* 51)

In the frequent quotation of this "note", scholars often leave out the first sentence/ clause that ends with the colon: an omission that takes away necessary information and context needed for a full assessment of the poet's pronouncement. This crucial de-selection (executed by scholars themselves), in turn, has caused much speculation and insinuation regarding the implied meaning to the "immoralist" and

“destructive” claims in the text ([Goonetilleke](#), *Sri Lankan English Literature* 216). The poet’s self-realization – that to compose in the English language constitutes a “cultural treason” which he proposed to counter through his writing – is clearly conveyed. To effect this circumvention, Wikkrama Sinha proposes as a “deadly position” the re-tracing of a creative Sinhala sensibility: a position which, in the perpetuation of a historical sense and cultural idiom, breeds an immoralist and destructive irreverence of the dominant poetic tradition in 1960s Sri Lanka which (so Wikkrama Sinha seems to imply) sought approval in the mimicry of the British canon. Since it exerts the boundaries of the discussion undertaken in this study, I do not propose to develop a detailed discussion of this veiled attack Wikkrama Sinha levels on leading poetic peers such as, among others, Patrick Fernando and Yasmine Gooneratne whose writings – despite their concern with local themes – relied on England for idiom, style, and form (Canagarajah; [Goonetilleke](#) *Modern Sri Lankan Poetry* xxiv). To the contrary, what measured as immorality and destructiveness in the imperial (or, British) poetic ethos furnished Wikkrama Sinha with the material and impetus to experiment in search of a voice, tradition, and sensibility with the historically-violated Sinhala folk memory at its foundation.

Wikkrama Sinha’s provocative debut collection, *Lustre. Poems*, consists of thirty-six poems arranged in five sections: “Lustre” (3-14), “Myrah” (15-18), “Metaphysical Poems” (19-26), “Other Poems” (29-41) and “Handbomb et cetera” (45-50), of which the poems arranged under “Lustre” constitute the collection’s opening installment. It contains ten poems which directly reflect sentiments expressed in the “note” referred to earlier. In particular, the poet’s investment in recovering a pre-colonial Sinhala sensibility – which remained a key aspect of Wikkrama Sinha’s poetic programme till the end – reads articulately in poems such as “Karagala” (6) and “Ascription” (3). In that order, the two poems are styled as impressions of fifteenth and seventeenth century Sinhala verse. Two other powerful expressions in the same section, “In the King’s Jail” (10) and “Anula Devi” (11), dramatize popular Sinhala folk memories and oral lore. Narrated through the voice of Dascon Adhikarama (Pedro Dascon or Pierre de Gascogne), a leading courtier of French heritage in King Vira Parakrama Narendrasinha’s court in Kandy, the poem reads as a non-repentant reflection by the adigar who was jailed and beheaded for having an affair with one of the palace queens ([Ratnasinghe](#)). Of resonant scope, “Anula Devi” is based on a legend of a Sinhalese queen of the first century B.C. who, according to Sinhala history, was the first woman sovereign of the people. The two poems show early experiments on Wikkrama Sinha’s part to break-through the English sensibility and tradition (in both content and form) in search of a harmony that transcends a disrupted historical and literary inheritance. This trajectory is sustained further by several other poems in the collection such as “Hearts of Granite” (29-30) – introduced as a compressed version of “a long poem on [the poet’s] ancestors” that he wished to “ultimately write in Sinhala” (51) – and “Memorial” (4). Both poems read as impressions of colonial violence in its various forms, latent in the people’s collective consciousness, working destruction over the Sinhalese. Annemari de Silva’s assessment of “Hearts of Granite” as a poem presenting “coloniser-colonised clashes” in terms that give “pride of place to the Portuguese” (de Silva 84) is both unreasonable and flawed. To the contrary, “Hearts of Granite” seems to draw from a particular phase of warfare in the late-sixteenth century where the Portuguese – who, for the greater part of that century related to the Kotte kingdom in the western coast as a protectorate – clashed with Sinhala armies from Sitawaka in the south-western lowland and those of the Kandyan kingdom in the hill territories. The inland movement of the Portuguese forces from the northern and western coasts is signified by references to the Hammenhiel fort (north) and the forts in Cota (west) and the Four Korales in the

western lowland. The complex military history of the period is interrupted by several fearsome battles in which native warlords resist the enemy with a ruthless determination – or, with hearts of granite.ⁱⁱ The poem makes reference to the destructive power of superior firearms as the Portuguese and their lascarins fired “from within the carriage” to “set aflame” the Sinhala “ancestor” ([Wikkrama Sinha](#) 29) who persisted by unleashing warfare rehearsed and perfected in the mountainous jungles as they “broke the silence of cicadas”

riddled the foliage
and the unseen enemy in a hundred expeditions, crushed

by falling rock
poised, like the tall trees
on the highest mountains. (29)

References in the poem to Portuguese commanders such as Gaspar Figueira (also spelt as Figueyra in some sources), Jeronymo de Azavedo, and Constantine de Sa leave enough signs to localize the descriptions in the poem between approximately 1591 and 1629. The poem’s emphasis on locally-bred guerilla movements by the Sinhalese resistance in the “deadly mountains of Candea”, and in maneuvering nature and shielding themselves as an “unseen enemy” (29), stand out. At Hanwella, in Sitawaka, and in the Wellawaya plains, the Sinhalese counter-attack is remarked as being “deafened to the bronze explosions / of the finest canon in the world” – the superior arms of the invader – as they “opened flesh like flowers screaming / with the swords most beautiful / with hearts of granite” (30).ⁱⁱⁱ

With distinct echoes of “Hearts of Granite” in its turn to indigenous folk memory, Wikkrama Sinha’s “Memorial” – a neglected poem for a long time – was brought under significant reinterpretation in 2015 when Nihal Fernando argued that the poem referred to the killing of peasants by British soldiers and sepoys during the Sinhala-Muslim riots in 1915 (Fernando 9-14). Previously, “Memorial” was carelessly referred to as an anti-colonial poem (in broad, general terms) which represented direct clashes between the British colonizer and the colonized Sinhalese ([Goonetilleke](#), *Sri Lankan English Literature* 220). The immediate cause which brought on the 1915 riots can be attributed to fermenting tensions between Muslims and Sinhalese-Buddhists. Tensions spilled over when, on 28 May 1915, devotees of the contending camps quarreled over procession-drumming in a Buddhist pageant that passed in front of a main mosque in Gampola, in the lower central hills (Ramanathan 1-4). Violence soon spread to other towns and to rural and outskirt areas. To contain mob rioting, killings, looting incidents, and arson, the colonial government declared Martial Law under which men and women were charged, tried, and executed. “Memorial” is anchored on the killing of innocent and unarmed Sinhalese peasants – as alleged – by the “Moor and sepoy” ([Wikkrama Sinha](#), *Lustre. Poems* 4): men and women whose tragic fates demonstrate trauma which isn’t framed into state-manufactured mainstream history. Fernando’s contribution is significant in characterizing and identifying the peasant names appearing in the poem which otherwise read as random folk names. Fernando juxtaposes “Memorial” with reports of the 1915 violence in Armand De Souza’s provocative examination of the riots, *Hundred Days in Ceylon Under Martial Law 1915* (1916). “Shot in their compounds” and laid to rest in funerals overseen by Martial Law restrictions “bereft of canna” and the “odours of / pica-mal” ([Wikkrama Sinha](#), *Lustre. Poems* 4), “Memorial” speaks

For Singho Appu, Siman, Jiris and Punchi Nilame
For Ampe Romanis and the lady Sabarath Etana
Who sowed her fiftieth year,
Reaping paddy in fields enflamed with sun. (4)

In addition to the memory of these individuals, the poet also mourns for “those shot in the banks of the Algoda river”, “those who were flogged in the somnolence of the Kelani”, and “those driven and shot on the Wanawaha rail-track” where “sovereign trains of cinnamon” (4) transported goods. The references to Kelani and Wanawaha – the latter, as Fernando correctly asserts to be a derivative form of Wanawahala/Wanawasala (Fernando 11): a village in Kelaniya – assist the reader to localize the violence in the immediate peasant community. References to “Siman” and “Jiris” in the poem identify with Simon Perera and Jeris Appu of Kaleliya who, having been accused of looting a Muslim merchant’s shop, were executed by a Superintendent of Police in Perera’s compound (Ramanathan 81-85). The visualization of colonial guns and law-keepers arriving at village steads to execute menfolk inter-textually complement arguably Wikkrama Sinha’s best known poem among his contemporary readers, “Don’t Talk to Me About Matisse” (1975); a poem argued to “suggest imperialist exploitation in the guise of art” ([Goonetilleke](#), *Sri Lankan English Literature* 142). As Hattotuwegama claims, while undermining the view that art and culture can be isolated from “the brute facts of history”, the poem denounces the idea that “a culture based on exploitation, plunder and the massacre of the innocents” could “practice and foster in the form of aesthetic cultural, philosophic and sociological concepts” (Hattotuwegama 27). In Wikkrama Sinha’s impressions of the thin line between European high art and colonial violence, he tantalizingly plays between cultural ambassadors and icons such as Matisse, Gauguin and Van Gogh – in the poem, reduced to the status of disease-spreaders among locals – and colonials who, in their violent exercise of setting the frontier, had the “aboriginal crucified” ([Wikkrama Sinha](#), *O Regal Blood*) 5) and the native culture dismantled. The poem’s concluding stanza gravitates these two ends – colonial art and imperial violence – towards one another which, in turn, draws attention to the perpetrators’ oppressive culture which caused irreparable historical trauma, rupture and displacement to the community:

Talk to me instead of the culture generally –
how the murderers were sustained
by the beauty robbed of savages: to our remote
villages the painters came, and our white-washed
mud-huts were splattered with gunfire. (5)

In his commentary of Wikkrama Sinha’s work, D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke has drawn on the poetics of “Don’t Talk to Me About Matisse” as being “[richer and stronger] than mere pro-Third World, anti-imperialist propaganda” which “attached positive values to native tradition” ([Goonetilleke](#), *Sri Lankan English Literature* 50). Goonetilleke goes as far as granting Wikkrama Sinha the status of someone who “tries to be a cultural nationalist” in finding “a positive sense of connection, if not identification, with the life of his country” ([Goonetilleke](#), *Sri Lankan English Literature* 50; my emphasis). Despite the hint of derision in Goonetilleke’s superior tone, his assessment nonetheless encourages readers to identify Wikkrama Sinha in line with demonstrations of cultural nationalism in the 1960s. Acknowledging the

poem's use of "oral and folk discourses" (Canagarajah 154-155) and its harmony with the "native ethos" (155), more encouraging critics have underscored "Don't Talk to Me About Matisse" as a poem in which Wikkrama Sinha succeeds to "tap the roots of [Ceylon's] traditional life instinctually" (Hattotuwegama 28).

Hattotuwegama's assessment above can be fruitfully imported to a reading of the poem "In Ancient Kotmale" which Wikkrama Sinha composed in 1973; in which a resplendent and glorious way of life – one that resonated the memory of pre-colonial Kotmale – is dramatized. The poem opens as follows:

In the beautiful principality, in Kotmale
I will build my house of the good soil's brick
With the timber of the ringing forests,
And I will cover it with the tiles flat,
One on one, as the palms of the farmers –

And in the morning will I see
The sun wounded as my heart with a million arrows,
Rise between the mountain ranges
And spread in the green valley its golden blood. ("In Ancient Kotmale" 244)

Situated in the deep central hills, Kotmale has a folk significance as a densely forested region which nurtured the water with which agriculture of the valleys were carried out in the pre-colonial Kandyan kingdom. The Kotmale hills bear a second historical significance as a retreat and place of refuge for Sinhalese royalty when attacked by enemy kingdoms where, in times of adversity, they concealed the sacred tooth relic of Gautama Buddha (whose possession was traditionally associated with the right of reign). In geographical terms, Kotmale – along with a vast area including Wellassa, Walapane, Dumbara, Hewaheta, Matale, Nuwara Kalawiya, Sabaragamuwa, and the Seven Korales (Jayawardena 78) – was a main battleground during the native uprising against British government in 1818. In subduing the spirited resistance in the Uva-Wellassa bordering Kotmale, Governor Robert Brownrigg deployed a force under Major MacDonald that massacred entire villages of its male population, engaged in looting and arson, and set fire to stocks and granaries.^{iv}

Referring to a part of the country known in its modern day for social backwardness, underdevelopment, and poverty, Wikkrama Sinha rectifies a lost past with a future's hope in a dream-like tone that overreaches historical trauma and displacement:

And I will go into the fields in the seasons –
I will sow the grain, a stream between my hands,
I will cast the grain in falling nets,
It will stream up round the calves of maidens
From the viridian fire of that clay.

And in the kilns of my sun-wed fields,
And under the haven of passing clouds
As I repose, in those almost everlasting days,

In the time ordained, in green calendars
Will come my yearned harvest. ("In Ancient Kotmale" 244).

The poem's use of associations with a flourishing peasant agrarian world stands out in allusions, references, and similes such as the "good soil's brick", the "timber of the ringing forests", and flat tiles arranged to reminisce "the palms of the farmers". The grandeur and glory of this violently subdued lifestyle is enforced with pastoral overtones through which the narrative is brought to a concluding high-note.

Wikkrma Sinha's contemporary Yasmine Gooneratne has (in an offhand fashion) noted "In Ancient Kotmale" to "have roots" in W.B. Yeats' "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" ([Gooneratne 2](#); my emphasis). Gooneratne doesn't explain what motivated such a random claim even though her imagination has influenced other critics – such as for example, Wilfrid Jayasuriya – who comment on Sri Lankan English writing. While concluding that "like Yeats' poet-king of Ireland" the narrator of "In Ancient Kotmale" presented a hero who meant to "redeem the land and fulfill his destiny" (Jayasuriya 148), Jayasuriya further burdens the poem's narrator as having "an alter ego in the person of the mythic Sinhalese hero Dutugemunu" (148). According to legend, Dutugemunu – the most prominent hero-king in the Sinhalese's chronicle *The Mahavamsa* – spent several years in Kotmale prior to his accession as king to the throne left vacant by his father's demise in the southern Rohana (or Ruhunu) country, after which he waged a successful war against (what the Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalist discourse often calls) the "Tamil invader" in the country's central northern regions.

However, I contend that both Gooneratne and Jayasuriya walk into traps they set themselves by reading a generally appreciated trait of a writer's work against historical incidents which are readily available in their limited scope of reference. This leads such critics to conclude in support of preconception too-readily which, in turn, provoke far-fetched conclusions. A fact both Gooneratne and Jayasuriya avoid mentioning is that Wikkrma Sinha spent some time in Yahangala, in the Uva "growing cardamoms" which, as George Braine explains, Wikkrma Sinha admitted as his "recent employment" at a job interview in the Maharagama Teacher Training College (Braine). Braine implies that "the appealing simplicity" of "In Ancient Kotmale" to have directly derived from the poet's hands on experience living and being a part of the Uva folk community during his "cardamom growing days" (Braine).

The present examination proposed an understanding of the broader poetic and cultural vision of Lakdas Wikkrma Sinha's creative agenda to further nuance the widely used comment that his stance demonstrated anti-colonial resonances. In a bid to push this observation further, the discussion characterized the writer's efforts to transcend four and a half decade of trauma and dislocation brought on by colonial government, in his return to a Sinhala sensibility and folk memory that preserved the grandeur of a destroyed age and impressions of that destruction. Wikkrma Sinha died in 1978: the year the post-independence state adopted a neoliberal economic model under the Junius Jayewardene United National Party (UNP) government. Being ushered on the back of a decade of scarcity and economic depletion, the "open economy" policies introduced in 1978 were meant to herald Sri Lanka to new heights and social and economic growth.

However, the architecture of the new economic paradigm shift – which included state-sponsored encroachments on territories that were historically considered “Tamil areas” (in which the state spearheaded colonization schemes and re-distribution favouring Sinhalese peasants) – had its colonial accent. Massacres of resettled Sinhalese villagers in these contested-zones by Tamil militant groups – as well as reprisals on Tamil villages by Sinhalese and state militaries – were prominent in the early years of the Sri Lankan civil conflict. In the Tamil nationalist consciousness, such attacks on Sinhalese villages were justified as being necessitated to take back encroached land. In further developments, in 1977, 1981 and 1983, mob violence was unleashed on Tamils in which hundreds died, thousands were displaced, and property was arsoned or looted, in which state-sponsorship and the government’s implied consent have been noted (Hoole et al. 63; Senewiratne 41). In support of neo-liberal dogma, attempts at the privatization of state assets – education, for example – brought the state into collision with students, trade unions, and progressives, whose activism formed the backbone of a series of anti-government actions between 1980 and 1987. This fermenting wave came to a destructive high as the political emergency of 1987-90 led by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in which a number estimated at the minimum between 40,000 and 60,000 were killed (Senaratne 103; Wickremereetna 15). The vast majority of these killings was extra-judicial and carried out by state militaries and unofficial armies in safe-houses and camps. The victims were mostly Sinhalese men. Out of a purely academic interest, it would have been intriguing to know how Lakdas Wikkrasinha – had he lived to the 1980s and 1990s – would have responded to and taken on the neoliberal state. This strand of thought, however, must remain speculative and solely be inspiration to our vacant and pensive moods.

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Notes

ⁱLakdas Wikkrama Sinha's name has also been variously presented as 'Lakdhas Wikkrama Sinha', 'Lakdhasa Wikkramasinha' and, more commonly, as 'Lakdasa Wikkramasinha'. To avoid confusion I have consistently used the spelling corresponding with that in the poet's *Lustre. Poems*, to which this paper makes central reference.

ⁱⁱFor a general account of Portuguese engagements in the Sitawaka territories and their enterprises to subdue the Kandyan kingdom in the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries, see the chapter "The Portuguese Conquest of the Maritime Kingdom" (201-267) in V.L.B. Mendis' *Foreign Relations of Sri Lanka: From Earliest Times to 1965*. For a nuanced presentation and discussion of the same, refer Paul E. Peiris' *Ceylon: The Portuguese Era (Volume One)*; particularly the chapters "Death of Raja Sinha" (252-266), "Edirille Rala" (289-308), "Wimala Dharma" (334-355), and "A Famosa Retirada" (374-389).

ⁱⁱⁱAn interest in the same historical period of four decades of Portuguese attacks on the Kandyan kingdom is found in the poem "Antonio Barretu" (1970), which narrates the death of the eponymous Sinhalese military leader - to whom Peiris gives the epithet, "the terror of the Portuguese" (Peiris 378) - who was killed, beheaded,

and head stuck on a pole for all to see by the invader. See Annemari de Silva's "Re-centring the Postcolonial Subject: The Poetry of Lakdasa Wikkramasinha" (83-84).

^{iv}For a comprehensive account on the origins and spread of the 1818 rebellion and, in particular, British severity in putting it down, refer Kumari Jayawardena's *Perpetual Ferment: Popular Revolts in Sri Lanka in the 18th and 19th Centuries*, chapter 8 (71-81).

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