Culture, Mind, and Society

Series Editor
Peter G. Stromberg
Anthropology Department
Henry Kendall College of Arts and Sciences
University of Tulsa
Tulsa, Oklahoma, USA
The Society for Psychological Anthropology—a section of the American Anthropology Association—and Palgrave Macmillan are dedicated to publishing innovative research that illuminates the workings of the human mind within the social, cultural, and political contexts that shape thought, emotion, and experience. As anthropologists seek to bridge gaps between ideation and emotion or agency and structure and as psychologists, psychiatrists, and medical anthropologists search for ways to engage with cultural meaning and difference, this interdisciplinary terrain is more active than ever.

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The University of Colombo occupies a site just south of the city centre, on the edge of Cinnamon Gardens, one of the city’s most exclusive neighbourhoods. Originally, a small cluster of whitewashed high-colonial buildings, looking out to a cricket pitch, the University has over the years acquired an incoherent clutch of newer buildings, many of them unusually ugly even by the standards of what we might recognise architecturally as transnational academic modernism. The two main roads which converge at the southern tip of the campus are not only wide and very busy, but also shaded by beautiful old trees which line the pavements on each side. It’s easy for a casual traveller to ignore the youthful ferment of campus life which goes on away from the road, and in the hostels and boarding houses where the students live.

Politically, the layout of the university evokes other histories. The road bounding the north-east side of the Arts Faculty is now officially known as Stanley Wijesundera Mawatha, honouring the memory of the 1980s Vice-Chancellor who was shot dead in College House by the youthful insurrectionists of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna in early 1989. As Vice-Chancellor, Wijesundera had refused to close down the campus when ordered to do so by the JVP. One of the first acts in their rising against the state had been the abduction and murder of a Colombo student leader, Daya Pathirana, in late 1986. In their time, the old trees have hidden a political history of unexpected intensity, and occasionally severe violence.
By the time that Mihirini Sirisena returned to her old campus in a new role as anthropological fieldworker in 2007, the political environment had changed. The insurgent violence of the 1980s was a fading memory in Colombo itself, but the war against Tamil rebels in the country’s north had just restarted and would reach its bloody finale two years later. That war and the issues that fed into it—the construction of antagonistic ethnic identities, the causes and consequences of political violence, displacement and memory—have dominated academic discussions of Sri Lanka for three decades. But while attention has been rather narrowly, if understandably, focused on these topics, Sri Lankan society has changed in many ways. The liberalisation of the economy in the late 1970s has led to the growth of an expanded middle class, heavily concentrated in the island’s Western Province. With this have come new styles of consumption, and shifting ideas about gender and sexuality. The young people coming to the University in Colombo are having to navigate a rapidly changing and uncertain social milieu, one which provides both opportunities for new kinds of self-fashioning and very real constraints, not least from the relentless force of peer pressure.

The world of the young, in Colombo as in many places, is often opaque to outsiders. Lecturers prefer to know as little as possible about their students’ lives away from the lecture hall. Students are often living far away from home and therefore far away from the kind of everyday surveillance which is so much a part of growing up in Sri Lanka. There are other kinds of surveillance, though, from fellow students. Building relationships is not easy, especially romantic relationships, and the consequences of failure are felt intensely. New formations of class make all this more difficult. New technologies like the use of mobile phones create opportunities as well as further obstacles.

This is the world that Mihirini Sirisena explores in her original and eye-opening book. In limpid prose, she introduces issues like the etiquette of gift-giving that ties a young couple together, the idioms in which they imagine their relationships with each other, and the fraught approach to sexual intimacy. In setting out these themes, Sirisena is herself charting often un-navigated territory. Anthropologists have, on the whole, felt more comfortable with the objectifying language of traditional kinship studies, with its analytic charts and abbreviations, than with the warmth (and occasional cold) of actually existing relationships between actually existing young people. In part, this may simply be due
to the greater academic rigour afforded by this apparatus of scholarship. But just as much is the fact that it is quite difficult to create an anthropology which brings warmth and emotion back into the study of relationships.

Sirisena confronts this challenge with considerable skill, and there are two specific aspects of her achievement which are worthy of note. To set out the stories she has assembled here requires above all a rare degree of trust, and that trust is something that had to be built patiently and carefully. Here, Sirisena’s position as a sometime insider must have helped, but this would not in itself have created the conditions for her interlocutors to open themselves as they have. For that, the author had to do the work that was needed. The second aspect of note is of course Sirisena’s writing itself, which combines a novelistic attention to detail, with a coolly analytic sense of the dynamics of self-making and relationship-building. It was once said that to be true to its subject, every new ethnography has to create its own genre anew. Mihrini Sirisena has, in this book, done just that.

Edinburgh, UK
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Jonathan Spencer
Psychological anthropologists study a wide spectrum of human activity: child development, illness and healing, ritual and religion, personality, political and economic systems, just to name a few. In fact, as a discipline that seeks to understand the interconnections between persons and culture, it would be difficult to come up with examples of human behaviour that are outside the purview of psychological anthropology. Yet beneath this substantive diversity lies a common commitment. The practitioners of psychological anthropology seek to understand social activity in ways that are fitted to the mental and physical dimensions of human beings. Psychological anthropologists may focus on emotions or human biology, on language or art or dreams, but they rarely stray far from the attempt to understand the possibilities and the limitations of on the ground human persons.

The discourse of romance has a long and fascinating history that spans the cultures of East and West, and wherever it is found it links the bodily realities of men and women with the larger structures of politics and economics. In this book, Mihirini Sirisena illuminates how romance has taken shape among college students in Sri Lanka. She shows how a culturally adapted form of this discourse works to mediate some of the contradictions in the lives of these young people, in a world penetrated by new realities of economics, politics and kinship. Love serves to shape and indeed make the self, to provide new modes of belonging, but in its powerful effects can leave the self fragile and vulnerable. This
work provides a compelling example of how our cultural expectations and understandings of emotion are central to the ongoing negotiation between selves and societies.

Tulsa, USA

Peter G. Stromberg
Good fortune in my life comes in the form of people. From the time I signed up to study for a Ph.D. in September 2006, which forms the basis of this book, I was blessed to have had so many people who poured in their time, effort, love, care and faith. In seeing the completion of this book, I am indebted to:

Subhani, Chandani, Thilini and Ajith who introduced me to my interlocutors at the university and my interlocutors, who accepted and trusted me and shared a significant chapter of their lives with me. Though they remain unnamed in this book, their lives comprise the core of this book for without them, I would not have a story to tell;

Jonathan and Lynn who let me follow my heart and guided me with invaluable advice and encouragement from its beginning;

Janet Carsten and Carol Smart, who examined my Ph.D. thesis and whose comments and critique guided the reworking of the Ph.D. thesis into this book;

Becky, Dhana, Eshani, Harini, Jane, Linda, Ruth and Tharindi for indulging in me with food and care, reading/commenting on various drafts and above all, helping me keep my sanity in check;

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Vikram, Keith, Christina, Tatyana and Buddy, who were my home away from home during the Ph.D.;

Amma, Thaththa and my sisters for instilling ambition in me and helping me chase my dreams with love and unflattering faith;

Simon and Roo for their unconditional love.

Thank you!
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A NOTE ON TRANSLATION
AND TRANSLITERATION

In this book, all statements and conversations come from interviews and conversations I had with my interlocutors, which I either recorded or wrote down during or after our meetings. The majority of these discussions were had in Sinhala, and all translations given in the book are my own. However, most of my interlocutors used some English in our conversation, and when they are cited, they appear in single quotation marks.

Where key terms and phrases for which my translations are approximations, I have transliterated the phrases and/or terms which are italicised and given adjacent to the translations in brackets. In transliterating, I follow the common system for Sinhala. Vowels marked in a macron indicate long vowels (ā, ī, ē, ē̆, ō, ū); retroflex consonants are indicated with a dot below (ṭ); sh is written as ś; prenasalised n is written as ņ; mūrdhaja na is transliterated as Ň.
People in the Book

Here is a brief introduction to people who appear in this book. They were the key informants, whose stories have shaped the book.

Amali

Amali was 23 years old when I met her, and she was in her third year of study at the university. She grew up in the suburbs of Colombo, with her younger sister and her brother. Her father was a retired civil servant, and he had passed away when I met her. Amali’s mother was a housewife. Amali sought help from her mother while mending her heart, broken when her four-year relationship to Erantha ended.

Amintha

Standing almost 6 feet tall with an athletic build, Amintha was an attractive young man who was popular among his fellow students. He was in his third year at the university, studying to become a teacher, when I met him in early 2008. In his mid-twenties, he beamed confidence and self-assurance and took the self-proclaimed position of my ‘key informant’, a role he lived up to well. ‘The university is not my life’, he told me when we first met, implying that all his energies are not directed into his university education. He already tutored students studying Sinhala literature for the advance level examination. Thus, his fallback was in place. If all else fails, he could become a tuition master in Sinhala. With all the private
tuition classes he conducted, he was building his reputation as a tuition master. Within the university, he was active in student politics and helped organising and took part in sport and literary events at the university. He prided himself on being able to savour all or most opportunities and experiences life had to offer. The older of twin brothers, Amintha was born and bred in the suburbs of Colombo. He catalogued himself as middle class, explaining that money was never a worry while he was growing up. His father was a teacher, and his mother was a housewife, who dedicatedly provided her children with the shelter and guidance they needed. Amintha often credited this cocoon of warmth his mother provided them as an explanation for him turning out to be the good man that he is. Amintha was in a nine-month-old relationship with a girl he met at the university when I met him.

Aravinda

Amintha’s twin brother, Aravinda offered an almost identical profile to Amintha, in appearance, character and activities. While Amintha described himself as the ‘sporty one’ while Aravinda was the ‘arty one’, Aravinda chose to describe Amintha as the ‘articulate one’ and himself as the ‘quiet one’. Aravinda has been going out with his current girlfriend for over a year when I met him.

Anish

Anish was 21 and was a first-year student at the Law Faculty. He is from the south of Colombo and was the youngest of a family of four. His parents were civil servants. He was in a brief relationship with Hiranthi when I met him, which ended during my fieldwork. He had doubts about the relationship, he told me, as he considers himself a ‘bit of a player’ and was not sure if he had it in him to work at the relationship to make it last.

Bileka

Bileka was 25 years old at the time of my fieldwork. Born and brought up in Colombo, Bileka’s background was significantly different to that of the majority of my research participants. Her father was a businessman; her mother was a doctor, and Bileka was educated abroad. At the time I met her, she was discovering the world of university students through her friends at work, who were
local graduates. At the time, Bileka was engaged to her long-term boyfriend.

**Bimal**  
Bimal was 25 years old and was the only Sinhala, Christian in the family of my interlocutors. He was a third-year student at the Arts Faculty when I met him. From north central Sri Lanka, he was the youngest child of a family of eleven. He was in a relationship with a woman from his village. Despite having carried on with that relationship for more than two years, Bimal saw no bright future lying ahead in terms of marital prospects.

**Bindu**  
Bindu was 23 years old and was a third-year student at the Science Faculty. Her parents owned a business in the south of Sri Lanka, where Bindu was born and bred. She was the middle child of a family of five and had moved to Colombo to follow a computing course before she began her course at the university. It was at this computing centre that she met Nilanga, with whom she had been in a relationship for over two years. When I met her, Nilanga had ended their relationship.

**Charithra**  
Charithra was a 22-year-old law student in her second year of study. She had moved to Colombo to study and stayed with an aunt in the suburbs of Colombo. Charithra’s father had passed away when she was young. Charithra told me that her brother and her mother, who was a teacher, never made her feel the gap that her father’s death had left vacant. Charithra had just started a relationship with a man she met at the university when I met her.

**Chathuranga**  
Chathuranga was 23 years old and was from central Sri Lanka. A third-year student at the Arts Faculty at the time I met him, education was the first thing that was on Chathuranga’s mind. It was not just that education paved the way for upward mobility and security. Being the oldest of three children, Chathuranga knew that he had to take over the responsibility of looking after his two younger sisters, as his ageing, farmer parents found it difficult to do so. He was not in a romantic relationship when I met him.
Chinthana  Chinthana was 24 years old and was a third-year student at the Arts Faculty. He has moved to Colombo to study at the university, from central parts of Sri Lanka and stayed at the university hostel. His parents were paddy farmers, and Chinthana has an older sister who was married. Chinthana told me that his family struggled to make the ends meet. He was recovering from a break-up of a 6-year relationship when I met him.

Dhamma  Dhamma was a 24-year-old third-year student at the Arts Faculty. He left his parents and sister behind in a village to the north-east of Sri Lanka, when he came to Colombo to enter into university. His father worked as a clerical assistant, and his mother was a housewife. Dhamma was in a ‘serious’ relationship with a woman he met at the university when I met him.

Dhananjaya  Dhananjaya was 22 and was a first-year student at the Law Faculty. His father owned a boutique, and his mother was a housewife. Dhananjaya was the 3rd child of a family of six and had moved to Colombo from central Sri Lanka to start his life at the university. He had been in a relationship with an older woman he met while working part-time in his village, and the woman had ended their relationship when I met him.

Dilan  Dilan was a third-year student at the Faculty of Law when I met him. He is from southern Sri Lanka and is the youngest of a family of eight. His parents are farmers. He has been away from home since the age of thirteen, living with friends and relatives during which time he looked after himself and indulged in drinking and loitering. When he was 15, his oldest brother passed away, and after that, he decided to focus on his education and do well. He was not in a relationship when I met him.

Duleeka  Duleeka was 32 and was married to her university sweetheart. She had a child, and they were putting the final touches to the house they had built in the suburbs of Colombo, when I met her.

Harsha  Harsha was 22 years old. She was the youngest daughter of a family of four, and her parents were paddy farm owners. Harsha moved from the south of Sri Lanka to
Colombo to study at the university. She was a second-year student at the Science Faculty when I met her and was in a relationship with a man she met at the university.

Hemanthi
Hemanthi and her parents moved from southern Sri Lanka, when she started her course for a bachelor's degree at the university. She was 23 and described herself as a modern, independent woman. Her father was a businessman, and her mother was a housewife. She was single when I met her and had recently broken off a relationship she had with a man she met at the university.

Hiranthi
Hiranthi was 21 years old and was born and bred in Colombo. Her father was a civil servant, and her mother was a teacher. Hiranthi followed her older sister’s footsteps into the Law faculty and was in her first year of study. I saw the death of her relationship to Anish during the course of my fieldwork.

Hishani
Hishani was 23 when I met her and comes from the suburbs of Colombo. Hishani’s mother had divorced her father, who was an alcoholic, when Hishani was young. Her mother worked as a wage labourer and struggled to make ends meet. As a result, Hishani and her younger sister had a hard childhood. They were estranged from their older brother, as it was the father who had custody of the brother. Hishani told me that her luck begun to change after she had met her boyfriend, with whom she had been in a relationship for the past 6 years.

Jayantha
Jayantha was 25 years old and was a third-year student at the Law faculty. He is the youngest child of a family of nine. His father worked as a wage labourer in their village in the deep south of Sri Lanka. Jayantha, like Chathuranga, was not in a relationship and didn’t see himself one. Jayantha didn’t want to be distracted by romantic relationships and could not afford one.

Kamani
Kamani was 23 years old and was newly married when I met her. She had married her childhood sweetheart. She was in her third year at the university but didn’t see her degree amounting to much as she didn’t expect to work. She was the younger of two children, with an older sister who worked for a private company in Colombo. Her
parents were retired teachers and had moved to suburbs of Colombo when Kamani started her degree at the university. Now they lived next door to Kamani and her husband.

Madhura Madhura was a 26-year-old student at the Law Faculty and was in the final year when I met him. Her father was a politician and represented their village, which is to the north-east of Colombo. Youngest of two children, Madhura followed his father’s footsteps into student politics at the university and was rather vague about the business his older brother minded. He was in a relationship with a girl he met at the university.

Nayana Nayana was a student at the Law Faculty and was in her second year. She introduced herself as a Sinhala, Buddhist girl from southern Sri Lanka, and was 21 when I met her. Nayana’s parents were teachers, and she has an older brother. Her parents had moved with her to Colombo when she started studying for her degree at the university. She was in a relationship with Nilan, a man she had known since she was a child.

Nirasha Nirasha was 21 years old. She was a second-year student at the Science Faculty. Her mother was a teacher, and her father was a civil servant. She lived with her parents and the older sister in the suburbs of Colombo, where she was born and bred. Nirasha was in a relationship with a man she met at the university.

Nishan Nishan was a 24-year-old law student in his third year of study. He moved to Colombo from southern Sri Lanka to study at the university. He was the fourth child in a family of seven. His father and mother worked as wage labourers in their village in the south. Nishan was in a relationship with a woman he met at the university.

Padmika Padmika was 21 years old and was a first-year student at the Law faculty. His father was a civil servant, and his mother was a retired teacher. The middle child of a family of five, Padmika and his two brothers grew up in different parts of the country, when they followed their father as he was transferred from one corner of the
country to another. Padmika was not in a relationship when I met him.

**Sayuri**  
Sayuri was 23 years old and was a third-year student at the Arts Faculty. She is from the central province of Sri Lanka, where she and her older sister grew up in a rather austere environment. Sayuri’s father was a head teacher, and her mother was a teacher, and Sayuri was my only interviewee who referred to her caste status when describing her background. She was in a relationship with a man she had met while she was at school.

**Susantha**  
Susantha was 26 years old and was a final-year student at the Law Faculty. He grew up in a village in southern Sri Lanka with his brother, where his mother worked hard as a wage labourer to make the ends meet, since his father abandoned the family for another woman. Susantha had found love at the university with a woman from the same village yet their relationship could not withstand the pressures of a clash of social classes.

**Thilini**  
Thilini was 24 years old and was a final-year student at the Arts Faculty. She was born and bred in the suburbs of Colombo. Her parents owned a small business in the village she grew up. Being the only child, she was the baby of the family and was not in a relationship when I met her.

**Other people**  
They too appear here, in their varying roles and capacities.

**Anura**  
Hishani’s boyfriend. I didn’t meet him.

**Erantha**  
Amali’s former boyfriend. I didn’t meet him.

**Jagath**  
Bileka’s fiancé. I didn’t interview him.

**Mr. Karunaratna**  
An astrologer and it was Bileka who put me in touch with him. He enlightened me on the process of matching horoscopes.

**Mr. Wijetunga**  
My former landlord.

**Mr. Wickramasinghe**  
A high school Sinhala teacher who advised me with meanings and interpretations of some Sinhala terminology.

**Narada**  
A TV show host and hosted a talk show on love at the time of my research and it was to speak to about this show that I contacted him.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Interaction Notes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nilan</td>
<td>Nayana’s boyfriend</td>
<td>I never met him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nilanga</td>
<td>Bindu’s former boyfriend</td>
<td>I didn’t meet him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanjeevika</td>
<td>A peer from my university days.</td>
<td>I spoke to her about love in Sinhala literature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarangi</td>
<td>Dhamma’s girl friend</td>
<td>I met her a few times, but I didn’t interview her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shivanthi</td>
<td>Aravinda’s girlfriend</td>
<td>I did not meet her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suren</td>
<td>Bileka’s friend</td>
<td>I spoke with him but did not include his story in this book.</td>
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