CASTE IN THE SAME MOLD AGAIN:
ARTISANS AND THE INDIGNITIES OF INHERITANCE IN SRI LANKA

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CASTE IN THE SAME MOLD AGAIN:
ARTISANS AND THE INDIGNITIES OF INHERITANCE IN SRI LANKA

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In a context of transforming expectations regarding the who, how, and what of heritage stewardship around the world, this dissertation examines caste's revitalization through boundary work carried out by a variety of actors and across a range of practical and discursive moments. Through a wide selection of ethnographic vignettes, it analyzes such boundary work around caste from multiple vantage points to illustrate how this category of identification is reproduced in tension with and in the service of neoliberal processes that have shaped Sri Lanka's "traditional craft industries" since the 1977 implementation of an "open economy policy." Grounded in two years of ethnographic fieldwork in the country's central province, the dissertation offers anthropological insight into what happens at the level of everyday experience when the logics of neoliberal economics and democratic egalitarianism become entangled with nationalist investments in heritage on the one hand, and the apparent specters of pre-modern preoccupations with hierarchy and honor on the other. In this majority Buddhist island country, caste among the Sinhalese has long been popularly rejected as an anachronistic and lamentable artifact of pre-colonial society, its public discussion generally avoided to an extreme (Silva and Hettihewage 2001:63). Focusing on two industries regarded as exemplary of Sri Lanka's traditional handicrafts, *Dumbara rata* weaving and the *hana* industry, I document the complex ways in which some of the country's most historically marginalized peoples, individuals at the lowest rungs of what is often figured as a Sinhala caste hierarchy, face the consequences of caste's quiet but indisputable reproduction in their daily lives. Challenging a persistent sense in scholarship on

the country that caste is somehow destined to disappear, the dissertation’s primary aim is to demonstrate not just *that* caste as a category of identification is alive and well, but also *how* this is so. As significantly, it is to illustrate beyond any doubt that its reproduction is the shared responsibility of actors across the strata of class, gender, age and caste.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Aimée Douglas grew up in Potomac, Maryland. She graduated from Bowdoin College with a B.A. in psychology. After completing her M.A. in Social Science at the University of Chicago, she matriculated at Cornell University in 2010. She conducted ethnographic research in Sri Lanka between 2010 and 2015, with a core eighteen-month period beginning in September 2013. She defended her dissertation in September 2017, exactly four years to the day after leaving for the field.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract…………..……………………………………………………………...………i-ii
Introduction……………………………………………………………………….......1-39
Chapter 1: Fieldsites: Atwaedagama and Redigama……......…………..………..……..…40-89
Chapter 2: Crafting Tradition……………………………………………………….....90-123
Chapter 3: Heritage or *Hana* Bundle? The Indignities of Inheritance
in a Sinhalese "Craft Village"…………...…………………………………….......124-179
Chapter 4: Knowing One's Place……………………………………………...…..180-223
Chapter 5: Reminders from "Within"……………………………………………..……224-259
Chapter 6: Broken Threads, Nefarious Designs: Tradition, Caste,
and Conflict Among *Dumbara Rata* Weavers……..……………………………...260-311
Conclusion…………………………………………………………………..…...…...312-315
Bibliography…………………………………………………………………...…..316-332

Introduction

"Wading in," a saying anthropologists-in-training often hear in reference to the initial phases of ethnographic research, conjures an image of one moving confidently if cautiously into the generally steady calm of "the field." Like that of most anthropologists, however, my experience carrying out the research upon which this dissertation is based was more akin to taking a tumble in rough surf and, to push the metaphor just a bit further, trying to regain my footing as another wave barreled toward me.

Anthropologist Janelle Taylor laments that the rise of "regimes of accountability" that have come to shape expectations around graduate student fieldwork has made a "casualty" of the element of surprise valued in mid-20th century anthropological training (Taylor 2014:523;530). She notes the degree to which funding applications nowadays almost necessitate that at least a portion of the proposed work already be completed. In this context, as she argues, "surprises now have the status of rare anomalies rather than expected and valued learning experiences" (531). In my case, and despite the surety with which I crafted my own applications for field funding to support research in Sri Lanka, it was not so much a refusal to admit the inevitability of surprise as the impossibility of anticipating its exact nature that would frustrate my own attempts to gracefully "wade in."

To explain, the following chapters focus on two spheres of productive activity: The *hana* industry in a village I call Atwaedagama, and *Dumbara rata* weaving in a village I call Redigama. Like almost all small-scale enterprises of artistic production regarded as Sri Lanka's "national" and "traditional crafts," *Dumbara rata* weaving and the *hana* industry have long been recognized as caste-based occupations. They are occupations performed by individuals at the lowest rungs of what is today commonly referred to as a Sinhala caste hierarchy

(Coomaraswamy 1907; Gunasinghe 2007; Knox 1981; Ryan 1953; Silva 2013; Tennent 1860). And yet, setting out to conduct my dissertation research, I had not anticipated caste, or, more precisely, I had not anticipated caste's salience as a category of identification for the Sinhalese men and women engaged in these industries. That such salience would prove a surprise to me was due in part to a reigning silence around and disavowal of caste. In India, perhaps the most obvious case for comparison given its geographic proximity and historical-cultural parallels, a constitutionally enshrined and largely caste-based national affirmative action program has been in effect for nearly seventy years (de Zwart 2000). While myriad forms of caste-based discrimination persist in the country, individuals disadvantaged based on their caste status have recourse—even if such recourse is often more theoretical than actual—to anti-discrimination laws over which there is vibrant public discussion. In short, caste is a publicly acknowledged and conspicuous feature of the social landscape. In Sri Lanka, by contrast, caste (and caste among the Sinhalese, in particular) has long been publicly rejected as an anachronistic and lamentable artifact of pre-colonial society (Silva and Hettihewage 2001:63). Caste's public discussion is often avoided to an extreme. The country's constitution makes no mention of positive discrimination, and legislative policy-makers have only rarely taken up the subject of caste-based discrimination (Uyangoda 1999:22). The men and women whose lives I focus on here, though finding themselves disadvantaged on the basis on caste, are loath to seek redress through the public invocation of caste.

This public silence around caste, I argue in the following pages, is also reflected in and reinforced by the topic's handling in recent social scientific literature. That caste's salience would prove the most *instructive* surprise to me during my dissertation research, however, was due to something inclusive of but extending beyond such silence: It was due to the striking and

often counter-intuitive ways in which concerns with caste figure in the lives of those residing in and around these two government-designated "traditional handicrafts villages."

As I learned during the core eighteen-month period of research upon which this dissertation is based, and as the following chapters make clear, concerns with and practices around caste in contemporary Sri Lanka are fraught with contradictions, many of which are inextricably linked to the public silence around and disavowal of caste. In an instance when one might expect identification as low caste to be only an encumbrance, ethnographic examination revealed instead a double-edged utility. Threatened by the possibility of losing control over a regional weaving industry to which they have historically been recognized as lineage-based heirs, low caste weavers in Redigama denounce what they view as their high caste neighbors' tendency to dwell upon caste as conservative and non-modern. Simultaneously, and often in the same sentence, they emphasize their own caste position to claim legitimate proprietorship over the craft and thereby resist these neighbors' efforts to weave independently of village workshops historically controlled by low caste families. Near my second field site of Atwaedagama, high caste individuals would (quietly) point to the incidence of inter-caste marriage between individuals from this low caste village and high caste individuals from other parts of Sri Lanka as evidence that caste "no longer matters."[1] They would immediately add, however, that the parents who had allowed their children to marry individuals from Atwaedagama had done so unwittingly. Likewise, a woman in Atwaedagama, also offering what she saw as evidence that caste is not relevant in contemporary Sri Lanka, pointed to her (low caste) son's employment at a local bank, the kind of job that many in Atwaedagama have historically been barred from having.

[1] In fact, inter-caste marriages in Atwaedagama were rare, and in this respect served more as "exceptions that prove the rule."

She urged me, however, not to broadcast this fact since, were anyone at the bank to learn of his caste background, he could lose his position. Finally, and to give an example of a slightly different variety, a high caste (Goyigama) student researcher who had visited Atwaedagama and written about the village's *hana* industry for her undergraduate degree shared with me that, because of their caste status, artisans there are "backward" and not interested in developing economically. In the same conversation, she criticized these very individuals for what she saw as their preoccupation with money. When she visited them, she explained to me, they refused to cooperate with her study and were only interested in selling her the items they made.

Ultimately, inconsistencies such as these did more than recommend caste-based identification as a topic worthy of anthropological investigation. These phenomena, which, despite my not seeking them out, rose to the surface of the unexpectedly turbulent waters around me, demanded attention to something beyond caste in and of itself. As I demonstrate ethnographically throughout the following chapters, they pointed to caste as prismatic of the practical and ideological entailments of several domains of cultural production that, through their entanglement on the ground of lived experience, condition (and in turn are conditioned by) the lives of the men and women whose voices animate this dissertation. The metaphor of a "prism" is especially fitting here given that, much like white light, caste is largely "invisible" in Sri Lanka. When I say that practices around caste are "prismatic," then, I mean that, much like a prism fans out variable wavelengths of light, they facilitated an analytical parsing out of other cultural forms whose interplay is generally imperceptible. In doing so, then, they not only rendered such forms visible, but also supported an examination of the locally meaningful ways in which they articulate in daily life in Sri Lanka. For instance, they focused analytical attention on and revealed the overlapping force of the institutionalization of a narrative of national heritage in

which caste has no place, a widespread "political discourse of social egalitarianism" (Uyangoda 1999:21) and ideals of democratic citizenship, the operation of neoliberal processes and, finally, the persistence of an ostensibly pre-modern status hierarchy.

In theory, any of the cultural forms that I consider in the following pages might serve for the others the prismatic function that I have assigned to caste. Examining the ideological and practical entailments of democratic citizenship, for instance, draws our attention to the contradictions that arise when this mode of political belonging runs up against the logics that underpin other modes of identification. The same may be said of national patrimony shepherded collectively or of the neoliberal privileging of exchange-value and individuated entrepreneurs.

Why, then, caste? When I first arrived in Sri Lanka, I hired a young woman from Kandy named Shanika to assist me in getting my bearings in Redigama, my initial field-site. In hushed tones and often toward the end of lengthy introductory conversations with village residents about the area or the local weaving industry in which I was interested, our interlocutors, confident that I would not understand, would quietly and almost embarrassedly confide in Shanika that there was "a caste problem" in the village. "*Kiyanna epaa*" ("don't tell her"), they would whisper to her while nodding in my direction. But for the subject matter, the frequency with which these words, "*kiyanna epaa,*" passed by the lips of my informants was almost as comical as it was puzzling. In my second field site of Atwaedagama, concerns with caste, once again urging me to look the other way, almost derailed my research agenda for what we will see would have been the second time. In this way, and in true fashion to the enduring ethnographic fascination with public secrets, caste demanded my notice by demanding that I not notice it.

My decision to follow up on these disclosures of caste was grounded initially in the sense that, as Michael Taussig (following Walter Benjamin) puts it, "truth is not a matter of exposure

which destroys the secret, but a revelation which does justice to it" (Taussig 1999:2). Revealed and just as quickly re-concealed, the bewildering presentation of caste's significance smacked of the theatrics to which anthropologist Kimberly Theidon refers when she writes, "public secrets may be privately known but collectively denied such that the drama of revelation amounts to 'the transgressive uncovering of a secretly familiar'"(2015:S194). My decision to focus on caste was motivated in part by a desire to make sense of this drama—to understand what motivates it, what compromises it, and what it says about life in contemporary Sri Lanka.

Ultimately, however, choosing to write about caste required an uncomfortable reckoning with risks that, given the topic to which I originally addressed myself, I never anticipated having to consider. To call out caste is, at least on the face of it, to do precisely what many of my interlocutors feared I would do. Writing about caste would not only confirm the persistence of something that is generally considered a pre-modern category of identification and is publicly disavowed. As importantly, and especially with consideration of my low caste interlocutors, writing about caste, and more specifically *their* caste, could re-inscribe the social boundary on one side of which they have historically found themselves marginalized. And yet, to not write about caste would be to reaffirm the very real basis for my interlocutors' fears. Indeed, *not* writing about caste would not only reinforce the erroneous notion, implicit in some recent scholarly writing, that Sri Lanka is or soon will be *post*-caste, but would also reproduce a silence that, I argue, is instrumental to the continued marginalization of those historically deemed "low."

To be clear, my central motivation for writing about caste was not to disrupt the continued marginalization of those considered to be low caste. I did not choose to write about caste because I feared that not doing so would reproduce the silence around it. I chose to write about caste because, despite the public silence around caste, the data that I collected demanded

that I attend to the phenomenon. Like the silence itself, they demanded that I do so not from any moral position, but rather from the perspective that, like any other cultural form that is fundamental to the reproduction of society, it must be analyzed to be understood. These data were unique to the place and time of my research. And yet the account that I have built out of them here disrupts any notion that caste somehow emanates from the mostly low caste people with whom I am primarily concerned in the following pages. Through an analysis of the ways in which differently structurally situated individuals reproduce this category of identification in their daily lives, it demonstrates that while it is low caste men and women who may feel the consequences of this reproduction most acutely—and while the burden may fall disproportionately upon them to call out this reproduction—it is not they who are solely responsible for it.

Drawing attention to the place of silence and, more accurately, silence asymmetries, in this co-reproduction of caste, this dissertation adds to a topically and geographically vast body of historical and anthropological literature dealing with the subject of silence in all its methodological and theoretical complexity. Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing The Past: Power and the Production of History* is among the most forceful accounts on the topic; and his conceptualization of "pastness" as "a position," a conceptualization we must also extend to the present and the future, encapsulates the element of interestedness in the story of heritage and caste I tell here (1995:15). To speak to the breadth of globally relevant topics regarding which this dissertation serves as a comparative example, this literature on silence also includes ethnographically grounded analyses of silence as a tool of resistance, as in Himika Bhattacharya's (2009) writing on narratives of violence among women along the Indo-Tibetan border. Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar's (2005) analogous work on silence as a reaction to the

intrusions of academics and other “experts” in the context of traumatic events of violence and oppression is particularly relevant to the argument I will make in Chapter 3. This literature also includes examinations of public silences around racism, as in Christina Sue’s work on state-sponsored silencing of racism in Mexico (2015), where, to gesture toward a state of affairs that will soon ring familiar, “scholars have paid little attention to the sociocultural aspects of Mexican racism” in part because “government officials have declared the nation free of racism and the topic unworthy of discussion” (114). This dissertation also speaks to what anthropologist Pedro Paulo Gomes Pereira, in his work on human rights and HIV in Brazil, calls the “dilemma of silence and voice,” or the hazards of speaking and of remaining silent on the part of both anthropologists and their interlocutors (Pereira 2008:38). Finally, it contributes to the anthropological conceptualization of silences that are “practiced in the absence of explicit coercion or enforcement” but that tend “to be constituted through, and circumscribed by, the political interests of dominant groups” (2000:114), as in the kind of silence Robin Sheriff has termed “cultural censorship.” Such varied methodological and theoretical strands within the literature on silence are taken up in different ways throughout this dissertation.

The audiences that I envision for this dissertation are multiple, but they are comprised first and foremost of scholars (Sri Lankan and otherwise) of Sri Lanka. Anthropologists unfamiliar with Sri Lanka may be disappointed by the absence of any sweeping historical overview of the country, or of a social taxonomy of caste, in the following pages. I would direct readers who desire such material to the abundance of scholarly literature on Sri Lanka in libraries around the world. I expect that this dissertation will be of greater interest to scholars who already have at least some acquaintance with the country. Hoping that the range of ethnographic instances described in the following pages will ring familiar to my Sri Lankans readers, my

primary aim for this text is twofold: that it will not only offer insight into the hitherto largely undocumented micro-politics of caste's reproduction, but also and by consequence that it will compel fellow specialists of the country to question and, where appropriate, resist the persistent scholarly portrayal of caste as destined to fade. By examining practices around caste from multiple vantage points, I intend for the descriptions and arguments I offer here to facilitate appreciation for and prompt scholarly discussion around caste's often subtle and paradox-ridden reproduction in the present. As importantly, and at the risk of being repetitive, I aim for this account to leave no question that this reproduction is not the sole purview of a particular group (high or low caste individuals, for instance), but rather a consequence of boundary work carried out by individuals across structural positions.

Silencing Caste

To make sense of the reluctant disclosures of caste's significance that I encountered early on in Redigama, and to situate the stories that I tell in the following pages, it is useful to begin by sketching, even if only in broad strokes, some of the historical conditions that have helped generate the ambivalence that characterizes concerns with caste among the Sinhalese today. Over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, "caste'" became reified as a category of identification at the same time that it came to be publicly rejected as out of place in a country perceived to be on modernity's doorstep. While states throughout the history of the island we now know as Sri Lanka "made ['caste-like' groups] central to their administrative structures," pre-modern Sinhala did not even have "words that expressed the distinctions found in the English-language categories of 'caste,' 'race,' or even 'religion'" (Rogers 2004b:53; Rogers 1994:13).

From the late 18th to early 19th centuries, a colonial power oriented primarily to the "extraction of tribute" and grounded in "the mercantilist rationality of sovereignty" shifted to a reliance "upon the productivity and consumption of an improving public" (Scott 1999:43-45). In the emergence of a "new political rationality" rooted in liberalist principles, the largely caste-based mode of political hierarchy entailed in *rajakariya* [lit. duty to the king], the pre-colonial administrative foundation of ritual and occupational service to the monarchy, was to be dissolved. In its place, colonial administrators sought to institute "principles of economic authority and distinction…defined by the abstract and self-regulating demands of the market, which operated not on such aggregates as caste but on individuals responding only to the rational or natural pressure of want and self-interest" (Scott 1999:48). In the promotion of its civilizing project in then Ceylon, understanding (and seeking to influence) the island's population emerged as a central undertaking of colonial authority (Scott 1999:44). In the process, however, the various "investigative modalities" (historiographical, ethnological, museological, medical, etc.)(Cohn 1996:5) developed by British administrators to understand and thereby better control the populations they sought to govern led, as they had on the subcontinent's mainland, to a late 19th century "growing self-consciousness about caste" (Blackburn 2010:89). As A.P. Kannangara has argued, a certain "caste consciousness" was in fact heightened during British colonial rule when "what was [formerly] taken for granted became more explicit" (Kannangara 2011:103). In addition, although the essentially feudal governing apparatus to be found in *rajakariya* was officially abolished in 1833, the British continued to pay "due heed" to caste-based hierarchization in the allocation of administrative titles and offices (Jayawardena 2000:161). Into the late 19th century it was "consciously revived and reactivated," and often forcefully so, when colonial administrators realized that, as Governor William Gregory (1872-1877) put it, "'matters

went far more smoothly and efficiently when the native officers were selected from ancient lineage rather than men who, though excellent of character and experience, had risen from the ranks'" (Gunasinghe 2007:48;58; See also Dewasiri 2008 and Jayawardena 2000).[2]

While aspects of caste-based hierarchical authority were reinforced under British rule, however, in the 19th century consolidation of what John Rogers has called a "modern sociology of knowledge," it was race, ethnicity, and nationalism that became central markers of who one is while identification in terms of religion, language, and what is in English referred to as caste acquired an inferior status (Rogers 1994:13).[3] At a moment marked by the ascendance of Victorian racial theory, race was affirmed as the privileged category of identification when it came to representative politics (McGilvray 2008:40; Thiranagama 2011:111; Spencer 1990:8) while caste, now "more hidden from view and spoken about less publicly," was "relegated to the private sphere of home and family" (Jayawardena 2000:161).

Caste did not simply fade quietly from public life, however. Between the late 19th and mid-20th centuries, many voices chimed in to offer justification for and approbation of a largely deliberate and institutional silencing of caste. Even though caste had served as a "primary

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[2] This is not to say that, insofar as colonial administrative and economic policies facilitated a reinforcement or reproduction of caste-based distinction, they necessarily always did so in terms of pre-existing hierarchies. In some instances, as Kumari Jayawadena has argued, transformations associated with both colonial and capitalist practices also "reordered the question of who was 'high' and 'low' in society" (Jayawardena 2000:xxi).

[3] "In South Asian languages," Stirrat notes, "there is no verbal concept semantically identical with 'caste'" (Stirrat 1982:11). As noted in Chapter 2, the term "kulaya" (also sometimes translated as "family") is generally regarded as the closest Sinhala approximation of the Portuguese-derived English term "caste." As Stirrat has also noted with respect to his work in Wellagoda, however, while marked by greater semantic variation than "kulaya" ("related to the idea of 'kind' or 'species' or 'variety," the term "jātiya" is more often used to denote "either racio-linguistic identity (e.g. Sinhalese or Tamil) or religious identity (e.g. Catholic or Buddhist)"), "jātiya" is at times also used in reference to the sort of "hereditary groups" denoted by the English term "caste" (Stirrat 1982:11).

category that was used in all regional censuses" (Silva, Thanges and Sivapragasam 2009:1) until the late 19th century, it was "never enumerated in any of the modern censuses that began in 1871" (Rogers 2004 Caste as a Social Category:72). Caste was omitted, according to the compiler of the 1891 census, because "'it would have led the people to believe it was important, while the 'declared policy' of the government is to disregard it'" (Rogers 2004:72). Arguing that "in no Eastern country…have the barriers of caste been more rapidly pushed aside than in Ceylon," colonial administrator E.B. Denham reported in 1912 that the Ceylon Census did not collect information pertaining to the subject since "caste does not play in Ceylon the important part it does in India" (Denham 1912:177).

The institutionalization of universal suffrage following the recommendations of the Donoughmore Commission in 1931 also foreclosed any possibility of caste figuring explicitly in representational politics.[4] The formation of an "electoral structure which made no concession to 'communal' interests" (De Silva 1981:422-423) was a liberal development with which various "caste associations that had come forward during the Commission sittings" were distinctly unsatisfied (Wickremasinghe 2006:148).[5]

This latter instance of caste's institutional silencing is worth dwelling upon because its consequences help us to appreciate a significant feature of the reproduction of caste-based

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[4] This is not to suggest that concerns with caste have been irrelevant in electoral politics, although the extent of this relevance has been debated over the years (See, for instance, Jiggins (1979), Roberts (1982), and Jayanntha (1992)).

[5] As recounted in a 1928 newspaper report on the Irish Lord Donoughmore and his fellow commissioners' visit to the island, "Wherever these British commissioners went they found themselves bombarded by representatives of the minority communities who told them their interests could be safe only if persons belonging to their particular caste or creed alone sat in the legislative chamber and acted as their spokesmen" (Singh 1982:9). In the end, the author noted, such "appeals had exactly the opposite effect to that which had been desired by the individuals and deputations which made them" (Singh 1982:9).

identification considered in the following pages. Bryce Ryan (1953), generally considered the scholarly authority on caste in Sri Lanka, visualized the distribution of Sinhalese castes as an inverted pyramid. Unlike in India, where the ritually superior castes are occupied by few (Brahmins) and the ritually inferior castes occupied by many (Sudras), Ryan estimated that those who have historically been regarded (though not without contestation) as ritually superior among the Sinhalese, the Goyigama or "cultivators," constituted at least half of the Sinhalese population (Ryan 1953: 95). This ritual superiority has never mapped onto a politically or economically homogeneous Goyigama population, and some have even questioned whether authors writing between the late 17th and early 19th centuries may have included more groups in the caste category "Goyigama" than was warranted given the realities of social distinction on the ground (Dewasiri 2008:193). Nonetheless, and with the institution of universal suffrage, by the early to mid-20th century those who identified as belonging to this "highest and most numerically important Sinhala caste" (Wickremasinghe 2006:149) saw a certain fortification of their political dominance (Farmer 1965:433).

Crucially, then, while caste as a now clearly articulated object of knowledge was often publicly derided as a lamentable anachronism firmly out of place in a "modernizing" Ceylon, the numerical dominance of the Goyigama was consolidated in an electoral advantage. In this context, in other words, caste could not serve as grounds for grievances that might be brought by those ritually inferior minority populations. As we will see in the following chapters, the contradictions that obtain in this liberal development would find expression in the "persistence of caste privilege in the form of castelessness" (Subramanian 2015: 294-295). Today, caste is at times figured as a (backward) feature of *low caste* communities rather than as a category of identification whose significance is reproduced by actors across social strata.

At a moment marked by the promulgation of what historian K.M. De Silva characterized as a "broad impulse towards social welfare" (De Silva 1981:436), public expressions of antipathy toward caste were pointed. Soon after the introduction of universal suffrage, a contributor to *Young Ceylon* gave a fiery statement expressing what she regarded as the mismatch between this supposed archaism (caste) and the liberal currents that defined the present: In "Wither Ceylon," Pearl Jayasundera voiced the egalitarian sentiment underlying support for new policies to ensure equal access to medical care and education, condemning the "caste system" as "the greatest of our social evils" (Jayasundera 1938:71). Jayasundera argued, "with the change in the psychology of the people, the disappearance of the slave mentality, the more liberal education, the advance of progress and the realization of the legal equality of all citizens, the caste system has become obsolete" (Jayasundera 1938:71). Thus declaring her faith in the march of liberal advancement, she called upon her readers to recognize that one "whose great-grandfather was a treacle maker or a goldsmith has just the same opportunities as a descendant of an adigar."[6] "Man," Jayasundera concluded assertively, "is master of his fortune and does not require the prop of a worm-eaten superiority of caste to raise him to a pedestal" (Jayasundera 1938:71). (On the flip side, however, and unlike in India (see p. 3), neither could one use the handicap of caste inferiority to contest his inability to reach that pedestal.)

The "traditional arts" largely referring by this time to productive practices historically associated with caste-based occupations, the notion that caste was impeding such arts' development was also gaining traction. In an article elegiacally titled, "A Heritage in the Dust," K.V.P. Goonatilleke explicitly attributed elements of a purported "decay" in the "rich heritage"

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[6] An *adigar*, or *Adikaarama*, is a Kandyan chief.

of the Sinhalese to "the barriers created by caste" (Goonatilleke 1935:386).[7] In later years, as we will see in Chapter 2, those concerned with the promotion of the "traditional arts" gave further voice to this sentiment and called for such arts to be sanitized of any caste association. Around the time of independence, the "traditional arts and crafts" associated with Kandy acquired force as cultural symbols of an ostensibly homogeneous Sinhalese collectivity. In articulating such industries as foundational elements of a distinctly *national* patrimony whose preservation was essential to staving off the ruinous effects of industrialization and westernization, the scholars who advocated most enthusiastically for their protection and development were keen to strip them of any caste association.

In 1956, a post-World War II moment in which delegates of the still newly created United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) "portrayed world citizenship as the path to world peace, and as a necessary step in the evolution of mankind from

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[7] Notably, Jayasundera and Goonatilleke's opinions on the matter were in striking contrast to that of art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy, to whom it was the capitalistic drive toward profit that had disrupted the "coordination" between parts of a "traditional society" (caste and the arts, namely) that he saw as fitted together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle" (141). Shortly before his passing in 1947, Coomaraswamy penned *The Bugbear of Democracy*, a piece in which he rejected the desirability of the "progress" to which Jayasundera referred. Speaking on behalf of the Ceylonese, Coomaraswamy stressed, "'we do not want the incredible American way of life" (124-125), and argued that the caste system "cannot be judged by concepts of success that govern life in a society organized for overproduction and profit at any price" (2005:147). Observing that "modern civilization is fundamentally a 'racket,'" he questioned the wisdom of the equal opportunity that Jayasundera had celebrated: "Suppose that men were really free to choose their work, and refused to undertake any such uncongenial tasks as, for example, mining, or refused to assume the burdens of public office? Might not a conscription of manpower be needed even in times of peace? That might be worse than the caste system looks even to be" (Coomaraswamy 2005:149). While stressing that he was not an apologist for caste, in delineating "the prejudices that are aroused in every hundred per cent progressive and democratic-egalitarian mind by the (Portuguese) word 'caste,' Coomaraswamy defended the latter against the "bugbear of democracy" by arguing that the "sanctified" status of "traditional arts" on the subcontinent was owed to a correspondence between "the state or [a craftsman's] own ambition" and his "due inheritance," or "that station of life to which it has pleased God to call him" (i.e. caste status)(Coomaraswamy 2005:123;134-135).

tribes to nations" (Sluga 2010:393), contributors to the UNESCO-sponsored Conference on Traditional Cultures in Ceylon deemed caste a thoroughgoing hindrance on the development of "the arts." As University of Peradeniya Lecturer of Education J.E. Jayasuriya put it in calling for a revival of the "indigenous crafts," "an essential condition…seems to be that they should be rooted up from their caste and occupational associations so that they are no longer attributes of a caste or occupation but become related to life at all levels in the community" (Jayasuriya 1956:69). To Jayasuriya, the "survival and development of some of the arts and most of the crafts" necessitated the elimination of the caste-basis of such practices (Pieris 1956:8; Jayasuriya 1956:69). His colleague, University of Ceylon sociologist Ralph Pieris, described caste as, like "magic" and "superstition," a phenomenon with "few defenders now" (Pieris 1956:8). Advocating a strategy by which to generate the "respect" that such artists deserve, and concluding that "ancient prejudice can be removed in democratic conditions," Pieris likewise called for the "removal of the stigma of caste attached to the artist and craftsman" (Pieris 1956:9). As we will see, the vehemence with which such calls were made, though proportionate to the abovementioned silencing of public discussion around caste, did not ensure such removal.

A Resilient Narrative of Caste's Demise

The historical longevity of the notion that caste is out of step with political and economic transformations sweeping across Sri Lanka is an almost ironic indication of the resilience of this perceived archaism. While most of my Sinhalese interlocutors would quietly admit that caste still plays some role in contemporary social life, particularly when it comes to marriage, perhaps the most significant domain in which knowledge about caste is reproduced, almost all would more volubly profess that it is on the decline. It is not only less important than it was "in the past," they would stress, but also (and much like tradition), destined to diminish over time. This

narrative of caste's inevitable waning, as already indicated, is nothing new. Over fifty years ago, in fact, anthropologist Nur Yalman wrote, "In Colombo one is likely to hear that 'caste is no longer very important, and that in any case it is disappearing'" (Yalman 1960:78). More recently, a young officer in the Department of Industrial Enterprise Development put it to me in a conversation about artisans in Atwaedagama:

> Well, it has been 200 years since the king died. That means that it has only been a few generations since then. So, do *you* think that the things that are rooted in them will go away anytime soon? No. It will take around 50 to 100 years. It will probably reduce in another 50 years.

This statement, notable also for its portrayal of caste as a thing "rooted" in low caste individuals, a notion to which I will return in Chapter 3, encapsulates the general attitude that I encountered in my conversations with residents in and around Kandy and Colombo: Caste is a regrettable holdover from an unenlightened past, and as the distance between what is commonly referred to as "the Kings' time" (*raja kaaleya)* and the present expands, and in particular as the economy continues to develop in accordance with liberal market principles, the importance of caste-based identification is fated to diminish.

In general, I encountered assertions such as this as expressions of faith in the ascendance of a market economy in which one's achieved social status trumps her ascribed identity. One of my centrals concerns in the following pages is with the contradictions—at times quite subtle—that point to the articulation between this market economy logic and reinvestments in caste hierarchy. The words of a government officer, a woman who assisted me soon after I arrived in Atwaedagama by providing what she hoped would serve as a historical overview of the area, offer one sense of what this contradiction can look like. Echoing an idea I encountered among almost all of my interlocutors that caste is mismatched to the country's presently developed

economic condition, she noted of caste, or "those things," as she put it, "We must respect them and we must care about them, but I don't approve of them." They are "not relevant in the present society," she added.

To give another example, toward the end of my stay in the country, I was chatting with a gentleman from the census department in Colombo and trying to make sense of the various administrative block names around Atwaedagama. Noting that several of the administrative divisions in the immediate area included Atwaedagama's former name rather than the one by which its residents have known it for decades, I shared off-handedly my understanding that Atwaedagama's name had in fact been changed by President Premadasa many years earlier. Atwaedagama's former name, as we will see, is more closely associated with the low caste status of the area's residents, which is reportedly one reason why Premadasa renamed the village. Suddenly looking up from the census schedule we had been reviewing together, the man adjusted his posture and, fixing his gaze toward me as though to command my attention, explained matter-of-factly that, in the past, there was "a thing called caste" in Sri Lanka, and the people in Atwaedagama performed a caste-based service (mat-weaving) for the king. "But that was in the past," he related seriously, "people don't think about those things now because we have developed and because of our economy." Concluding this diversion by cheerfully boasting of Sri Lanka's "numbers" (its rising GDP) in comparison to those of other countries in the region, he stated confidently, "No, people don't think about that at all." As he bowed his head back down toward the pages on his lap, he gazed blankly at their white edges for some time before adding in a confessional tone, "Well, except in marriage. Even my mother didn't want me to marry a girl from a low caste family."

Such contradictions tell us much about the always-already "indigenized" forms of what Sahlins has called a "new planetary organization of culture": "Unified by the expansion of Western capitalism over recent centuries," Sahlins writes, "the world is also being re-diversified by indigenous adaptations to the global juggernaut" (Sahlins 1999:ix). In keeping with this compelling assessment of global transformation, in the ensuing chapters I read these contradictions not as paradoxes whose resolution lies in what critics have referred to as an "unfolding trajectory of the teleological path of a single [political-economic] rationality" (Scott 1999:43), but as evidence of the very re-diversification to which Sahlins refers.

Scholarly Prognostications of Caste's Demise

While scholarly interest in caste burgeoned between the 1960s and 1980s (Jiggins 1979; Leach 1960; Stirrat 1982; Yalman 1960, 1967, 1989), the topic has since largely fallen out of fashion among social scientists of Sri Lanka as they have redirected their primary attention to questions of national and ethnic identification given urgency by the eruption of civil war. Scholarship on caste in the intervening years has generally not dealt with the contemporary period. In addition, it has tended to highlight upward social mobility among those identified as belonging to certain caste groups, a fact that at least some have argued has "overshadowed the conditions of exclusion and marginality experienced by other caste communities" (Uyangoda 2012:39; See also Kannangara 2011:100). Kumari Jayawardena, for instance, examines how a changing economic landscape over the course of the 19th century not only facilitated the emergence of a commercial-oriented Sri Lankan bourgeoisie that "acted as a class" but also, and in accordance, occasioned unprecedented opportunities for caste mobility among the Kerava (Jayawardena 2000). Relatedly, Kannangara has studied the strategic and "propagandist" practices of "rising non-Goyigamas" to assert caste superiority in 19th and early 20th century

caste disputes (Kannagara 1993). Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri's recent work examines the mid-18th century caste composition of peasant settlements as well as transformations in the dynamics of class and caste mobility under Dutch rule in Western Sri Lanka (Dewasiri 2008). Finally, Michael Roberts has examined how Kerava families rose from social and economic disadvantage to positions of remarkable financial standing by the early 20th century (Roberts 1982).

With the important exception of Tamara Gunasekera, to whose work I will turn momentarily, it has generally been scholars in disciplines other than anthropology, and, notably, a few local scholars in particular, who have spearheaded a scholarly return to questions around contemporary practices of caste-based identification.[8] Political scientist Jayadeva Uyangoda and sociologist Kalinga Tudor Silva are at the forefront of a generally social-justice oriented revival of interest in the topic (Matthews 2004; Silva 2013; Silva, Sivapragasam, & Thanges, 2009; Uyangoda and De Mel 2012). Framing some of the most pertinent questions at hand in terms of caste-based discrimination, these scholars have done much to highlight what sociologist-anthropologist Siri Gamage has described as a "dominant caste syndrome…at the core of the political process and governance" (Gamage 2014).

For his part, Kalinga Tudor Silva has endeavored to confound the notion that "the basis of the explicit primary identity of individuals is shifting from caste to ethnicity" (Silva 1999:201). Rather than arguing a necessary displacement of one category of identification over another, Silva finds it productive to inquire as to why individuals in certain situations might

[8] There are indications that the tide is turning. Signaling the timeliness of this dissertation, Gananath Obeyesekere and other renowned anthropologists of Sri Lanka took up questions around caste at a November 2016 conference on "Caste, Social Justice and Democracy" in Colombo.

"renounce or at least undervalue their caste identity and replace it with a higher order ethnic identity" (Silva 1999:202).

The formulation of "an identity," ethnic, caste, or otherwise, is not amenable to the kind of analysis in which I am interested here. However, I am in full agreement with Silva's argument that a tendency in contemporary Sri Lanka to "look down upon any open expression of caste distinctions" may not amount to an actual "decreased importance of caste" in all spheres of social life (Silva 1999:212). Indeed, as I would argue, such a tendency is elemental to a rhetoric of liberal development that, if it does facilitate them, at least helps conceal the ways in which caste's importance is reproduced. And yet there are those who suggest that, for example, the trend of using "more fashionable names, particularly on the part of those from deprived caste backgrounds" (Silva 1999:210) reflects either caste mobility or a decline in concerns with caste. According to sociologist Amarasiri De Silva, personal and family names "have become increasingly recognized as a marker of an individual's social status in the wider society," the average annual number of name change notifications published in Sinhala newspapers increasing by a factor of nine between 1976 (484) and 1993-1995 (De Silva 1999:81). Roughly seventy-one percent of name changes between 1993 and 1995 were ones in which individuals or families changed names associated with a "'low caste'" status to ones associated with identification as high caste Goyigama or Radala Goyigama (De Silva 1999:82). In his initial writing on the topic, De Silva interpreted this phenomenon as reflecting an actual transformation of status.[9] As he

[9] In his more recent work, De Silva revises his position, writing that it "is not certain if a change of family name indeed changes one's status but, when a whole family changes its name and adopts one of a different caste, it is possible that its caste status also changes" (De Silva 2009:19). While finding that "individuals who changed their names to Goigama-like names comprised a large percentage of the total number of family name changes" in the sample considered, De Silva reports that it cannot be said that "such individuals completely severed their

acknowledges in his more recent work, however, and as Silva seeks to stress by referring to caste as a "'hidden identity,'" the picture is more complicated. I will elaborate upon this complexity in Chapter 3. To offer a preview, one of my research assistants, a young Muslim woman from Kandy, generally lamented contemporary preoccupations with caste among the Sinhalese and often spoke favorably of what she viewed as an overall decline in its significance. One afternoon, however, she related to me with remarkable sympathy the difficulty that the mother of a close Sinhala friend was having in locating a "suitable" (i.e. like-caste) marriage partner for her daughter. Registering an involuntary expression of surprise on my part, she frowned and explained that the phenomenon of name changing presents a vexing challenge—though, significantly, not an insurmountable one—when it comes to ascertaining who others "really are."

To explain the general anthropological and sociological turn away from caste among contemporary Sinhalese as a central topic of consideration entails a degree of conjecture. Though limited in explanatory force, I would argue that we ought not discount the role of an acceptance even among some scholars of the hopeful notion that, "in the context of a modern society…a person who was compelled to be known as a man of low caste [can] now…raise himself in the spheres of educational, economic, political and social status" (Somathilake 1998:358). In other words, caste no longer has the kind of bearing on social life that might warrant our analysis of it. I will return to this notion and its implications momentarily. Here, however, I want to offer a few potentially more definitive explanations for the relative neglect of the topic in contemporary scholarship.

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relationships with their family and kinsfolk in the villages and that they assumed an entirely new caste status" (De Silva 2009:19). In my personal communication with him, Professor De Silva noted that he revised his interpretation of the phenomenon after conducting interviews with individuals who had changed their names.

In the first place, it could simply be that caste has been overshadowed by the arguably more pressing concerns raised by a protracted civil conflict typically understood first and foremost as a matter of ethnic difference.[10] In addition, however, a shift away from considerations of caste in the present might also extend from the public and institutional silence around caste described above. This silence, which may derive fundamentally from a widespread public denial of caste's significance in a modern democracy, manifests most significantly in the absence of any serious reckoning with caste-based discrimination in the country's constitutional framework and a general neglect of the topic in the development of socioeconomic policy (Silva and Hettihewage 2001:63; Uyangoda 1999).

Beyond further suggesting the irrelevance of caste in the present, a general dearth of public or demographic information pertaining to caste has likely also compounded scholarly disinterest over the years. This dearth of information is an artifact of what I have already discussed as a long history of the institutional silencing of caste even while concerns with the status hierarchies to which it refers remained salient. As Rogers notes, while "in practice the British never disregarded caste completely…the normative view that it was undesirable took hold quite quickly among many officials" (2004:640). This view had consequences in terms of the kind of information that was collected and acted upon. Particularly following the Colebrooke-Cameron Commission of 1833, a reform effort heavily shaped by a concern with "universal ideas of political rights, civilization, and progress," "regulations and policies that took

[10] The more than thirty-year war between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) came to a bloody end with the latter's defeat in May 2009, just over four years before I began the core period of fieldwork upon which this dissertation is based.

explicit note of caste were repealed or ignored" (Rogers 2004:639-640).[11] The national census, we will recall, long ago dropped questions regarding caste from its schedule.

The lack of "hard data" resulting from the institutional disregard of caste has disappointed some scholars interested in the topic and may have also dissuaded others from taking caste up as a topic worth investigating. In 1945, for instance, sociologist William H. Gilbert complained that "there are no community surveys including caste data along with other relevant social facts concerning residence, segregation, present occupational activities, incomes, endogamy, and tendencies toward disregard of caste rules" (Gilbert 1953:340). He concluded rather sardonically, "Evidently, the European administrators of Ceylon thought that it was possible to make this social phenomenon disappear by ignoring it" (Gilbert 1953:340; 306). As though responding to Gilbert's somewhat desperate cry that "even a single instance of such a survey would go far toward throwing light on the present social conditions of the Sinhalese castes" (Gilbert 1953:340), Bryce Ryan would publish his seminal *Caste in Modern Ceylon: The Sinhalese System in Transition* (1953), less than a decade later. Over sixty years have since passed, and the data that Ryan presented therein remains the most comprehensive snapshot of the distribution of castes among the Sinhalese (Jabbar 2005:3; Silva and Thanges 2009:13).

Although current anthropologists of Sri Lanka typically give at least some mention of caste in their accounts (Lynch 2007, Gamburd 2000, Hewamanne 2008), writing on the topic in terms of contemporary social life among the Sinhalese is conspicuously limited in relation to that which deals with caste among Tamils (McGilvray 2008; Thiranagama 2011). While it is difficult

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[11] As David Scott (1999) has noted, these reforms, which "led to the unification of the administration of the island, the establishment of executing and legislative councils, judicial reform, the development of capitalist agriculture, and of modern means of communication, education, and the press," have been viewed historiographically as "establish[ing] the definitive moment of the break with [Ceylon's] "medieval" or "feudal" past" (42).

to speak of trends when dealing with such a small body of literature, recent scholarly treatment of the topic is also marked by enduring and implicitly hopeful predictions of caste's demise. Some scholars appear to have gotten caught up in the ultimately linear and deterministic currents that characterize the abovementioned claims that caste is necessarily on the decline. In accounts that otherwise offer nuanced analyses of contemporary social life in Sri Lanka, they demonstrate fealty not only to the claim that, as Wendy Brown puts it in her critique of progressive narratives, "history has reason, purpose, and direction," but also to the notion that "modernity itself…emerged from a more primitive, religious, caste- and kin-bound, in-egalitarian, unemancipated, bloody, unenlightened, and stateless time" (Brown 2001:5-6). Indicating a reluctance to abandon this "structure of progressive expectations for the future" (Donham 2002:244), Sri Lanka anthropologist Bambi Chapin has for example written, "the importance and legitimacy of caste is being eroded throughout Sri Lanka by political and economic development as well as by popular sentiment" (Chapin 2014:29-30). While acknowledging that it is "happening more slowly than is claimed" and that it would therefore be "premature to write [caste's] obituary as some smart town folk are inclined to do," Kannangara nonetheless likewise writes that "[t]he decline of caste continues as it will continue" (Kannangara 2011:111-112). Similarly, in an account that is, like Kannangara's, commendable for drawing attention to the contemporary prevalence of concerns with caste, Bruce Matthews observes that caste, though "still crucial," has "long been challenged by class…as the leading social hierarchical indicator" and is "slowly diminishing in authority" (Matthews 2004:86;98). In his ethnographically grounded work on transformations in ritual practice and knowledge among the Berava in southern Sri Lanka, Bob Simpson has also written of a "progressive backing away from

hereditary, stigmatized occupations among the [Sinhala] lower castes…such that the vestiges of caste-based identity are rapidly being expunged" (Simpson 1997:44).

If the idea of modernity, "in its more optimistic versions," as Webb Keane puts it, tends to encompass the notion of a "rupture from a traditional past, and progress toward a better future" (2007:48), such scholarly anticipations of caste's demise conjure a distinctly modernist cheer of approval. In one sense, it is worth noting here, such anticipations recapitulate the trend of thought against which sociologist Hans-Dieter Evers wrote in the late 1960s. In describing the work of his contemporaries, Evers observed that "traditional Sinhalese institutions and values are depicted as disintegrating under the pressure of various factors of change and only limited attention is paid to institutions which effectively counteract westernization, modernization, and possible change" (Evers 1969:685). Examining a phenomenon Weber dubbed "monastic landlordism," Evers argued that a pre-colonial temple system prevalent around Kandy, enjoying a certain fortification when "reforms abolishing the Kandyan feudal administration in the eighteen-thirties exempted the religious sphere," ended up effectively helping to "maintain the feudal aristocracy" and "perpetuating caste distinctions" in the region (Evers 1969:687;686).

Anthropologists and other social scientists have of course at times been at the vanguard of the almost eager composition of "cultural obituaries" (Herzfeld 2004:60; Berliner 2014).[12] It is to such "obituaries" that Evers addressed himself. While the predominant sentiment around such perceived losses is generally one of urgency or lament, however, the modernist strand of determinism that we observe with respect to caste instead suggests the frustrated sense that those

[12] As David Berliner (2014) has also stressed in his writing on "exonostalgia," to note as much is not intended to "minimize the historical fact that human groups [have been] annihilated" (Berliner 2014: 376). Rather, it is to argue that the familiar trope of "vanishing cultures" has done little justice to the fact of cultural (re)production in societies throughout history.

things that *should* be dead and gone but are not are thoroughly anachronistic in their stubborn persistence. Insofar as it lays bare the shared strand of linear thinking that underpins both sorts of claims, the irony here is noteworthy.

I will return to the implications of this linearity momentarily. First, I want to point out that, to the extent that caste is acknowledged as a salient category of identification in the present, it is formulated not so much in positive terms as an instance of cultural resilience as something "vestigial" (Simpson 1997:440). Recalling the late 19th century anthropological '"doctrine of survivals,'" an evolutionist notion oriented to the "survival of the *un*fit" (Stocking 1968:97), this aspect of the contemporary handling of caste is not new to scholarship on the subcontinent. It resembles something political scientists and India specialists Lloyd and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph described almost fifty years ago. Scholars distinguishing between "modern society" and "traditional society," they observed, envisioned "[features of the latter] as residual categories that have failed to yield, because of some inefficiency in the historical process, to the imperatives of modernization" (Rudolph and Rudolph 1967:4).

Treating caste today as a "residue" in excess of those political and economic processes supposed to obtain in the juggernaut of "modernity" not only encourages a disregard of contemporary practices of caste-based discrimination ("it will soon be a thing of the past, anyway," so the idea goes), but is also deceptive insofar as, in relying upon something like a myth of perpetual demise, it suggests that if we just turn our heads long enough, when we look back we will not see caste at all. The very real implications of such a conceptualization ought not be underestimated. To ascribe to the popular fiction that concerns with caste are somehow destined to diminish as an operation of an all-encompassing logic of history is, I would argue, to be complicit in the reigning silence on the topic in public and political discourse in the country in

general (Uyangoda 1999; See also Moore 1997). As I will argue in the following chapters, this silence, one for which individuals across caste strata are responsible, ensures a definitive if not always obvious place for caste in social life among the Sinhalese.

The critical eye with which Sahlins and others have approached the "postmodern panic about the possibility that anything like 'a culture' actually exists" any longer (Sahlins 1999b:xx), then, also informs the ethnographically grounded skepticism with which I approach contemporary claims of caste's demise in Sri Lanka today. I would elaborate, however, and suggest that there is an instructive resemblance between this explicitly anxious regret over the passing of the so many "cultures" to which Sahlins refers and the implicitly hopeful faith in the disintegration of a category of identification (caste). Although to my knowledge they are not typically brought into focus simultaneously, we ought to recognize how, in both moments of anticipation, the bewildering contingency that obtains in the "ever-changing same" is passed over for the surety afforded by a "future that 'will be'" (Chakrabarty 2000:251). Whether the anticipation for this "to be" is marked by dread on the one hand (as in the loss of culture(s)) or by a forward-looking sense of achievement on the other (as in the societal triumph over a form of institutionalized inequality), it deflects attention to that which *is* in the present as something other and much more than "the dead hand of the past" (Sahlins 1992:21). Put otherwise, anxious regret over expected loss may obfuscate the "resistance of culture" (Sahlins 1999a:412). In the same way, I argue, the implicitly celebratory projections of caste's eventual elimination, a prognostication permitted by the notion of a future that "forms itself in the calculations and desires of the subject of political modernity" (Chakrabarty 2000:251), encourages a neglect of the contemporary reproduction of caste-based identification and the discrimination that may attend it. Examining these latter phenomena is a task far better served by a recognition that, to

borrow from Chakrabarty, the way the "archaic comes into the modern [is] not as a remnant of another time but as something constitutive of the present" (2000:251).

A Present-Day, Anthropological Intervention

Anthropology's distinctive methodological pursuits serve a singular role in the recuperation of caste as a topic worthy of scholarly investigation. Among the anthropologists to explicitly address the topic of caste among the Sinhalese, however, only one, Tamara Gunasekera (1994), has dedicated an ethnographic monograph to an examination of contemporary caste-based hierarchy in light of the widespread "popularization of an egalitarian ethos" (Silva 1999:212). In this respect, the task to which Gunasekera sets herself is a significant counterexample to the abovementioned overstatements of caste's passing. Through an analysis of social stratification during the late 1970s and early 1980s in two Sinhala villages (Rangama and Devideniya) in Kegalle District, Gunasekera seeks to challenge the notion that caste-based hierarchization gave way to class-based antagonism in the second half of the 20th century. Far from promoting a "sense of unity" based on shared class position, she argues, a post-independence reduction in caste-based "privileges and obligations" has in fact and "on the contrary exacerbated class and caste tensions" (Gunasekera 1994:2).

Gunasekera's is a valuable and atypical anthropological effort to explicitly foreground the persistence of caste-based stratification against imaginings of the formation of consciously class-based collectives. There are two major counts on which her approach to caste differs from that which I adopt in the following pages, however. In the first place, Gunasekera sets out to examine "the social structure of caste" and, more specifically, "the determination of the caste groups" and the interaction between them (1994:31). I find the suggestion of pre-existing caste groupings whose identification and hierarchical ordering is the primary task of the anthropologist

to be vulnerable to an essentialism that misses the practices by which social distinctions are reproduced (and never *necessarily* so). In Gunasekera's circular formulation, castes are "groups possessing differential degrees of social honour and prestige," and "[i]n societies where caste is present…social honour and prestige or status accrues to an individual by virtue of his birth in a particular caste" (Gunasekera 1994:7). Caste groups, in other words, are ready-made entities whose hierarchical relationality awaits social scientific documentation.

As we will see in the following chapters, much more work goes into reminding individuals of their proper social (and geographical) place than a formulation such as Gunasekera's would tend to admit. Heeding calls for a nuanced analytical vocabulary that eschews essentialistic "identity" talk in favor of an examination of practices of identification, I do not approach practices of caste-based identification here as evidence of "primordial ties" (Brubaker Cooper's 2001; Shils 1957:134) brought forth into the present. Rather, and in the spirit of Fredrik Barth's seminal and still deeply relevant *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969), my concern is with the on-going and historically contingent reproduction of social boundaries through *practice* (Bourdieu 1977). As Thomas Blom Hansen writes, "[c]aste groups…are not 'out there' as groups *an sich*," but must be "named in public rituals, organized, and reproduced through performative practices" (Hansen 2001:10). Instead of accepting caste status as reducible to the "social honour and prestige" (or lack thereof) accruing "by virtue of [one's] birth," then, I examine the ways in which caste is reproduced as a category of such identification through active boundary-making between individuals whose dissimilarity is not *given,* but *made.* Approached from a point that seeks to avoid both radically essentialist and radically constructivist interpretations, actions that Gunasekera might perceive as reflecting a pre-existing and invariable positionality vis-à-vis others are understood here as constitutive *of* that

positionality. My concern rests with neither the identification of purportedly ready-made groups nor the examination of behaviors that attest to such groups' given separability and hierarchical relationality. My interest is in delineating the locally meaningful and often unpredictable actions (discursive and otherwise) by which historically situated individuals identify with and differentiate themselves from others.

The second and closely related feature of Gunasekera's account that I wish to consider here, an intolerance for ambiguity, surfaces in her discomfort with certain inconsistencies around "native" rankings of caste groups. Gunasekera is committed to the enumeration and proper hierarchical ordering of castes in the area in which she worked, and in particular to the documentation of an order already established in the scholarly literature. This commitment thwarts her instinct to consider one of the more curious mysteries she encountered in Rangama and Devideniya. Facing a point of disagreement with high caste (Goyigama and Walawwe) residents of the area as to the relative positioning of two lower castes, the Gallat and Vahumpura, Gunasekera distinguishes between "subjective ranking" and "objective ranking" to resolve a potentially revelatory moment of contradiction. While pointing out that elsewhere and even by non-high-caste residents in the area, the Gallat are considered superior to the Vahumpura (the "objective view"), Gunasekera reports that high caste residents (Goyigama and Walawwe) and the Vahumpura themselves maintain that, here, the Gallat are in fact inferior (the "subjective view"). The justification given by high caste individuals, as reported by Gunasekera, is that they have always had "a close and trusted relationship" with the Vahumpura (1994:40). Gunasekera argues that this assertion of superiority is at odds with an "objective" ranking in which, according to inter-caste interaction (namely, asymmetrical forms of address and the fact of other low caste individuals' performance of certain caste-based services for the Gallat but not the

Vahumpura), the Gallat enjoy the superior position. Gunasekera offers the example to illustrate the "danger of accepting native models of society uncritically" and concludes that the "behavioral reality" is that the Gallat are superior. The high caste model suggesting otherwise, she argues, amounts to a "distorted view" of social actuality (1994:40).

I am not interested here in questioning Gunasekera's conclusion that, based on the criteria of inter-caste interaction she has privileged as indicating "objective" relative caste status, the Vahumpura are in fact superior. Neither would I dismiss the importance of considering how the representations that people have and make of the world may conflict with or even depart entirely from their actions within it. My concern rests instead with Gunasekera's handling of a local model of social order at odds with her own. Gunasekera chooses to resolve the inconsistency between claims and practice by reducing the former to subjective fancy rather than, as may have been more productive, asking *how*, despite interactional-based indices of Gallat superiority, the high caste residents of Rangama and Devideniya maintain things as otherwise. Unfortunately, we have little more to go on than Gunasekera's postulation of self-interest. She invites us to assume that the village's high caste residents are guilty of an opportunistic declaration of the superiority of the Vahumpura to justify their own "close and trusted relationship" with them. It is unclear whether there is more to the story. One is left wondering whether, out of sheer discomfort with the conflict between this "subjective ranking" and the "objective" criteria that she has selected, Gunasekera has passed up an opportunity to interrogate a locally meaningful logic of hierarchical ordering to leave intact the logic of another. In the end, what presents as a potentially revelatory puzzle is papered over in favor of maintaining the neatness of an abstracted caste hierarchy.

While ranking itself is generally not disputed in Atwaedagama and Redigama, the subject of caste is, as already noted, riddled with contradiction. It is such contradiction—an aspect of the

messiness inherent to social life—that can be occluded by a commitment to the excavation of any putative underlying order or structure. As we will see in Chapters 3 and 4, for instance, it is precisely in the evident inconsistencies characteristic of the practices (including narrative practices) of Atwaedagama "insiders" and "outsiders" that one may observe the effect of forces demanding both indifference toward and allegiance to one's ostensibly proper social and geographical "place." I do not read these ambivalences and contradictions as blemishes on an image of social life whose abundant and objective clarity may be discerned if we just tune out the subjective noise. Rather, this work is carried out in a spirit of scholarship advocated many years ago by R.L. Stirrat. Reflecting on the "somewhat confusing" notions of caste that he encountered in the coastal Catholic Sinhalese village of Wellagoda, Stirrat related, "this confusion is in itself crucial to caste in Wellagoda," and argued that "any attempt to avoid it would…amount to a bowdlerization of the data" (Stirrat 1982:9). The contribution that this dissertation makes to the anthropological literature on caste in Sri Lanka extends from its similar embrace of such contradictions. I do not approach these contradictions as conflicting data points to be reconciled. Rather, and here is the core of my intervention, I approach them as prismatic of the practical and ideological entailments of a range of cultural processes—those pertaining to democratic citizenship, narratives of national heritage, and neoliberalism, for instance—that articulate with one another in unpredictable and locally meaningful ways to condition the lives of the individuals we will meet in the following pages.[13]

Overview of the Chapters

[13] Following Marshall Sahlins (2000), and given that it is as much "constituted and orchestrated by meanings" as is "society," I approach the economic as cultural (2000:17).

Chapter 1 provides an overview of each village and introduces several areas of anthropological significance taken up more extensively in subsequent chapters. Attending to some of the most important features of local socio-economic history in each location, I outline the methodological considerations that guided my investigation and helped determine its objects. Before delving further into the present-day ethnographic material I amassed for this dissertation, in Chapter 2 I present an analysis of mid-20th century efforts around the consolidation of a nationalist conceptualization of heritage and of the contradictions that characterize these efforts. As we will see in subsequent chapters, this consolidation and the tensions found within it continue to animate the work and lives of contemporary artisans. The chapter examines post-independence (1948) calls for the study and promotion of the country's "traditional arts and crafts" (Pieris 1956). It contextualizes these calls in terms of post-independence economic policies oriented in a firmly "statist direction" (Moore 1997:75) and the parallel formulation of an "ethnonationalist conceptualization of 'a deep horizontal comradeship'" (Silva 1999:212) among the country's majority Sinhala population. More specifically, focusing on the University of Ceylon's 1956 UNESCO-sponsored "Conference on Traditional Cultures in Ceylon," it examines two discernible but interwoven nationalistic projects that characterize this early post-independence discursive production of national crafts. The first of these projects is the narrative privileging of Kandyan arts and crafts as uniquely suitable vehicles for national patrimony, an endeavor centrally concerned with distinguishing the "foreign" from the "local." The second project centers on the discernment of the "traditional" from the "non-traditional," a task that, as we will see, involved a careful and ultimately contradictory handling of perceived continuity and change regarding both the "traditional arts" and the individuals responsible for producing them.

The discursive and practical efforts to associate the "traditional arts and crafts" with a homogenized Sinhala national collectivity not only sidelined non-Sinhala artistic traditions, including those of Tamils, I argue, but also continue to have consequence in the lives of the Sinhala craft producers I introduce in later chapters. Consolidating the burden of responsibility for collectively held national heritage production upon Kandyan artisans, these efforts sought to purify craft of caste. Ultimately, however, this conceptualization of a national heritage sanitized of caste has come to serve in caste's reinforcement. In subsequent chapters, my concern shifts to the ways in which aspects of this conceptualization of national heritage articulate today not only with the democratic egalitarianism with which it is more mutually imbricated, but also with neoliberalism and with caste as a meaningful category of identification.

Having explored the tensions that characterized earlier efforts to define the "traditional arts" in Ceylon, in Chapter 3 I examine how Atwaedagama's emergence as a "traditional handicraft village" and site of an industry often regarded as archetypal of Sri Lanka's national heritage, the *hana* industry, intersects with the reproduction of caste-based difference.
Despite the wishes of the early architects of the "traditional arts and crafts" category, what we will see in this chapter is the resilience of a socially reproduced link between the craft as a traditional craft and caste. The chapter focuses on residents' encounters with what they perceive as their humiliating representation as "backward" in popular and scholarly writings in which they figure as exemplars of Sri Lanka's traditional artisans. The first part of that chapter outlines Atwaedagama's 20th century consolidation as an object of scholarly and popular interest, a village that has come to be prized as a place to be studied, documented, and preserved in its ostensibly archaic splendor. Since Coomaraswamy's publication of *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art* in 1907, students, scholars, journalists and filmmakers have rendered accounts in which the village

and the creative work of those who reside there are portrayed as demonstrative of an essential, socio-temporal difference. Until little more than a decade ago residents of the area had little access to such accounts, many of which were intended for an English-speaking readership. Today, however, they are well aware of their portrayal in scholarly and popular accounts that, while arguably intended as celebratory appraisals of Sri Lanka's cultural heritage, re-inscribe that difference and, in the process, ensure these individuals' discursive relegation to a past that they would just as soon rather forget.

Drawing on ethnographic evidence gathered over a ten-month period beginning in May 2014, the second part of the chapter focuses on the area's residents' interpretation of their representation in these contemporary scholarly and popular writings as instances of their acute, public humiliation. In communicating their misgivings toward the scholars, journalists, and students who come to study and write about them, Atwaedagama's residents spin a narrative of collective insult. They criticize the reproduction of a tired tale in which *hana* industry participants are figured as either developmentally stagnant or facing imminent extinction on the doorstep of modernity. However, as I will discuss in the final part of the chapter, these same residents formulate the object of their complaint as a myopic fascination with "old" or "historical" things and, in doing so, reproduce an idea commonly used to delegitimize their concerns in the first place: since caste is a thing of "the past," bearing little force in contemporary Sri Lanka, grievances articulated in its terms cannot be taken seriously. In this respect, they inadvertently collude with the local students, scholars and journalists whose writings they resent. As we will see, in their interpretation of the insult and in the strategy of silence that they adopt to wrest some control over the situation, residents of Atwaedagama

unintentionally contribute to the very social boundary maintenance that they are anxious to overcome.

Chapters 4 and 5 examine how the logics of neoliberalism, democratic citizenship, and nationalist investments in heritage articulate with caste hierarchy in practices around what is referred to locally as "*hana* work" (*hana waeDa*). Paralleling the argument that I develop in Chapter 3, these chapters consider the ways in which the caste-inflected social and geographic boundaries of Atwaedagama are reproduced not only by those who Atwaedagama residents refer to as "outsiders" (*pita minissu*), including government officials and high caste residents in the village's immediate vicinity, but also by village "insiders" for whom such reproduction is often ultimately disadvantageous. On the one hand, as we will see, both insiders and outsiders happily point to the logic of a market economy in which all is reduced to exchange value. On the other hand, conveying the unease to which Simmel's formulation of money as a "frightful leveler" refers (Simmel 1969:52; Simmel 2004), they also reinforce a notion of money as a defensive barrier against intimacies of social proximity that might compromise hierarchical caste distinctions.

More specifically, Chapter 4 focuses on high caste individuals in Atwaedagama's vicinity who perform activities one might reasonably assume to qualify as *hana* work. It examines the ways in which such individuals characterize either the work itself or the circumstances by which they have come to engage in it in a manner that maintains their elevated social distance from their low caste neighbors in Atwaedagama. In examining these efforts, I borrow Weber's notion of negative monopolization, a concept meant to indicate that which occurs when, "in order to maintain its specific way of life, [a] status group must *not* own and manage" certain "special trades" (Weber 1998:191). Working from the assumption that violations of such imperatives

reveal more about the social worlds in which they operate than the rules themselves, I examine what is revealed about local social life and the commitments that undergird it when individuals around Atwaedagama transgress one such boundary of monopolization. In this case, I argue that the tendency for higher caste individuals who engage in *hana* work to characterize their work as they do stems from the local resilience of a tri-partite association between people, work, and place.

Chapter 5 examines how Atwaedagama residents trouble the boundaries distinguishing them from "outsiders" while drawing upon (and thereby reinforcing) the logics of such distinction as they remind one another of their proper social and geographical "place." It highlights, in other words, the subtle ways in which the area's residents reinforce the parameters of caste-based difference according to which the social and geographical boundaries of Atwaedagama are continually redrawn. Issuing pointed moral evaluations of individuals seen as trying to set themselves apart from either their neighbors in the village or from the industry for which the village is known, Atwaedagama residents invoke a conceptualization of money as having an essentially dangerous and disruptive capacity to permit those who have recently acquired it to forget where they come from and who they "truly" are (a phenomenon indexed by the idiom of "hiding the mat"). As we will see once again, in negotiating local behavioral expectations and criteria of moral evaluation, residents of Atwaedagama are impelled toward a complicity in their own social and economic marginalization.

Chapter 6 turns to the village of Redigama, some 30 kilometers east of Atwaeadagama and the site of a recent struggle over the decorative cotton weaving industry known locally by the name *Dumbara rata* (lit. Dumbara designs). The chapter offers a look at the contradictions around caste's reproduction in a place where industry organization and local socio-economic

transformation have resulted in a rather different set of orientations to caste. There, Berava individuals recognized as the industry's traditional heirs face their high caste neighbors-cum-employees' calls for the right to weave *Dumbara rata* textiles independently of the village's Berava-owned workshops. Drawing in locally meaningful ways upon the logics of a market economy, nationalist conceptualizations of heritage, and caste-based difference, individuals on both sides of the struggle over *Dumbara rata* weaving negotiate their relationships to a historically caste-based industry reportedly booming with a rebound in international tourist arrivals since the end of Sri Lanka's civil war in 2009.

In a place where post-war demand for "heritage craft" (Local Artisans 2016) items has burgeoned and where we might expect the eager engagement of those identified as high caste in a traditionally low caste industry to either reflect or prompt a waning of concerns with caste, the chapter examines how the resulting conflict over *Dumbara rata* weaving has presented opportunities for claims of identification along caste lines. While popular associations between a caste-based transmission of knowledge and Sri Lanka's "traditional craft industries" furnish, for some, the ideological moorings of claims of "inherited ability" and descent-based ownership over the industry, for others they motivate a purposeful (neoliberal) articulation of entitlement based upon individual, self-taught skill. While criticizing their high caste neighbors for what they see as a backward preoccupation with their elevated caste status, *Dumbara rata* weaving's recognized low caste heirs invoke caste in defending their right to control the industry. By contrast, their high caste challengers, limited in the terms with which they can assert rights over the industry without compromising their privileged social position, invoke ideals of a modern democratic capitalist state in which national heritage is collectively held and the status of the citizen-consumer trumps the communalism implied by claims to ownership rooted in caste.

Chapter 1
Fieldsites: Atwaedagama and Redigama

Located in the Dumbara valley, a region stretching eastward from Kandy to the Knuckles Mountains, Redigama and Atwaedagama are both home to craft traditions associated with the name Dumbara. While what have come to be called *Dumbara rata*, or Dumbara designs, have historically appeared on items woven in both places, however, the phrase "*Dumbara rata*" is more typically used to refer to the weaving industry of Redigama. Meanwhile, although Atwaedagama is known locally for what are called *Dumbara kalala* (Dumbara mats), the name by which the craft industry (not just weaving) carried out in the village today is commonly known is *hana karmantaya* (*hana* industry). This name refers neither to the village's geographical location nor to the designs that may appear on items produced there, but rather to the plant, *hana,* that residents of the village have used for decades to produce woven mats and other items.

I selected Redigama and Atwaedagama as research sites not so much because of the designs they hold in common, but more primarily because they are locally reputed to be "traditional handicraft villages" (Mudugamuwa 2013). My original objective in each location was to investigate how participants in one corner of Sri Lanka's traditional craft industries understand themselves and their work in the context of an emerging, post-war "economic formation" characterized by "an acceleration of neoliberal development" (Winslow and Woost 2004:97; Kadirgamar 2013, Economic & Political Weekly, "Second Wave of Neoliberalism: Financialization and Crisis in Post-War Sri Lanka"). An investigation into the weavers and weaving traditions of each village, I posited, would inform our understanding of larger order issues pertaining to nationalism, heritage, and patterns of identification that characterize present-

day Sri Lanka. 2013, the year in which I began my fieldwork in earnest, was marked by the hyper-politicization of post-war development and reconciliation. Despite this, I imagined my original research objective to be comparatively non-political. Studying weavers in a part of the country somewhat removed from the trauma wrought by over three decades of civil war, I expected that I would enjoy freedom and ease of access when it came to establishing relationships with and collecting information from artisans and other residents of the areas. As I would discover early on in my fieldwork, I could not have been more wrong. The angle from which I was able to approach each site (and the material things within it) was thoroughly determined by the local political landscape, where the interests and motivations of my would-be informants cropped up like jagged boulders before me and impelled me to go here, not there, to see this, not that, and to talk to this person, not that one. As is often the case among ethnographers, the terms and even the object of my investigation were as much dictated to me as they were of my own choosing. Ultimately, I took this as a positive development that would in the end reveal more of the local world to me on its own terms than I might have seen otherwise.

In navigating the uneven social terrain that I encountered in each field site, I was surprised to find myself adopting orientations to the past and to the things that animate the present in ways I could not have anticipated. To say that I was compelled to don blinders to make progress in my research would not be an exaggeration. In Redigama, for instance, I had originally intended to study all aspects of *Dumbara rata* textile production. *Dumbara rata* textiles are ubiquitous in Colombo and Kandy. They adorn public buildings, private homes, upscale spas, craft stores, and even the offices of Colombo's largest transnational advertising firm, where anthropologist Stephen Kemper found *Dumbara rata* cushion covers to "domesticate the feel of the place" (2001:123). I expected that the attention these items invited in such spheres

would extend to the place where they are produced. Arriving in Redigama amid the abovementioned struggle concerning proprietorship over the local weaving industry (the subject of Chapter 6), however, I found myself having to literally avert my eyes from these material things and even deny interest in *Dumbara rata* weaving to allay suspicion that I might be there to help those on one side of this struggle "steal" the industry. Despite my repeated assurances that, as a student researcher, I did not pose a threat to business, the men and women recognized as *Dumbara rata* weaving's hereditary heirs were suspicious of my interest in their work. Ultimately, and while it was not my original intention, I assured my nervous listeners that I was explicitly *not* interested in the industry or the textiles themselves, but rather in people's lives and histories.

In Atwaedagama, selected similarly because it is the location of an inherited industry, I found myself avoiding an issue about which, thanks in part to my experience in Redigama, I had expected my interlocutors to be especially talkative—their and their industry's history. In this second field site, however, I was urged to profess an interest *only* in "the industry," a category whose sanitization of the "past" and "social context," as we will see in subsequent chapters, is of central concern to the practitioners of the craft for which the village is known. Only later recognizing the broader symbolic consequence of the moment, I vividly recall the surprise I felt on an occasion when a woman proudly unrolled a *hana* wall-hanging woven by her husband and invited me to photograph the item. Sensing that I might also capture her image with my camera, she held the textile up to cover her body before signaling to me that she was ready: "Hari!" ("Okay!"). Negotiating my interlocutors' desire that what they referred to as their "society" and its history not enter the frame of my research, much of my energy in Atwaedagama was exhausted disabusing village residents of the idea that I was there to dredge up "the past" or to

write in ways that might reinforce the caste stigma—a stigma historically conveyed via sartorial or other bodily signs—associated with their productive and artistic activities.

In Atwaedagama, the traces of these things' value as heritage objects, a value readily accrued to them in other spheres, ran up against their capacity to conjure a history of poverty and social marginalization. In certain instances, my examination of a purse or a duster, or my questions about the techniques by which such items were produced, would prompt suspicions that my goal was to tease out this past. By contrast to the situation I encountered in Redigama, however, my expressions of interest in the things at hand—mats, dusters, pencil cases, etc.—were also met at times with what seemed like sighs of relief that my attention had apparently set upon "the industry" and not "the people." Such cases pointed almost explicitly to the "semiotically underdetermined" (Keane 2001:69) quality of things, or what Roland Barthes has referred to as their "wavy meaning" (i.e. their inability to be "sutured in any simplistic way with the 'sociological' or 'political 'reality of any particular historical moment" (Pinney 2005:267). In Atwaedagama, the capacity of things to conjure an unsavory past or a fact about the social condition of their makers seemed amplified in some instances, irrelevant in others. As an anthropologist wholly dependent on her interlocutors, my job included honing a sensitivity to this capacity and adjusting accordingly.

Encountering head-on the truth in Trouillot's trenchant observation that "the past—or, more accurately, pastness—is a position" (1995:15), I was also driven in each field site to bring my research goals into alignment with local temporal orientations. Certain residents of Redigama, for instance, interested in expanding the temporal horizon to establish the legitimacy of their claims to *Dumbara rata* weaving, were keen to talk about the origins of the industry and how the knowledge that it entails had been passed down the generations into their hands. They

were eager to report on aspects of the past that they believed could best explain and defend their present control over the industry and its largely tourism-based growth in recent years. In Atwaedagama, by contrast, I found residents preoccupied with collapsing the temporal horizon to secure a measure of dignity—a form of dignity central to an ideology of democratic egalitarianism (Taylor 1992)—in a place where "the past" is commonly seen as a time of caste-based suffering and impoverishment. There, the avoidance of the past itself emerged as an object worthy of investigation.

To make sense of these contrasting orientations to things and to time and, as importantly, to contextualize the voices of the individuals who embody these orientations in subsequent chapters, a review of these two villages' present situations and their recent histories in terms of broader political economic currents is in order.

Redigama

The Decline of a Local Agricultural Economy

Redigama is in most respects like many of the other villages dotting the floor of the Dumbara Valley in Sri Lanka's Central Province. The village comprises approximately 1,000 acres, including government-owned forest and roughly 200 acres of paddy land. As of 2012, it was home to 120 Sinhala Buddhist families, nearly a quarter of whom qualified as low-income. The village's population is divided among two castes, those identified as Berava, considered a low caste, and those identified as Goyigama, considered the highest of all Sinhalese castes and that to which the majority of Sinhalese have historically been said to belong (Wickremasinghe 2006:149). (As of the last census to account for caste, the Berava were estimated to make up three percent of the Sinhala population (Jabbar 2005).) A small, old temple complex which, according to local lore, once sheltered the sacred tooth relic, is located to the west of the main

road cutting north to south through the village. Most of the houses in Redigama are set back from this main road and concealed by vegetation or line lanes shooting off the road's western edge. A small number of others are tucked under trees across the paddy fields to the east, accessible in some cases only by foot. A one-room cement block structure serves as an office for the local Grama Niladhari (GN), an administrative officer assigned to the village by the government. A small, dark, and largely dilapidated wooden *kade*, or shop, one of two in the village, is situated in a long and otherwise abandoned structure on the eastern side of the road. During my time in Redigama, I often found its owner, a middle-aged woman who worked as a seamstress for a large tailoring business in Colombo before returning to the village, keeping the shop with the assistance of her skinny, orange tabby. Perching himself like a parrot upon her shoulder, he meowed softly at customers purchasing from the minimal collection of soap, tea, and biscuits the woman procured from a grocery in the nearby town of Udadumbara.

Soon after settling into a small home in Udadumbara in 2013, I joined a crowd of men, women and children waiting by a defunct state-owned Sathosa cooperative grocery store, boarded up long ago, and followed their lead as they piled onto a bus headed down into the valley below. Hooking a right at the town clock tower, the driver kept the heavy old vehicle's transmission out of gear as he meandered down a steep and winding road. Laborers in the major re-development of a network of roads in the region, construction workers and their respective "*baases*" (foremen) paused from their arduous work and, wiping sweat from their brows, moved to the side of the narrow road as we passed. As we rolled onto level ground, my belly felt the engine turn as it reluctantly sputtered to life. The predictable onslaught of Sinhala pop music blasting out of the overheard speakers, a ubiquitous feature of bus travel in the country, followed as we wended our way past paddy fields and grazing dairy cows. Minutes later, I stepped off the

bus, my ears ringing, and was struck by the dead calm of my surroundings. In the coming months, I would come to recognize and appreciate the significance of this quietude as an artifact of both an exodus of residents out of Redigama, my destination, and what many report as a lack of sociality among those left behind.

Like most other parts of rural Sri Lanka, Redigama has been dramatically reshaped in the wake of the 1977 implementation of "open economy" policy reforms and the consequent shifting "endowments of land and human capital" (Kumanayake, Estudillo and Otsuka 2014:28). Prior to the late 1970s, residents of the village and surrounding areas enjoyed a local agricultural economy bolstered by government fertilizer subsidies and restrictions on food imports. Today, they live in what has become one of the most economically vulnerable areas of the Mahaweli River basin (Adaptation Fund Board 2012). With trade liberalization intensifying as it did in many parts of the world in the late 1970s, export-oriented industrialization initiatives, the cessation of food and fertilizer subsidies, and the importation of global market-priced fertilizers wrought havoc on the local agricultural economy. While most residents of the village formerly relied upon chena (swidden) and rice cultivation, due to government restrictions concerning the preservation of the biodiversity of the nearby Knuckles Mountains, chena also reportedly began to drop off after the 1980s and ceased entirely within the last decade. As has happened throughout rural Sri Lanka, then, the area's "food self-sufficiency" has steadily eroded (Yamaguchi and Sanker 2007). While per capital GDP has increased since the 1970s, agriculture's contribution to economic growth in Sri Lanka has also steadily declined from 27% in 1980 to 12% in 2009 as industry and service sectors have come to dominate (Kumanayake, Estudillo and Otsuka 2014:28-29). Reporting the already low capacity of their land due to water insecurity, farmers in Redigama note that the 30-35 rice *busal* (bushels)/acre that they are able to

cultivate is dwarfed by the productivity of large-scale agricultural businesses. After accounting for the cost of fertilizer and the support of day laborers, many explained to me, they are simply unable to compete. In fact, the profit one sees after compensating day laborers is so minimal, some related, that several farmers in Redigama often leave their land fallow.

Day laborers who might assist with farmwork are also increasingly hard to recruit. The doubling of internal rural-urban migration between 1996/97 and 2003/04, driven by higher wages in urban industrial and services sectors, has left places like Redigama feeling like ghost villages to those left behind. As far as many of those who remain in Redigama are concerned, and in keeping with the observation that "81% of [internal] migrants [in the early 2000s] were job seekers with better education coming from remote and lagging regions," those who do well in school move away from the village (Kumanayake, Estudillo and Otsuka 2014:31). Seeking employment as teachers, construction workers, hotel employees, and factory workers in and around the island's urban centers, they leave behind farmers who, facing the high cost of fertilizer and the expense of hiring farmhands where they once had the ready support of their neighbors and family members, find it increasingly difficult to farm.

The silence that shocked my senses as I got off the bus in Redigama in 2013 was symptomatic of this decline of the local agricultural economy and the exodus that has accompanied it. It was perhaps also indicative, however, of a reported dissolution of sociality that many in the village associate with the country's development in recent decades. There is a sense that the introduction of amenities like electricity, running water, and pre-packaged foods to replace what was once cultivated locally, in combination with the movement (and periodic return) of residents to more urban areas, has exacted a toll on the physical and collective wellbeing of the village.

This sense of a decline in rural social life is neither new nor unusual. In the early 1990s, political economist Mick Moore reported that, particularly in "the less accessible parts of the Kandyan hills and the Dry Zone," the "rapid spread of public transport, schooling and literacy, and the high levels of extra-village employment and part-time farming imply that there is a core of truth in older villagers' laments about the decline of community" (Moore 1992:35). In a volume in which Jonathan Spencer sensibly cautions that the word "community" is "perhaps better suited to politicians and other practitioners of the discourse of manipulation…than to the sober assessments of social science" (Spencer 1992:385), Moore surmised that, to "the extent that villagers had less external contact and fewer external sources of livelihood and information than they do today, their degree of commitment to their community was greater than it is now" (Moore 1992:35).

In Redigama, the sense that social relations among village residents have suffered with the country's development cuts across the lines of class, caste, age, and gender. Achini, an elderly Berava woman and former weaver who moved to Redigama after marrying a skilled and highly regarded weaver in the village in 1965, explained this transformation to me one afternoon in her son's weaving workshop. Remarking on the incidence of diabetes, high blood pressure, and other maladies plaguing a rising proportion of Sri Lanka's population, Achini related that people ate well, worked in collaboration, and took care of one another in the past. "Now" she noted sadly, "we spend our lives alone because of the development of the country." Tharanga, a Goyigama man in his late 40s and a weaving employee of Achini's nephew, communicated the same sentiment:

> There was no electricity here when we were little. It came later. But that unity between people has broken (*ekemuthukama kiyana eka* gilihuna). We remember how when we were kids, after cutting the harvest in the fields, there were lots of kids playing together.

> But the kids these days don't play like that. They only concentrate on education. In the past, our neighbors would come to our house. We would go to their houses. It was like that in the villages, compared to the towns. That was a great friendship (*sabadiyawa*). That has really declined. With the development of the economy, all those good qualities have been destroyed (*ara arthika diyunu wenne wenne guna dama kiyena ewa pirihila tiyenne*).
> Q: Why do you think that happened?
> The reason is that people are going to the town and they bring things from the town to the village. The town has a boundary wall culture, right [*Nagere are thappe welin wate wechchi sanskruthiyakne thiyenne, needa*]? I think they only get together for funerals. People have that culture in their minds, and they think that signifies wealth [*Ee sanskrutika thamayi minissunge hithete wadila tiyenne posathkama kiyala*]. I mean, people are more concerned about money. Those good qualities [*guna dam*] have disappeared.

Tharanga noted that, in his youth, one would receive a lunch rice packet from one's neighbor when working his fields. Today, he related sorrowfully, laborers bring their own meals. Pointing further to the significance of food in the maintenance of social relations in the village, he offered a poetic anecdote to illustrate the breakdown of the life in unity that he believes the area's residents once enjoyed:

> When one house prepared food they would share a little of it with the neighbors. But now that's disappearing. Try to imagine, one house would prepare oil cakes. When a house prepares the oil cakes, it starts to smell. So, we knew that we would also get the oil cakes in the evening. But now we only enjoy the smell.

Sashika, a Goyigama woman and former employee of one of the village's weaving workshops, echoed Tharanga's reference to urban "wall culture" in remarking on the general changes that she has seen in the village since her childhood. With the introduction of electricity, paved roads, and running water, she explained, "villagers started to live like city people." With that change, she explained:

> The harmony between the families has decreased [*paul paul attera samagiya adduwela*]. The people have started to live their lives on their own [*Minissu tani taniyen jiwatwenna wela*]. That harmony and coordination that was in our fathers' time isn't there anymore [*Apee appachchila ina kaale tiba ekamutukama samagiya daen naeae*]. People are trying

> to live on their own, in a boastful way [*respect eke inda taniyen inna tamayi minissu balanne*]. It's like that now.[14]

Explaining that those who "have abilities use them to get ahead and leave the village," Sashika observed that even the village's children's and sports societies have "wasted away."

Beyond the perceptible and relatively constant quiet, there were other hints that a certain collective dimension of sociality was wanting in Redigama when I arrived in October of 2013. The construction of a public hall, for instance, funded by a grant from the government, had been halted when a dispute broke out over the property on which it was being built. Missing windows and doors, it had been abandoned to a pack of dogs. Those in need of an occasional meeting space, while complaining that the community was incapable of coming together to drive out the dogs and clean up the building, resigned themselves to the use of a dilapidated *ambalama* (resting place) near the shop described above. Once a shelter for pilgrims and travelers along the main road running through the village, razor sharp protrusions along the edges of the old structure's low and nearly rusted out corrugated sheet metal roof threatened the heads of those who dared to step across its threshold.

[14] Many of my interlocutors in both Redigama and Atwaedagama used the English term "respect" (*respect eka*) to convey a prideful arrogance that they associate with others' upward mobility. This term is similar in meaning to the Sinhala term "*adambara,*" generally translated as pride or arrogance (See Clough 2010, p.63), but seems to have a stronger connotation of showing off. "They're trying to show me their respect," for instance, carries the meaning, "They're trying to boast to me." In Sashika use of the term here, it is intended as a negative assessment of others' efforts to live (and to make a show of the fact that they are doing so) independently, as she and others believe people do in cities. The usage is a collective criticism of the trappings of wealth and convenience historically associated with "respectable" persons or, put differently, a critical comment on an apparent bargaining away of coordination and harmony with others in exchange for independent prosperity.

These observations are not intended to reproduce the hackneyed narrative of rural decline rightly criticized by Jonathan Spencer in the early 1990s (Spencer 1992). Neither are they meant to reinforce the romanticized idea of "the village community" (and the notion of that community's dissolution) popular throughout the 20th century in both Europe and Sri Lanka. At the same time, one may speak, as Spencer does, of changes ""in the *texture* of social relations" (Spencer 1992:370), and it is with precisely such changes that I believe Redigama residents like Tharanga and Sashika are concerned.

Figure 1-*Diya kachchi* with *Dumbara* designs. 18th-19th c. Colombo National Museum. Van Geyzel 2008:287, 285.

The Rise of *Dumbara Rata* Weaving

In addition to the decline of the local agricultural economy and the associated changes in social life in the village, there has been another transformation in the area that may also explain the jarring silence I encountered during that early visit to Redigama. In roughly the same period that local agriculture has contracted, Redigama has seen significant growth of the weaving industry for which the village is now known. One indicator of such transformations is the rapidly widening circulation of *Dumbara rata* textiles over the second half of the 20th century. There is evidence that some variation of the textiles now called *Dumbara rata* circulated beyond Redigama between the 17th and 19th centuries (Vangeyzel 2008:53), the area's Berava weavers said to have woven for Kandyan royalty. For example, at least a half-dozen *diya kachchi* and larger rectangular cloths dating from the 18th and 19th centuries and adorned with hallmark Dumbara designs, including *mal paetta*

(flower petals), *mal paeti hatara* (four-petal flowers), *iri kondu* (hair lines), and birds, are held in the collection of the Colombo National Museum (Van Geyzel 2008).[15]

In the early 20th century, *Dumbara rata* textiles were on display at an agricultural exhibition in nearby Kandy. Adorned with cobra, bird, and Bo leaf designs, they were also sold since at least that time at the Kandyan Art Association. Writing with respect to Redigama in particular, in fact, Coomaraswamy noted, "the villagers themselves still use some of the cloth made, but the industry would hardly survive were it not for the demand of *etirili* made through the Kandy Art Association (Coomaraswamy 233-234).[16] In the Association's 1914 price list, "Dumbara cloth," sold at fifteen rupees per six by three foot swath, is categorized under "Miscellaneous" alongside just three other items, including "Dumbara mats" likely manufactured in Atwaedagama.

While *Dumbara rata* textiles circulated to some degree beyond Redigama well before the 20th century, present-day elders in the village report that, prior to the 1960s, the village's low caste Berava weavers, who once wove the textiles on "pit looms" in their homes, primarily sold minimally decorated cotton linens to their neighbors in the immediate vicinity. In the years following Sri Lanka's independence from the British in 1948, a series of nation-wide

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[15] In his *Sinhala English Dictionary* (2010 [1892]), Clough translates *diya-kachchiya* as a "bathing dress" or "small piece of cloth worn around the waist by the cinnamon pealers and cultivators of the ground" (243). In the appendix of his *Sinhalese Folklore Notes*, Arthur Perera described the *diya-kachchiya* as a "coarse cloth bathing dress which it is the duty of the dhobi to supply at the bath" and noted that it "is also called Diyaredi or Diyapiruwata" (1917:vi). Van Geyzel describes it as "an ancillary male garment or undergarment worn while hunting, working in fields or bathing and also by watchmen or guards." The "garment consists," she writes, "of a band or belt worn around the waist with another band passing between the legs and attached to the waistband in front and at the back, often with an elaborate decorated apron in front" (2008:11)

[16] Clough (2010 [1892]) translates *aetirili* as sheets or pieces "of cloth spread upon chairs and other seats out of a respect to a guest" (93).

developments around traditional crafts would help to expand the sale of *Dumbara rata* textiles well beyond the village. In turn, this expansion would set the stage for the conflict that I found in the village, and that would ultimately prompt my somewhat hasty departure from it, in 2013.

As explored in greater detail in Chapter 2, the 1950s saw a concerted and nationalist-driven effort toward the institutionalization of the country's traditional "arts and crafts." The Arts Council of Ceylon, for instance, modeled after Great Britain's Arts Council and incorporated by an act of parliament in 1952, was concerned with reviving the "dormant and neglected culture of the villages" by, among other things, working "to preserve, promote and encourage the development of such arts and crafts as are indigenous to Ceylon" (Bandara 1972:20). While the Arts Council and other interested entities organized exhibitions of handicrafts, by the 1970s there were also several government departments that, oriented explicitly either to poverty alleviation, the promotion of traditional arts, or both, organized or conducted training courses in *Dumbara rata* weaving and other "traditional occupations" (Bandara 1972:20) throughout the island. One weaver reportedly left Redigama in the late 1950s to complete a two-year training sequence at a government weaving training center where, already a skilled weaver of *Dumbara rata* textiles, he learned to also weave saris. By the time the local agricultural economy began to suffer the consequences of the open economy reforms of 1977, a series of training initiatives had also already been carried out in the village itself. In the mid-1970s, for instance, the Department of Small Industries funded the construction of a weaving training school. During the six years of its operation, the school was managed first by an elderly Berava weaver and later by his son, each of whom taught ten primarily high caste students in two-year training sequences. Into the 1990s, the National Craft Council established in 1982 funded smaller training classes in which the

village's low caste weavers provided home-based weaving instruction to their high caste neighbors.

While some private dealers and outlets transacted regularly with weavers in Redigama from the 1970s, the sale of *Dumbara rata* textiles during the period between the early 1900s and the implementation of the "open economy" reforms was dominated primarily by governmental and quasi-governmental organizations like Laksala and the Kandyan Art Association. Since the 1980s, however, *Dumbara rata* textiles have become widely available in private boutiques and crafts shops throughout Kandy and Colombo. In recent years, weavers in Redigama have also received direct commissions from Sri Lankan Airlines, the Colombo Hilton, and from the newly established Academy of Design International Design Campus, a Colombo-based partner of Northumbria University in the UK. Over the last century, then, the primary circulation of *Dumbara rata* textiles has shifted from within and immediately beyond Redigama to an international marketplace.

This liberalization of Redigama's weaving industry has coincided with a transformation in national rhetoric on crafts and a general shift toward emphasis on private enterprise. Insofar as it helps to contextualize the current conflict in Redigama, it is worth deviating momentarily to outline what this shift has looked like. From the early 20th century to the early 1980s, advocates of Sri Lanka's arts and crafts tended to emphasize the responsibility of the government and local buyers to patronize artisans who were figured as anything but "businessmen." The purpose for doing so, so the idea went, was not in the end an economical one. In an early 20th lecture in Ceylon, Ananda Coomaraswamy condemned the Sinhalese for their failure to contribute to a "revival of national art and craft in Ceylon" (1904:22). Noting that they "have certainly made no effort to keep up their crafts," Coomaraswamy lambasted his Kandyan audience for their

unabashed consumption of "the most rubbishly and tawdry of European wares" to the neglect of "your Kandyan mats and brassware and jewelry" (Coomaraswamy 1904:16). To Coomaraswamy, the work of the ideal craftsman was essentially the work of an artist, not a "trader." Any "decorative touch" that a craftsman added to his work came about "almost unconsciously" (Coomaraswamy 1904:2). To Coomaraswamy, such capacity to embellish was something over which "tradition" had given the craftsman "full command," and it was not to be confused with an interest in making a sale (Coomaraswamy 1904:2).

Fifty years later, sociologist Ralph Pieris similarly placed responsibility for a "revival" of traditional crafts with consumers. "From the point of demand," he wrote, "an art is 'dead' only because of the negative attitudes of the people who have no interest in it." One consequence of this "negative attitude" of would-be consumers, he explained, is that "the artist's work declines in quality or quantity of both" (Pieris 1956:3). Raising the question of whether, given "social and economic conditions militating against the continuance of these arts and crafts, they should be rehabilitated," Pieris's colleague, P.E.E. Fernando, stated, "frankly, I must say we can import at cheaper rates articles of comparable utility and artistic merit." Noting, however, that doing so would require one to "take into consideration the artistic heritage that will be lost to the future," Fernando concluded that Ceylon best follow the lead of "Enlightened countries [where] efforts have been made and are being made to revive such traditional arts and crafts" (Fernando 1956:57). Grounding the justification for the "rehabilitation" of arts and crafts in matters of heritage and Enlightenment rather than economic calculation, Fernando argued that the purpose of such rehabilitation should unequivocally not be "to provide more plentiful souvenirs or 'objects of art' to rich people who indulge in the pleasure of collecting museum pieces" (Fernando 1956:57). Pointing to the "weavers of Dumbara," Fernando observed critically, "they

depend mostly for their sales on producing 'souvenirs' for tourists and visitors to carnivals and exhibitions" (Fernando 1956:56).

Anxieties about the influence of monetary concerns on support for the traditional arts and crafts also informed the shaping of the Sri Lanka's National Craft Council and Allied Institutions Act, a piece of legislation intended to comprehensively institutionalize governmental support for the country's crafts and crafts producers. In the parliamentary debates leading to the Act's passage in the early 1980s, Lakshman Jayakody, then a Minister of Parliament and later the Minister of Cultural Affairs, expressed strong reservations about the role that "business" might play in government efforts to "safeguard the arts." "We have to decide whether business should follow the arts, or whether the arts should follow business," Jayakody proclaimed, "and what I have to say is that business should follow the arts" (Hansards of Parliament, August 3, 1982).

The sentiments articulated by Jayakody and others quoted above are by no means entirely absent from present-day conceptualizations of craft in Sri Lanka. At a moment when "liberal state-based regimes of protection of patrimony" around the world have given ground to "marketized relationships which position cultural heritage as a resource" (Coombe and Weiss 2015:43), however, their public expression is often overshadowed by a logic in which it is business and not art leading the way. In important respects, as we shall see, the conflict in Redigama that I examine in Chapter 6 has everything to do with the tension between these logics. Speaking of *laksha* (lacquer-work) and *biralu* (lace), and articulating an approach diametrically opposed to that of Fernando, a government officer quoted at length in Chapter 6 explained to an audience of weavers in Redigama, such "things are our heritage, so we sell them to foreigners." A writer for Laksala, the government-run handicraft sales and marketing outlet that has supported crafts producers since the 1960s, struck a similar tone. In a 2010

organizational report, "The Way Forward," the author writes of the need for "coordinated efforts and enthusiasm from all stakeholders" and stresses the foreign exchange earnings to be gained "by exploiting the rich cultural heritage and wide range of unique crafts Sri Lanka produces" (Laksala 2010:2).

If the goal, however idealistic, of earlier champions of Sri Lanka's "traditional arts and crafts" was to safeguard such spheres of artistic production with little regard for fiscal gain, expressions of this emergent neoliberal approach suggest that the pendulum has more than swung the other way. At an Atwaedagama village meeting attended by officers from the National Craft Council, the Ministry of Traditional Industries and Small Enterprise Development and the local Divisional Secretariat, discussion turned to the scarcity of *hana*, the plant whose fiber is used by the villagers to produce woven wall hangings and other items. When a weaver suggested that the government assist artisans by importing *hana* from India, the Assistant Secretary of the local Divisional Secretariat balked, "People shout at us for bringing unnecessary things from abroad!" When the weaver pointed out that Laksala has begun selling imported items, the exchange suddenly escalated into something more hostile while laying bare the dominance of market considerations: "Yes," the Assistant Secretary agreed, "when they don't get good products from people like you," Laksala will "go for a substitute."

In some ways epitomizing this shift away from an emphasis on state-based protection of patrimony, in much of the marketing material pertaining to crafts production in Sri Lanka today, the figure of the "crafts entrepreneur" has eclipsed that of the "traditional craftsman." Whereas earlier spokesmen like Coomaraswamy and Pieris placed the onus on the buyer, and more specifically, the *Sri Lankan* buyer, to patronize the country's crafts, the discursive emphasis today is on adapting to buyers' desires, or, as Laksala lists first among the organization's "Core

Values," "delighting the customer."[17] In these narratives, a neoliberal rhetoric stressing market flexibility and entrepreneurial skills development on the part of crafts producers has all but displaced emphases on public patronage and consumer obligation found in earlier and more explicitly nationalistic narratives around traditional crafts. Consumers were once charged with responsibility for adapting their tastes to satisfy an expressly non-economic goal of supporting the country's explicitly-not-business-people crafts producers. Now, it is artisans who, urged to become like "neoliberalism's quintessential actor" (Freeman 2007:252; Also Bourdieu 1998 and Harvey 2005), must adapt to the shifting demands of an international consumer base.

In subsequent chapters, I take up contradictions arising out of an articulation between a nationalist conceptualization of heritage preservation—a conceptualization largely consolidated, as I argue in the following chapter, at an early post-independence moment marked by state-centric economic politics—and the logics of a market economy that has gained force in more recent years. As an example of such a contradiction, while some praise artisans for their adherence to "tradition," others condemn them for intransigence and inflexibility when it comes to meeting market demand. As I chatted with one scholar of the "traditional arts" at a café in Colombo one afternoon in 2012, he praised the country's artisans and shared his belief that it was a good thing an anthropologist such as myself had come along. "Everyone has come and worked with the craftsmen, given them designs, and so forth. What those people don't understand is that it's tied to a way of life. All of those craftsmen are deeply tied to the environment and the history." Complaining that, in Colombo, "people don't understand the social rhythms of culture," he explained, "Tradition is where you go to the craftsman and he works at his own pace. This was one of Coomaraswamy's points. The attitude of the traditional

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[17] http://www.laksala.gov.lk/about-us.php. Accessed January 9, 2017.

craftsman is that you come to them." By contrast, in a conversation on creating an upscale "niche market" for handicrafts, a representative from the country's Export Development Board channeled a capitalistic ethos when she stressed to me that the "attitude and mindset of the traditional craftsmen" need to change. Artisans in places like Atwaedagama and Redigama, she explained, need to understand that that they must meet deadlines and adhere to standards.

As national rhetoric around crafts has shifted, craft producers in places like Redigama and Atwaedagama have come to grapple not only with competing representations such as these, but also with other consequences of the same liberal market forces that drove this shift in the first place. Of primacy on this front in both villages are the transformations artisans have experienced both in their roles as makers and sellers and in their relationships to those around them. To return to Redigama, the village's low caste Berava weavers have found themselves increasingly drawn into a marketplace that extends well beyond both the local and largely interpersonal transactions in which previous generations of weavers in the village engaged and the mostly small-scale transactions that characterized their relationships with Laksala and the Kandyan Art Association. At the same time, relations with their high caste Goyigama neighbors have also changed.

To begin to explain the nature of this transformation, an overview of the industry's present set-up in Redigama is in order. There are currently six separately owned and managed home-based weaving workshops, including four run by three brothers and their sister, one run by one of the brothers' adult sons, and one run by a male cousin of these four siblings. There are also several *Dumbara rata* workshops beyond the village owned and managed by close relatives of these six family members. For instance, the cousin mentioned above has a brother who runs a three-employee workshop approximately 130 kilometers to the north. A brother of the adult son operating a workshop in Redigama also keeps a workshop/display room at a government-run

marketing and sales complex, *Apee Gama* ("Our Village"), in Colombo, while his wife weaves in the village. Additionally, the younger brother of the wife of one of the siblings maintains a workshop in Matale, where he reportedly has eight immediate family members who assist him on a regular basis.

In general, these Berava workshop owners call upon members of their immediate families (their spouses or their own children) or other close relatives (spouses of children, for instance) to help only when necessary (when, for instance, they are inundated with orders or, as is the case today, they find their workshops understaffed). While such individuals almost invariably know how to weave, having watched and practiced for as long as they can remember, Redigama's workshop owners seem keen to see their children take up jobs other than weaving. To that end, they have invested in their children's education in ways that would have been impossible not long ago. "Excluded from the formal education system on the grounds of caste" in the 1930s, Berava children continued to face "systemic prejudice in the education system" until at least the 1960s (Simpson 1997:50). Although "school attendance was expected," anthropologist Bob Simpson explains, "it came second to the needs of the informal system of teaching through apprenticeship" (Simpson 1997:50). Things look quite different for Berava children in Redigama today. The daughter of a man regarded as the most successful workshop owner in the village, for instance, attended high school in Kandy, about a 50-minute bus ride away, and is now employed as a civil servant in a nearby government office. Notably, the only English-speaking individuals I encountered in the village were close relatives of the workshop owners. One, a daughter, teaches English and has moved to an area closer to Kandy. Another, a close cousin, is a customs and immigration officer at Katunayake International Airport. Several close male relatives serve in various branches of the military, while other more distant relatives have left the village for jobs

as teachers. As has been the case with the village's high caste residents, many of the village's Berava seem to have moved elsewhere. Most of the Berava men and women who continue to live in Redigama, all of whom are reportedly related to the siblings who run the village's workshops, are or were at one time involved in weaving. Yet even those who intend to remain involved in *Dumbara rata* weaving may not wish to do so as weavers. For instance, the son of the only female workshop owner in Redigama proudly shared with me his intention to attend business school so that he and his sister could start their own weaving business. When I asked whether he planned to weave like his mother, he explained that the point would be that others would do the weaving.

The Origins of Discord and the Anthropologist's Sudden Departure

According to some, the sale of simple household linens (Rs. 50 for a bed sheet, for instance) once brought Redigama's Berava weavers into moments of affable exchange with their high caste neighbors. As *Dumbara rata* textiles have transformed into more precious collectibles (Rs. 1,000 for a cushion cover or Rs. 4,000-8,000 for a wall-hanging, for example) purchased by unknown foreigners and affluent Sri Lankans, such moments of exchange within the village have reportedly vanished. As one Berava weaver put it to me, the village's high caste Goyigama residents can no longer even afford what is produced in the village's weaving workshops. At the same time that business transactions between Redigama's Goyigama and Berava residents have disappeared, however, another context for their meeting has arisen. Faced with economic uncertainty stemming from the contraction of the local agricultural economy, many of the high caste individuals who have remained in Redigama have turned to the village's Berava-owned weaving workshops for employment. Generally, the individuals operating the large floor looms in the Berava weavers' workshops today are high caste and mostly female.

The number of high caste employees in these workshops in Redigama presently ranges from two to around a dozen. This number is reported to have oscillated considerably since peaking in the 1980s when one workshop had 20 employees, more than three times the number it has today. Many report that high caste weavers began quitting the workshops in droves beginning in around 2008, shortly before the country's civil war came to an abrupt and bloody end and right around the time when the government began investing in infrastructure development projects in the region around Redigama. A number of men from the village, including at least one workshop owner, reportedly took jobs on the road construction crews hired by a Korean engineering and construction firm managing a multi-year project in the area. Redigama's high caste residents do not refer to the sudden generation of employment opportunities in explaining the reported exodus of employees out of the workshops, however. Instead, they cite low salaries and the failure of their employers to make required contributions to government-mandated employee retirement funds. When government officers would visit one workshop to check the owners' compliance in this regard, the owner, aware in advance of the date of each visit, would reportedly give his employees the day off so that it would appear as a "family-only" business and therefore qualify as exempt from the mandatory contribution.

Redigama's high caste residents and weavers are also acutely aware of the discrepancy between the prices that *Dumbara rata* textiles fetch in the island's urban centers and the amount that they receive for their labor. Paid per piece, a weaver might for instance earn Rs.100-200 for a day's work weaving a cushion cover that will ultimately sell for approximately Rs.1,000. Such individuals will often credit the greed they believe underlies such discrepancy for driving employees out of the village workshops in recent years. At the same time, the way they discuss this "greed" suggests more than dissatisfaction with salaries. To gesture toward the focus of

Chapter 6, it also suggests a discomfort with a transformation in inter-caste relations that has resulted from the development of *Dumbara rata* weaving. Asked why employees have reportedly fled workshops in recent years, one former employee and current construction worker, Gamini, explained, "Because when they [his Berava neighbors] earn more money, they forget the past. That's the main reason…In terms of caste, they tried to become big people." Gamini and others explained that the Berava workshop owners, in trying to "become big people," had begun offering food and drink to their employees. When the latter refused the attempt at commensality, perceived as an attempt to collapse the hierarchical social distance between them altogether, their employers became angry and had reportedly started speaking to their employees "in a proud way," driving the latter to quit. Epitomizing the orientation to the past that I describe above, Gamini's wife, also a former employee, explained, "Even though we work there, we don't drink tea or eat from their places. Because of that, they're very angry. During the past, during my grandmother's time, they [her family] didn't even let them [the Berava family's ancestors] sit in the chairs, and if they came to speak to our families, they stayed outside and spoke. But now it's changed."

Transformations in the weaving industry and in the local agricultural economy have driven the recalibration of a once established hierarchical relationship between the Berava and their high caste neighbors. I examine what this recalibration has meant in Chapter 6. To situate both the struggle that has unfolded in the village in recent years and my own rather unfortunate research experience there, however, Redigama's high caste weavers have since the 1990s had at least some interest in weaving independently of their low caste employers. When demand for *Dumbara rata* textiles exploded following the end of the war in 2009—around the time residents associate with an exodus of employees out of the village workshops—this interest became much

stronger. Just three years later, the village's high caste residents got what they believed would be their chance to begin weaving independently of their low caste neighbors.

In 2012, shortly after I had visited Redigama to meet with workshop owners and assess the suitability of the area as a potential field-site for my research, a representative from the office of the Divisional Secretariat, Senuri, was tasked with generating a proposal to "develop the status of the villagers and the small industries" of Redigama. With Rs. 10 lakhs (approximately 8,000 USD at the time) allocated for the project by the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, plans were drawn up to renovate an abandoned schoolhouse to be used as a central *Dumbara rata* weaving training and production center for all villagers. When an argument broke out over who would manage the center—the village's high caste residents wanted someone from the government while their low caste neighbors insisted it should be one of the existing (Berava) workshop owners—the Divisional Secretariat reportedly became nervous that the initiative was creating discord and cancelled the project. The bitterness that the ordeal generated was only exacerbated when, just over a year later, the village's high caste residents found another advocate for their right to weave independently in a locally assigned officer from Samurdhi, the government's rural poverty alleviation program.

It was into this environment that I, blissfully unaware, inserted myself in October of 2013. Beyond the disquieting silence I encountered when I got off the bus on that early visit, there were other signs I would soon encounter that all was not quite right in Redigama. While in 2012 several of the village's Berava workshop-owners had welcomed the idea of my returning to the village the following year to carry out my research, I now found their feelings to be quite otherwise. When I called the only female workshop owner in the area, a woman who just a year prior had generously shared her time with me and had even suggested that I stay with her upon

my return, she angrily asked why I could not simply speak to someone else and leave her alone (I ended up staying permanently in Udadumbara town). When, on a phone call with my research assistant, that woman's brother noted that he was too busy at the moment to speak, I said that I planned to be in the area for a long while and would be grateful to speak with him when things had settled down and he had more time. Before abruptly hanging up on my assistant, he told her sternly, "Look, no matter when it is, I'm not going to talk to you all for more than a few minutes."

While others were not so curt, and indeed while several were ultimately very generous with their time, I gathered early on that there was a general suspicion among the Berava workshop owners and their relatives that I was in Redigama as a businesswoman or, worse, as a collaborator with the government. I assured those willing to speak to me that my intentions were neither to open my own *Dumbara rata* weaving "showroom" nor to aid the government in any of its projects to "spread the industry out" to others in the area.[18] Ultimately, however, my words fell on deaf ears, and in January 2013, just four months after I had settled down near Redigama to carry out the research for this dissertation, I was faced with one of those deeply regrettable situations in which the anthropologist realizes that she has unintentionally imperiled the wellbeing of her informants. Several weeks prior, I had accepted the invitation of two weavers—

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[18] The latter suggestion, that I might be collaborating with the government, was ironic. As was likely the experience of other American students and scholars carrying out their research at the height of the "Rajapaksa Regime," the mid-ranking government officials I encountered during my fieldwork regarded me with more than a little suspicion. I arrived in Redigama in 2013 amid the country's preparations to host the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, an event that drew international attention to allegations of human rights violations committed during Sri Lanka's long drawn-out civil war. Coming from the United States, a country that in March 2012 had voted in favor of adopting a resolution to hold Sri Lanka accountable for the investigation of such allegations, I was questioned at length at the local Divisional Secretariat about my presence in the country and the particulars of my research agenda.

a husband and wife, both employees of one of the Berava workshop owners—to dine with them and their adult daughter at their home some distance from the main road passing through the village. Travel being both difficult and dangerous after dark, and darkness falling well before dinnertime, the couple had invited me to spend the night. I happily accepted, and we four spent a pleasant evening chatting, watching television, and enjoying the meal of rice and curry that they had generously prepared. Weeks later, I was shopping for stationary in Udadumbara when a friend of my hosts tapped me on the shoulder and delivered the unwelcome news: the couple, employed as weavers for nearly 20 years, had been fired. Not long after our social gathering at their home, I learned, my hostess, Kiyoma, had delivered the couple's most recently completed order of *Dumbara rata* textiles to their employer, the workshop owner, as she had so many times before. Expecting him to give her the yarn she would need to complete the next order in return, she was surprised to find that he had no intention of doing so. Putting her off with "some excuse," as it was told to me, he sent word soon thereafter that she and her husband were to disassemble and return the loom that he had loaned to them so that they could weave for him while carrying on with their farm work and household chores. A relative of the workshop owners and a neighbor of my hosts had reportedly explained the reason for his dismissal of the couple. Invoking what is locally considered to be a rather disparaging term, she noted that it was because they had "talked to the *suddi*" (white woman). They had talked to *me*.

Soon after this troubling event, my research in Redigama ground to a halt. I had, without any way of anticipating it, stumbled into a place where, thanks to processes set in motion long before my arrival, a contestation over a local weaving industry had come to a head. It is crucial to point out that my presence likely exacerbated the tension brewing beneath the surface in Redigama. I cannot know for sure the extent to which my being there influenced the events that I

observed and write about in the following pages. In the end, however, the consequences of my presence became too much of a distraction both to myself and to those whose lives I had no intention of interrupting, and I decided I had better withdraw from the scene.

Atwaedagama

Following the unfortunate sequence of events that precipitated my departure from Redigama, in April 2014 I turned my attention to Atwaedagama, a village of approximately 300 people about 30 kilometers to the east. Given its relative proximity to Redigama and its similar association with the name *Dumbara rata*, I hoped that selecting this village would facilitate continuity in the research I had already begun. I also hoped and, though it makes me wince to admit it now, fully anticipated that I would not encounter anything like the local dispute that had thwarted my original research plans in Redigama. However, while I did not find the unique difficulties of navigating Redigama's rocky social landscape to be replicated in Atwaedagama, my expectation that all would proceed without incident proved to be a naïve one. I was suspected of being neither a potential business competitor nor an aid to government officials seeking to challenge claims of lineage-based proprietorship over the local weaving industry. I was, however, suspected nonetheless—this time, of having an interest in reproducing a hackneyed historical narrative about the caste-based difference and associated historical destitution of Atwaedagama and its residents.

There is no getting around the fact that Atwaedagama has historically been recognized as a "mono-caste" village, an area populated almost exclusively by persons identified as Kinnara, considered to be one of the two lowest castes among the Sinhalese.[19] As noted above, however,

[19] In the last census to account for caste (1911), Kinnara were estimated to make up .3 percent of the Sinhala population (Jabbar 2005).

much of my energy in the village was spent reassuring people that I was not interested in perpetuating their stigmatization as low caste and essentially socially different from other Sinhalese. As I relate in Chapter 5, one uniquely suspicious informant, Piyumi, stressed that, if I write a book in which I note, “these people are low caste, they only marry each other, they’re poor, they do this job,” it is they who will suffer. Piyumi and others stressed that I should “just focus on the industry” and that the “social context” is irrelevant. Significantly, this advice directly opposes that given by heritage professionals and policy-makers working at national and transnational levels. “Crafts stem from a relationship between humans and their environment within their historical, cultural, and social contexts,” an author writing on behalf of UNESCO tells us, and this “intimate relationship should be understood and respected by designers attempting to develop crafts” (Craft Revival Trust, Artesanías de Colombia S.A. and UNESCO 2005:vi).

By broaching a topic that, as discussed above, is in general publicly silenced, I am arguably facilitating the understanding for which this Craft Revival Trust author calls at the cost of re-inscribing the lines of social distinction that Piyumi and others in Atwaedagama resent. However, I neither see “the industry” or “craft” as isolable from the social relations that produce it nor agree that silence would accomplish the outcome that Piyumi and my other interlocutors desire, for caste’s relevance to simply go away. As I have noted already and as I will argue in subsequent chapters, it is in many respects the silence around caste that has facilitated its perpetuation as a meaningful category of difference in contemporary Sri Lanka. Piyumi suggested that I write a counter-narrative, however, and, in endeavoring to heed the following words of Thomas Blom Hansen, I believe I have done so:

> [T]he task of the social scientist is to produce knowledge and writing that defies ethnic closures by documenting and exploring the richness, diversity, and multivocality of the social world of even the smallest of localities. Good scholarship is usually unsettling to established or widely held ideas, and scholars, to my mind, should strive to make their work as useless as possible for those who promote ethnic closures (2001:17).

While not remaining silent on the topic of caste, I have tried to write in a manner that "defies ethnic closures" or, put otherwise, resists essentializing any terms of identification. My hope is that, in doing so, I have produced, if not the exact counter-narrative that Piyumi envisioned in her request, then at least an account that is "useless" to the reproduction of caste-based difference in Sri Lanka.

Of Population, Plants and *Paeduru*: The Emergence of a Local Market

To situate the concerns of Piyumi and others I encountered in Atwaedagama, and to appreciate how it is that caste-based identification has come to figure differently in the lives of those engaged in the *hana* industry than it does for *Dumbara rata* weavers in Redigama, it helps to highlight some of the ways in which these two villages differ. Two specific points of differentiation serve to orient a discussion of Atwaedagama's situation vis-à-vis broader currents in Sri Lanka's political economy. They also serve a more extended examination of the ways in which caste in and around Atwaedagama articulates with the ideological and practical entailments of neoliberal processes, notions of heritage for the nation, and a long-standing "political discourse of social egalitarianism" (Uyangoda 1999:21).

To begin, whereas the population in the district subdivision in which Redigama is located has steadily decreased with migration to more urban areas in recent years, that in which Atwaedagama is located has skyrocketed. Between 2001 and 2012, Udadumbara, the location of Redigama, was one of only two areas in the Kandy District to see its population decline (the other, Gangawata Korale, the location of the city of Kandy, is the most heavily populated in the

District). Over the same period, Kundasale, where Atwaedagama is located, saw a population increase of 20,805, by far the most significant rise in all of Kandy District.[20]

For those in Atwaedagama, this population explosion has coincided with an abundance of day labor opportunities afforded by housing construction and infrastructure development. Atwaedagama is roughly equidistant between two larger towns at each end of a very busy road. Two significant temples, one belonging to the Ramanya Nikaya (monastic order) and slightly north from Atwaedagama, the other (with which a small temple in the heart of Atwaedagama is affiliated) belonging to the Siyam Nikaya and located in the town at the northern end of the main road, draw considerable traffic.[21] The road, now well-traveled by local buses, motorcycles, three-wheelers, construction lorries, and vans shuttling people from Atwaedagama and surrounding villages to and from their shifts at a nearby garment factory, became increasingly dangerous for pedestrian use in recent years. Just months prior to my arrival, the election of a monk at the temple nearer to Atwaedagama to a senior position in the Order prompted the widening of the road, a development about which all in the area were delighted. The construction of houses along the road for mostly Sinhalese and Muslim families (one of the nearby town boasts a well-attended mosque) was also booming, and the appearance almost overnight of an opulent

[20] The population of the area seeing the second highest growth in Kandy district, Udunuwara, was 11,353 (http://biomassenergy.lk/files/Kandy%20-%20Final%20Report.pdf)
[21] Notably, of these two monastic orders, ordination practices within the Ramanya Nikaya are said to be more flexible as regards caste.

reception hall not far from Atwaedagama attested further to a strong local economy. Hardly a day went by when, walking to and from the room I rented from a young Muslim family in one of these nearby towns, I did not see workers along this road shoveling sand or gravel, laying bricks, or pouring cement foundations for new buildings.

While these developments in Atwaedagama's immediate vicinity and in the region more generally have presented ample casual labor opportunities for men from the village, for those engaged in the village's *hana* industry they have also presented a new challenge: a decline in the availability of *hana*, the large succulent whose fibers, or *kaendi*, are used by artisans in and beyond Atwaedagama to produce a variety of handmade items. While residents of Atwaedagama report that they have always had to travel some distance in collecting the large plant, they are increasingly driven further away from the village to do so (Figure 2).

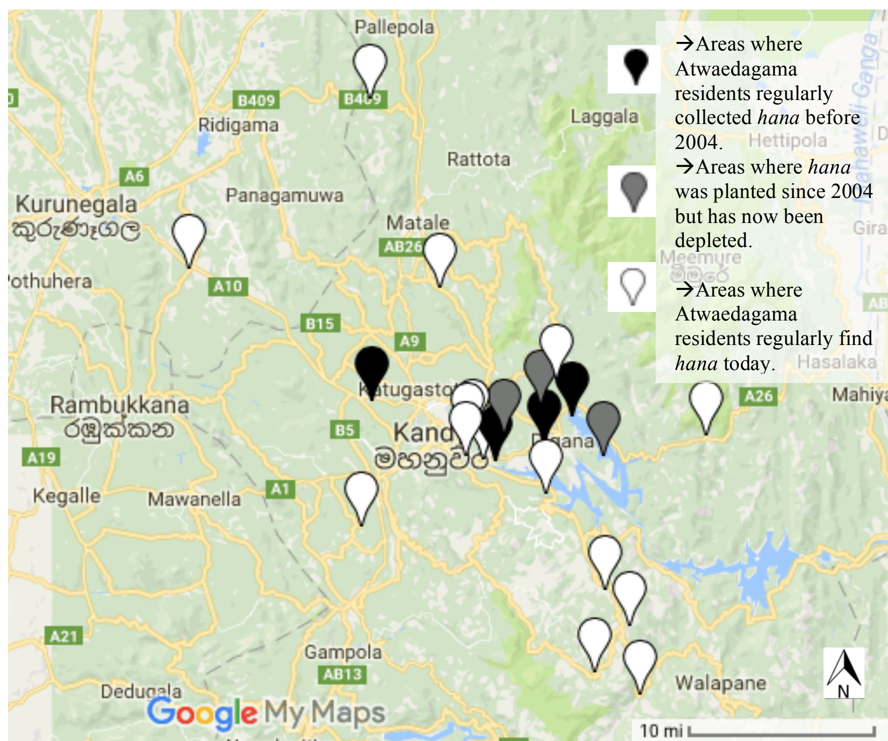

Figure 2-Hana Distribution, 2004-2015. Produced by author using My Map, Google.

The decline in locally available *hana* has driven a degree of collaboration between individuals who had once sought out the plant on their own either by foot or bicycle. Indeed, the distances that Atwaedagama residents must now travel to secure the plant are often so great that they must hire a lorry (due to the plant's thorny edges, they are prohibited from bringing *hana* onto buses) to transport the leaves back to the village. Since the cost for an individual to do so is prohibitively expensive, groups of five to eight individuals will often pool their resources and hire one collectively. After taking the bus to their destination, they will typically cut the plant on temple or government lands. If women are participating, they will generally return by bus while the men will return with their *hana* bundles via lorry.

Figure 3-A letter holder made of *paeduru* and ready-made cloth.

Even after sharing the expense of a driver and fuel, the cost of securing *hana*, which most families who use the material will do at least once or twice per month, is still much greater than it was just over a decade ago. To add to this, as the population density increases throughout the island, Atwaedagama's artisans find themselves increasingly having to venture onto private lands to secure the plant. As we will see in Chapter 5, they are not always welcome in doing so. Many find themselves either having to pay for a plant that was once freely available or, should they attempt to cut it without consent, being chased away by angry and sometimes knife-wielding property owners.

Most in Atwaedagama are willing and able to brave these obstacles, but an increasing number have also begun either supplementing *hana* or, in some cases, replacing it altogether with a cheaper and more readily available material, woven plant fiber mats, known locally simply as *paeduru*, or mats, imported from India.

The shift to *paeduru* began, according to local lore, when a buyer, the owner of a small store in the village of Wewaldeniya, suggested the material as a substitute. Wewaldeniya, after *wewwael,* or "cane," is situated along the main road between Kandy and Colombo and is popular among Sri Lankans and foreigners alike for its abundance of shops selling cane furniture, baskets, and other locally (and, reportedly, in recent years, not so locally) crafted items. Atwaedagama's artisans have found a steady market there for their change purses, pencil cases, and other woven *hana*-based products. In 2009, however, when a shop-owner reportedly discovered that mice had destroyed his stock of *hana* goods, he suggested that they try using *paeduru*. The suggestion, possibly also motivated by the shop-owner's desire to sell *paeduru* mats, resonated with his contacts in Atwaedagama and, in the years since, an increasing number of residents in the area have begun incorporating *paeduru* into their work.

Until about five months prior to our meeting in 2014, Sarath, 65, and his wife, Chandi, 50, had worked exclusively with *hana.* They began using *paeduru* around the time when a woman from a neighboring village who keeps a shop along the main road added the mats to her store of fabrics, glue, cardboard, and other materials that Atwaedagama's artisans now use on a regular basis. One afternoon, I found Sarath seated at his sewing machine in the doorway to his home, his bespectacled eyes straining as he took advantage of the mid-afternoon sunlight to sew zippers onto *paeduru* square cutouts. Glancing up periodically at his daughter's home just yards from his own on the same property (the latter was in Cyprus while her husband, a driver, cared for their two children with the help of Sarath and Chandi), Sarath recounted how he and Chandi had made the switch to *paeduru*. "In our ancestors' time" he explained, "there was *hana everyplace*. It was nearby and we didn't have to go far away. After that, over time, little by little, it disappeared. Little by little, we had to go far away."

For Sarath, at 65, the labor involved in going out to collect *hana* and weaving the mats that are then cut into smaller pieces used to make change purses and other smaller items is significant. We get a sense for what collecting the plant looks like in Chapter 5. Procuring the leaves (*pathu*) is just the beginning of a painstaking process, however. Upon their return to Atwaedagama, the green pulp of each leaf must be scraped away with the sharpened edge of an *albisiya* stick to extract the plant's long, floss-like fibers. The preferred time of day for this particularly strenuous task is the early morning when the air is still cool. The fibers must then be dried, dyed (with a range of mostly synthetic but also some natural pigments), and again left out to dry for several hours. Strewn over broad, black rocks, spread out on rooftops next to heaps of chopped breadfruit, or hanging alongside blouses and sarongs on clothes lines, bunches of natural, black, and, most often, neon-yellow, -green, and -pink *hana* punctuate an already vibrant forested landscape. After being dried, each bunch of *hana* is struck (often with an *albisiya* stick) repeatedly to soften the stiffened fibers. It is then rubbed with a small amount of *ituru tel* (oil leftover from scraping coconuts) and combed with a boar bristle brush for upwards of thirty minutes to separate the strands. Twine is then tied tightly at even intervals along the length of the bunch, which is then hung from a small tripod before the strands, drawn out 10 to 20 at a time, are twisted together to form weft threads for weaving.

Figure 4-A partially woven *hana* mat

Like others whose children have taken advantage of alternative employment opportunities in recent years, Sarath finds it difficult to enlist the help of his sons and daughters in collecting the plant and assisting in this arduous process of preparing the fibers for weaving (which, due to his failing eyesight, he also finds increasingly difficult to do). In addition to his daughter working as a domestic servant in Cyprus, Sarath has two other daughters who have married and moved to a village in Matale, to the northwest. Sarath's two sons, though still living in Atwaedagama, work as three-wheeler drivers and are rarely available to assist.

Sarath finds the switch to *paeduru* to make economic sense. No longer able to weave *hana* mats themselves, he and Chandi would have to purchase them from others in Atwaedagama to keep up with production. The cost of a two by twelve foot (the length of a loom, or *haeda*) striped (*paaten-paaten*) or plain *hana* mat, which takes two to three days to weave (plus another two to three days to gather and prepare all the materials), is typically Rs. 1,200-1,500. For a mat with more complex designs, the cost may range from Rs. 3,000-5,000. The cost of a single four by six foot *paedura*, by contrast, is just Rs. 600.

The income that Atwaedagama's artisans derive from *paeduru*-based items would seem to be comparable to that derived from woven *hana*-based items. The cost of making a small purse may be half as much, for instance, but one will also sell it for half as much. At least some in Atwaedagama explain, however, that, because of the price at the point of sale, *paeduru*-based or partially *paeduru*-based items sell more quickly than those made exclusively of *hana*. "Even if I sold [a *hana* change purse] for Rs. 100," Sarath explained, "it would still be a loss for us, but we can't even sell it at Rs.100. *This* [paeduru] has better business."

I am unable assess the actual economic gains or losses entailed in the substitution of *paeduru* for *hana* mats. While it may be true that *paeduru* "has better business," most in

Atwaedagama today continue to use *hana* even while an increasing number will at least occasionally mix the two together. Some, for instance, will turn to *paeduru* during the monsoon season when collecting *hana* is hindered by the threat of leeches and the difficulties of traveling in the rain and when the processing and drying of *hana* is complicated by sudden downpours throughout the day. Others may use it when those who typically help them in collecting or processing the plant, or to weave for that matter, are unavailable.

To many of the government representatives and Colombo-based designers with whom I spoke in carrying out this research, the substitution of *hana* by *paeduru* is lamentable. Notably, however, it also complicates what many of them regard as the intransigence or unwillingness to adapt that they say characterizes Sri Lanka's artisans. To offer an example, in 2002, Sri Lanka's Export Development Board identified all the country's "traditional crafts" and, in an effort to create a high-end local and tourist "niche" market for the items, began to focus on the introduction of design and entrepreneurial skills training in select villages. Reproducing an image of artisans that, as we will see in Chapter 2, was largely consolidated during the early post-independence period, a senior official involved in the effort explained that artisans in Atwaedagama and Redigama, neither of which were among the villages selected, are especially resistant to change "because [their industry is] handed down from generation to generation" and they are simply doing things the way they have always done them.

A representative from the National Craft Council (NCC) who has worked closely with artisans in Atwaedagama echoed this sentiment following a meeting in the village one morning. In the company some of the more successful individuals mentioned above—individuals who, in addition to manufacturing small purses and other items, tend to be among the few who still weave decorative wall-hangings—he addressed me and my assistant:

> People who are artisans [*shilpi*] and living in villages are the hardest people to develop. It's unlike other villages. *These* people, they have traditional ideas [*sampredayaka adahas*]. [Addressing the men present] I'm not blaming you all, I'm just saying. These are the results that people have gotten through research. Artisans living in villages are *so* unwilling to change…So, some people who have gotten away from these ideas, like you all, are the people who have developed in this industry.

Those who have adhered most closely to what government officials and designers regard as the most "traditional" of *hana* items, decorative woven wall-hangings made exclusively out of *hana*, are also praised, then, for getting away from "traditional ideas" (*sampredayaka adahas*). It is these individuals who, as the NCC officer puts it, have "developed" (or profited most) in this industry. In fact, most of these individuals have always enjoyed a structurally superior position in Atwaedagama. One is the grandson of the village's last headman, recalled locally as the last *duraya*.[22] A skilled weaver of decorative mats, he and several of the others are individuals who were either commissioned or are the children of individuals who were commissioned by an American in the mid-1960s to produce a collection of decorative wall-hangings that, as described in Chapter 3, were later displayed in exhibitions throughout the United States. The benefits of this connection, which positioned these same individuals to profit further from a booming tourist market for their wall-hangings, are not without consequence today. These individuals tend to be the ones who have maintained close business connections with high-end crafts emporia in Colombo and Kandy—shops that, as many in Atwaedagama report, would be loath to accept anything other than *hana*-based goods. Lak Pahana, Laksala, the Academy of Design, and other buyers sell largely to foreigners and affluent Sri Lankans for whom *hana*, a locally sourced natural fiber, is believed to be a marker of the authenticity of these "traditional handicrafts."

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22 As John Rogers notes, "Non-Goyigama headmen were appointed only for non-Goyigama villages. They were called durayas, a term that distinguished them from the *arachchis*, the Goyigama village headmen" (Rogers 2004a:66).

Unlike most of government officials and urban designers with whom I spoke in carrying out this research, most in Atwaedagama look favorably upon the sudden availability of ready-made, imported *paeduru,* a material that they see as serving the same purpose as woven *hana*. Despite their characterization by some as intransigent, many of those who have adopted *paeduru* in fact see themselves as successfully responding and adapting to transformations that are beyond their control. Shifting global political economic currents have translated into an expanding Sri Lankan middle class and a booming local population that, in a very real sense, have rendered *hana* somehow less local than the *paeduru* that one may purchase in the shop down the road. To Sarath, for instance, the incorporation of *paeduru*, or, in his case, its replacing *hana* altogether, demonstrates both a natural progression and an adaptive kind of resilience. When I asked what he made of the transformation, he replied:

> I don't think anything about it. This is what we are left with…Someday soon this will also go away and there won't be any mats to work with. Once the mats disappear, we will find another alternative [*wikalpeya*]. That is how we should learn [*igenaganna one*].

To Sarath, there is nothing remarkable about the shift to *paeduru*. Although he did not mention an arguably comparable earlier shift from a fiber known as *niyanda* to *hana,* to be discussed in Chapter 2, he sees a certain inevitability in the periodic location of alternative materials. There are, however, also those in Atwaedagama who, unlike Sarath, defend the notion that *hana* is more authentic and regard the use of *paeduru* as a regrettable phenomenon. One gentleman, Chaminda, declared in a public meeting, "We cheat people, saying that these are *hana* products when in fact we use substitutes!" In an ironic twist, he suggested to a government officer that, since *hana* is no longer readily available nearby, perhaps the government should import the plant from India. Just prior to the suggestion, the officer had in fact noted that, "as the world develops, we have to use substitutes because there is less natural land." She invoked the importation of

cotton thread and yarn from India as an example. Now, however, she referred to recent public outcries over the country's importation of *kankun* (water spinach) and dismissed Chaminda's suggestion of importing *hana* outright.

The privileging of *hana* as more 'true' than *paeduru* has real implications for those in and around Atwaedagama. High-end crafts emporia are generally unlikely to purchase items that are not (save zippers and trim) made exclusively of *hana.*[23] Government support for artisans in the village is also conditional. When Rs. 75 lakhs were allocated to develop the industry in the village, for instance, weaving *hana* was privileged. While sewing machines were provided for in the original budget for the project, the government officer in charge of its implementation, suspecting that the machines would be used for "other purposes," had removed them. In a public meeting about the project, he noted that it is the individual who weaves *hana* who is the "true artisan [*shilpeya*]": "When we talk about the *Dumbara rata*, we are talking about the 'mats.' Even in this instance, I don't give priority to those who make bags and purses. The *first* person that we all need to protect is the one who weaves the mat."

Significantly, this identification of mat weaving as the work of the *true* artisan cuts another way. To government officers and others working in reference to an idealized, caste-free vision of collective patrimony—a vision that, as we will see in Chapter 2, was largely consolidated in the mid-20th century—it is decorative mat weaving, the work of the "true artisan," that, as an embodiment of national heritage, must be privileged and protected. In nearly every piece of literature that has ever been published on "the Kinnara," however, it is "mat weaving" that is identified as the primary occupation of the caste. As we will see in subsequent

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[23] I did happen upon paeduru-based pencil and change purses at a high-end textile boutique in Colombo. The items, apparently not very popular with the shop's customers, were set off in a corner and had been marked down considerably from their original price.

chapters (where the phrase "hiding the mat" is a significant one), it is also mats and mat weaving that most readily communicate the caste status of those in Atwaedagama. The positive resonances of "national handicrafts" and the negative resonances of "pavement crafts" are

Figure 5- *Hana* wallet purchased from a clothing store in Colombo

complicated by the "semiotically underdetermined" (Keane 2006:69) quality of things. Whatever multiplicity of meanings might animate things at the moment(s) of consumption, at the level of production, the articulation between narratives of national heritage and the persistence of caste-based identification has meant that different elements of what is generally referred to as *hana* work (including working with *paeduru*) have come to carry markedly different semantic loads. As we will see, sewing purses is for instance something that even high caste residents in the village neighboring Atwaedagama may "get away with." While not regarded as the work of the true artisan, and therefore not worthy of government support, in and around Atwaedagama the practice of sewing is also not semantically saturated in the same way that we find mat-weaving to be. It is in part for this reason that one young man,

evidently fearful that I would re-inscribe the lowly caste status of Atwaedagama's residents in my writing about the industry, communicated his disgust for *hana* work and in particular for making dusters. Of sewing, however, he noted, "Yes, *that's* okay."

The tendency to at least supplement if not substitute woven *hana* with the imported mats is significant in part because it indexes broader political economic transformations that Atwaedagama's residents find themselves facing today. Since the 1960s, as noted above, Redigama's *Dumbara rata* weavers have seen the consumer base for their cotton textiles shift from locals to foreigners and affluent Sri Lankans, the rise in the price of their decorative wall-hangings, cushion covers, and other items far exceeding the buying capacity of the average Sri Lankan consumer. Many in Redigama are proud of the fact that *Dumbara rata* items are no longer what they call "pavement crafts." By contrast, over the same period, most of those engaged in the *hana* industry (now a bit of a misnomer) report to have seen their population of buyers shift from a largely foreign and wealthy demographic to a local and less affluent one.

In the late 1950s, Raghavan reported that Dumbara mats woven by the Kinnara constituted a "luxury product" (Handsome Beggars 1957:50). Even plain *hana* or reed-based sleeping mats (*nidaaganna paeduru*), also woven in Atwaedagama until the late 1990s, according to some, did "not command the market and the ready sale" enjoyed by mats woven by others (Handsome Beggards 1957:50). Beginning in the 1960s and 70s, tourist-driven demand reportedly shot up for Dumbara mats, items that were sold by the

Figure 6-Woven *hana* wall-hangings, purses and other items for sale at Colombo's Lak Pahana crafts emporium

Kandyan Art Association as early as 1914.[24] Tourist demand at the time was so great, in fact, that, according to an elderly weaver in the village today, the government sent someone in the 1960s to assist the villagers in organizing a cooperative society through which Laksala could make its purchases and keep up with demand for the items. Nearly everything that the approximately forty individuals who participated in the society made was bought up almost immediately. By 1971, the government had sponsored the construction of a "training center" (*madhyastaaneya*) in which, with support from the Department of Small Industries, residents would learn to weave, or, many having learned already from their parents, practice their weaving technique under the instruction of Lakshman, one of the most skilled weavers in the village.

In recent years, largely foreigner-driven demand for Atwaedagama's wall-hangings has been dwarfed by local demand for smaller and less expensive items thanks to an expanding Sri Lankan middle class. Villagers have also come to rely less upon the patronage of government-run Laksala, an organization that many condemn for being increasingly managed like a private corporation. Lakshman, who retired as the teacher at the local training center in 2003, has not been replaced. Today, in addition to housing several sewing machines for villagers' use, the building serves not primarily as a training space, but as a workspace for those who lack room or suitable lighting at home.

Figure 7-Punya and Eromi prepare weft threads for Renuka as the latter weaves a *hana* mat

[24] We will recall from the preceding section on Redigama that Dumbara mats (sold at Rs.1-2.50) are listed alongside Dumbara cloth in the Kandyan Art Association's 1914 price list.

None of the fifteen individuals (eight men and seven women) who regularly use the center weave there. Utilities for the building, once covered by Laksala, are now paid for by funds these individuals pool together each month for the purpose. Nowadays, almost everyone sells to private businesses rather than to Laksala. Reflecting mournfully on this transformation, the teacher mentioned above related: “In those days, we grew because of Laksala. We even built our house through Laksala. In those days, it was called the Mahagedera [ancestral home or “great house”] of Sri Lankan Handicrafts. They started paying us monthly, and then the payments started coming late, and then it just stopped. Now, most people don’t give to Laksala anymore.”

Village residents report that up until the 1990s, when the cooperative society dissolved after allegations of corruption among its officers and people returned to selling their items privately, busloads of tourists came in search of the area’s famed wall-hangings. In 2014, however, Lakshman related, “I can’t even remember a day when we sold anything to a tourist. It’s mostly Sri Lankans. Teachers and people in the government sector. People like that.” Sarath similarly explained, “In the past, people used to buy things from Laksala. Laksala would sell to foreigners [*sudhu mahatwaru*, lit. white gentlemen or “sirs”] and, in those days, only places like Laksala sold things. But not anymore. Now, there are *so* many people in Sri Lanka who [buy from us].”

Many of my interlocutors in Atwaedagama welcome this shift to a local market as evidence of the strides that Sri Lanka has made in terms of economic development. When I remarked upon the phenomenon to one woman, Renuka, she paused her weaving and, lifting her head, smiled and said, “Because now Sri Lanka is developed, no? Women are working, so they buy these things. See, we even have this new road, and in Kandy they’re making nice tunnels, and escalators—just like in other countries!”

Today, there are fewer than a dozen individuals in Atwaedagama who weave decorative wall-hangings made exclusively out of *hana*. Most but not all of these artisans are men, who, having learned how to weave designs when they were children, continue to sell the comparatively high-priced items to large craft outlets like Laksala and Lak Pahana in Colombo. Several of them, however, have also become successful by virtue of their position in terms of the broader labor organization within the village. Like others, they see profit not in wall-hangings, but in the smaller items that that have come to sell more readily in the local market. Two such households have acquired multiple sewing machines (three in one case, several more in the other) and have enough floor space that they employ others in the area to work on their premises. Others either buy finished purses from or pay a piece rate of around four to six rupees to other residents of Atwaedagama—and, as we will see, to some in neighboring villages—to hand-stitch the edges of woven *hana* or mixed *hana*-and-*paeduru* change purses and pencil cases. One individual, for instance, purchases finished purses at approximately Rs.125 piece from his neighbors before selling them at a markup at large shops or craft exhibitions organized by the government. Another relies on the assistance of four others, all of whom work at their own homes, to help him complete large orders for shops in Kandy and Colombo. A number of young women I came to know regularly sew for several individuals and could often be found doing so as they sat chatting with family, watching television, or visiting with their neighbors as the latter wove or brushed *hana*. On the evening before a large order was due to his neighbor, one man whose family I grew to know well sat on the floor of his poorly lit kitchen and busily put the finishing touches on a collection of purses. His daughter having sewn late into the evening while he finished weaving a mat on the family's loom, he now sat beside a pile of the colorful, striped items, carefully holding a dripping candle to each one as he burnt off stray strands of *hana* fiber.

There are approximately twenty individuals who also weave plain or striped (*paaten-paaten*) mats and sell them to these few wealthier neighbors. The latter, after cutting the mats, will glue a piece of cardboard between the woven *hana* and *kaemberala* (Cambrelle, a nylon fabric) before using a sewing machine to sew cloth piping or zippers along the edges of the pieces and then pay yet another to sew the parts of small purses or pencil cases together by hand. Mohan, who we will meet in Chapter 5, purchases *hana* from others, dyes it himself, and then redistributes it to yet others who will weave the fabric to his specifications and then return it to him. Selling directly to large crafts emporia like Laksala and receiving sizable orders from other businesses (a bank or other organization hosting a conference may, for instance, ask him to produce 500 file covers), he designs the necessary items and, after in some cases using an industrial machine in Kandy to cut the necessary amount of cardboard, will commission others to glue and sew the final products.

Several of these more successful individuals belong to a crafts society (or council) in the village, and in that capacity serve as intermediaries between Atwaedagama artisans and government agencies that have sponsored development projects in the village in recent years. (Notably, this "Society" is reputed to have formed in around 2013 when its leaders learned of a Rs. 75 lakh government-sponsored development project slated for the *hana* industry.) Most in Atwaedagama, whose monthly earnings from *hana* work average Rs. 8,000-10,000, do not wield such economic power, however. Collecting and preparing their own *hana,* and weaving their own mats, families in the village create change purses, pencil cases, "dusters" (also called "fly whisks," or *chaamera*), and letter holders in the shape of "dolls" (*boniko*). Although some who find travel difficult, such as elderly widows who might make dusters, for example, might sell such items to middlemen in the village, others are able to sell directly either to small shops or on

the street in towns throughout the island. While a few women travel to nearby areas to sell the items—one sometimes peddles dusters on the steps of a popular grocery store in Kandy, for instance—most often it is men who travel considerable distances to do so. Said to be "doing business," they take buses to areas all over Sri Lanka and, after spending the day selling on the streets or moving from shop to shop, stay the night in a rented room or at a local temple before returning to Atwaedagama or moving on to another town. "If we had a meter attached to our legs," one young man said of the work, "it would explode!"

Local Boundaries, Global Horizons

There is another significant transformation that Atwaedagama has undergone in recent years that is worth highlighting in this introduction to the village insofar as it helps us to appreciate not only Piyumi's and other area residents' suspicions toward researchers such as myself, but also the efforts to which some in the village go to distance themselves from or downplay their engagement in *hana* work. Even while, by contrast to the situation in Redigama, the international market for their *hana* and *paeduru*-based items has contracted in relation to the local demand that the items enjoy, many in Atwaedagama have in a sense become more international. Since the early 1990s, a high proportion of the village's population, and women in particular, have taken up employment as domestic laborers in the homes of families overseas, primarily in Lebanon, but also in Kuwait, Dubai, Saudi Arabia, Cyprus, Qatar, Israel, and Singapore. According to a former Grama Niladhari for the area, upwards of 75 percent of Atwaedagama's population of adult women have been overseas at some point. I rarely met anyone in the village who did not report to have a close female relative who was abroad. Considering some of the ways in which this phenomenon has shaped Atwaedagama's residents' perceptions of themselves and the world around them can help us to not only make sense of the

wariness and sensitivity with which many of these individuals respond to scholars and students like myself, but also to appreciate why caste as a category of identification presently operates rather differently in Atwaedagama than it does in Redigama.

There is a way in which boundaries seem to dissolve when it comes to talk about work abroad. My interlocutors in Atwaedagama would often use the geographically non-specific phrase “piTa rata” (abroad, or, literally, “outside the country”) when discussing their own or others’ time overseas, indicating a certain irrelevance as to one’s particular destination. Typically, after all, no one intends to *stay* abroad. Similarly, there is a sense in which, after one’s return to Sri Lanka, the social and geopolitical boundaries that carve up this small island seem less relevant. Vimala, 50, owns one of two small *kades* or shops in Atwaedagama. Her father, who had land in the village, brought her and her mother there when Vimala was just two months old. Now a mother of five, Vimala left Sri Lanka for the first time in 1990 when her children were small. Over a period of seven years, she spent time in Lebanon, then Saudi Arabia, and finally Kuwait. Two of her own daughters and one son are now also abroad. Another daughter sews *hana* purses in Atwaedagama while a second son works as a day laborer in housing construction. Sitting in her living room with me, my assistant, and a neighbor, a woman who had never been abroad, Vimala noted how different she found other countries to be and shared her observation that, when one returns home, one sees that everyone is “the same”:

> Now, look at Nuwara Eliya. You’ll see that all the people are the same [as we are]. All are one type. The only difference you might see is in the houses. Now, if you talk about the Sinhala people, we all speak Sinhala. There is no difference. If there is some kind of difference, the only way we would know is…You can’t see a difference…

To Vimala and others with whom I spoke, life abroad facilitates a recognition of the sameness of all Sri Lankans (setting aside the crucial fact that, in these narratives, this “sameness” generally

refers to those Sri Lankans who are *Sinhalese* and *Buddhist*). While Vimala demonstrates some uncertainty toward the end of this observation when she indicates that in fact there *might* be "some kind of difference," even if you can't *see* it, she suggests that, at least ideally, the relevant horizon of difference becomes one that is *national* rather than *sub*-national. The flip side of this recognition is the frustration that boils over when one contrasts the local persistence of social boundaries with what one perceives as the irrelevance of categories of identification, and caste in particular, in other countries. Piyumi, mentioned above, has spent years in Singapore. As I note in Chapter 5, she stressed to me that the "real people" in whose homes she has worked as a domestic servant "don't care about caste." Likewise, Liyoni, 37, spent three years working in Cyprus so that she could build a home for her husband, a bus driver, and her two daughters. In a conversation that I detail further in Chapter 4, Liyoni remarked on what she views as a high caste preoccupation with caste status (though, notably, she never used the word caste, or *kulaya*). "I think this should change because we are all the same people, right? We are Buddhists, we are Sinhalese, we are all the same…Now, in other countries, what I saw is that all are the same people. They don't have a *jati* problem or a religion problem or anything. All people are the same. It's only here. And in India, too, right? In India, we also have it."[25]

In subsequent chapters, I examine the reasons for and mechanics of the boundary maintenance processes that undercut this notion that "we are all the same." Insofar as life abroad has for many in Atwaedagama resulted in a shift in the horizon of differences that (should) make a difference, this transformation may motivate the sentiments that residents of the village have,

[25] Contrary to what one might expect, few of my interlocutors invoked a notion of Buddhist egalitarianism in lamenting caste. Far more common, as the ethnographic material throughout this dissertation makes clear, were invocations of a modern and developed economy premised upon individuated citizen-consumers.

for example, toward their representation in popular and scholarly accounts that accentuate their caste-based distinction from other Sinhalese (the topic of Chapter 3). Juxtaposed to the apparent boundarilessness of life abroad and the unified (Sinhalese, Buddhist) Sri Lanka that becomes, for some, a more salient vision following one's return is the fact that, as the following chapters make clear, in and around Atwaedagama, social and geopolitical boundaries are often vigilantly policed and acutely felt.

Chapter 2
Crafting Tradition

In 2013, a representative of Sri Lanka’s National Craft Council (NCC) held a meeting in Atwaedagama’s Handicraft Training Center to discuss the government-sponsored distribution of work huts to artisans in the village. The budget for the project, pitched as part of an initiative to “strengthen traditional handicraft villages” and thereby promote a “cultural revival” in the country, had originally also provided for the distribution of sewing machines. By the time the project was implemented, however, the NCC had struck these from the plan. Although many in attendance at the meeting regard them as increasingly essential to their productive involvement in the industry for which Atwaedagama is known, the machines were deemed superfluous to the traditional industry that the NCC was interested in supporting. Pointing at a Singer sewing machine at the back of the room and then at a handloom nearer to himself, the representative who had organized the meeting admonished his disappointed audience, “the main requirement for this industry is not that *machine; the main factor in this* traditional *industry is* this *machine, the one that is used to weave the* mat*.” Proceeding to the next item on the agenda, the construction of the work huts themselves, the question was raised as to whether the structures could be improved upon by recipients. Acknowledging that the project would provide materials for the work hut’s roof, floor, and pillars alone, the NCC officer replied, “Yes, you can even put up walls.” When a middle-aged man eagerly queried, “Can we use wattle and daub?” the representative gave a laugh and asked him in reply, “What, in* this *day and age you want to use wattle and daub?” “If you use cement blocks, that would be nice,*” *he explained, adding before the meeting concluded, “We can’t always harp on the traditional and just stay there and become stale.”*

Identified as “traditional handicraft” producers in rural Kandy, the men and women with whom I am concerned in this dissertation bear something of a double burden. Charged with the (re)production of heritage claimed for the nation, they are compelled toward faithful adherence to an ever-shifting conceptualization of a tradition whose parameters are, in the end, arbitrarily defined. Subsequent chapters explore how this burden (and the contradictions that it entails) manifests in the lives of contemporary artisans. This chapter examines how this legacy was consolidated in the years immediately following Sri Lanka’s political independence in 1948 when the task of identifying “the traditional” and truly “national” became central in efforts to preserve, protect, and develop what are typically referred to as the “traditional handicraft industries.” More specifically, it centers on the analysis of a compilation of papers presented at the University of Ceylon’s 1956 “Conference on Traditional Cultures in Ceylon,” a gathering prompted by UNESCO at a time when the organization had begun a concerted campaign toward the “protection of cultural heritage” as a central means of promoting “mutual understanding between nations’” (Blake 2000:61). Important elements of the discourse instantiated in these papers continue to reverberate in some of the most current Sri Lankan scholarship on what is today popularly referred to as “traditional knowledge (TK) and traditional cultural expressions (TCE).” Situating the conference in terms of broader ideological currents of early to mid-20th century Ceylon, I examine the tensions and contradictions that arise out of two discernible but interwoven projects that preoccupied the conference’s participants. These projects continue to influence the lives of the contemporary artisans with whom I am more generally concerned in this dissertation. As is the case with respect to the paradoxical practices (discursive and otherwise) of contemporary artisans and others considered in subsequent chapters, these tensions and contradictions signal points of articulation between ideological and practical entailments of,

among other things, a liberal market economy, caste-based hierarchy, and democratic egalitarianism.

"Virtually all nationalisms," Herzfeld reminds us, "are centrally concerned with purity and pollution," and the flavor of nationalism that we encounter in these papers is no exception (Herzfeld 1997:71). The two projects preoccupying contributors to this 1956 gathering of scholars at the University of Ceylon are perhaps best conceived of as efforts at purification. Responding to the supposed juggernauts of Industrialization and Westernization, the authors of the papers considered here were centrally concerned with the identification of a national heritage that could effectively channel the spirit of a resilient (and only newly independent) country. The first project entailed in this effort was the discursive sanitization of "the local" of "the foreign." Contributors to the 1956 conference engaged in the selective privileging of particular things and people as archetypal of the artistic and cultural heritage of the nation. As we will see, their narrative handling of "traditional arts and crafts," or "traditional cultures," as they were identified at the meeting, contributed to the privileging of a particular (Sinhala, Kandyan, Buddhist) form of identification at an early post-independence moment when, to quote Stanley Tambiah, "the voicing of…nationalist-Sinhalese-Buddhist claims reached a crescendo" (1986:70).

The second project in which these conference participants engaged involved sanitizing the traditional-as-preservation-worthy of the non-traditional, or the traditional-as-antiquated. Put otherwise, it entailed articulating those traces of the past that, deemed palatable in a modern democratic present, allow the nation to "express its historicity at the same time that it…declare[s] its novelty, its freedom from History" (Duara 1995:30-31). While establishing a thread of historical continuity such that the antiquity of the "traditional cultures" could be

established, conference participants also advocated for the elimination of those things that, while apparently accessory to that antiquity, they regarded as anachronistic. Among these things that were seen to exist in but not properly belong to the present, caste was foremost.

If, to the extent that it succeeded, the first project reinforced the sense that it is *Kandyan* artisans who are ultimately responsible for the reproduction of national heritage and thereby consolidated the burden of such responsibility borne by the men and women we meet in subsequent chapters, the second project had its own consequences. As we will see in examining the contradictions that attend it, this latter effort not only figured artisans as largely incapable of determining what things from "the past" are acceptable in the present (handlooms and mud walls, for instance), but also reinforced a notion that, to the extent that caste-based identification has *not* been relegated to the past, continues to have implications for contemporary artisans: figured as averse to change, it is low caste individuals who are often portrayed as "clinging" to caste while the (majority high caste) world around them is ready to move on.

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The 1956 conference at the University of Ceylon was convened by UNESCO as part of a pan-Asia initiative to address the question of how, as one contributor put it, the "traditional cultures can be saved from industrialization" (Wijesekera 1956:18). That Sinhala nationalist sentiment and an ideological rejoinder to industrialization would converge on "traditional art and crafts" was in some respects over-determined in the moment. In the first place, an understanding of craft as the obvious and natural foil to modern industry was far from unprecedented in Ceylon. "[D]uring much of the colonial period," Pfaffenberger argues, "[native Sri Lankan arts and industries] were viewed as only pale and pathetic imitations of their much more sophisticated Indian counterparts" (Pfaffenberger 1993:347). In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, however,

the mostly British planters in control of the country's agricultural economic formation opposed investments in urban industry, and a new idealized vision of (rural) arts and crafts came to serve a purpose. Advocating investments in coconut, rubber, and tea, these planters cultivated a "profoundly bucolic ethos" both conducive to and augmented by an idealized discursive construction of small-scale "village industries" (Pfaffenberger 1993:352). As part of its ambitious Rubber Exhibition held in Kandy in 1906, for instance, the Ceylon Agricultural Society, founded by Ceylon Governor Sir Henry Blake in 1904, sponsored the first ever "exhibition of arts and crafts representative of the whole Island" (Wright 1907:307; Willis, Bamber & Denham 1906:226). In his remarks at the exhibition's opening ceremony, Governor Blake called his audience's attention to the structure within which they had convened, reflecting, "this beautifully decorated building has been erected simply by the labour of the ordinary Kandyan villager, without the assistance of an architect, without the drawing of a plan" (Willis et al. 1906:16). The building "arose as if by magic," he added, and declared that he knew "of no country in which by the work of the ordinary villager without professional assistance anything like this could have been accomplished." The effect of exhibiting this and other "gratifying evidence of the artistic feeling of the Kandyan people," he hoped aloud, would go a long way toward "stimulating the revival of village industries that add so much to the comfort and the interest of a rural population" (Willis et al. 1906:16).

Ananda Coomaraswamy, who had been charged with managing the Arts and Crafts exhibition for the Ceylon Agricultural Society, leveled a more pointed and forceful critique of industrialization in the handbook he authored to accompany the displays. Organizers of the Rubber Exhibition praised in general the "conservatism of the Kandyan," whose architectural and artistic productions reportedly "expressed their national art and religion in the form

consecrated for them by ages" (Willis et al. 1906:7). Coomaraswamy's vision for the Arts and Crafts exhibition went a step further. Displaying "craftsmen actually at work," the exhibition was intended to convey the "real advantages of handwork" over the "establishment of factories with all of their attendant evils" (Anonymous 1906:11).

At a moment when British administrators like E.B. Denham reported an "unprecedented increase" in the import of foreign and, namely, British goods (Jayawardena 2000:131-132), the exhibition was for Coomaraswamy not just an add-on to the agricultural showcase that served as its backdrop. Rather, it was an extension of a campaign against industrialization and, more specifically, a reigning desire for "machine made European goods" with which it was popularly believed Sinhalese crafts could not compete (Coomaraswamy 1904:15). Not long before the rubber exhibition, Coomaraswamy gave a lecture at the nearby Kandy Town Hall in which he not only reminded his audience, "[t]he Sinhalese have always been an essentially agricultural people," but also lamented the degradation and in some cases complete "perishment" of Sinhalese "arts and crafts" due to their "contact with commercial and utilitarian ideals" (1904:1-2). Denouncing what he viewed as the deplorable accumulation of "useless luxuries" and the most "tawdry of European wares," Coomaraswamy sharply admonished the Sinhalese for making "no effort to keep up their crafts" by patronizing the local manufacturers of mats, brassware, and jewelry. To an essentialized image of "men who take only a pecuniary interest in the productions of their factories" (1904:17), he juxtaposed an equally one-dimensional representation of a Sinhalese craftsman who was "in no hurry and never I think worked over hard or over anxiously," making "things well and handsomely and certainly with no lack of care and honesty" (Coomaraswamy 1904:2). To Coomaraswamy, Sinhalese purchasers bore ultimate responsibility for shielding local artisans from the devastation wrought by the "long arm of

commerce," a threat he found in the increasing reliance upon imported aniline dyes in local textile production.

Ironically, Coomaraswamy's distinctly nationalist and romantic valorization of tradition accorded with the "bucolic ethos" (Pfaffenberger 1993:352) that colonial British planters were articulating at around the same time in resisting industrializing activities that would have interrupted the flow of profits in agriculture. His romanticized vision of the arts and crafts would also come to serve centrally in the anti-Western sentiment given full expression in the 1956 conference papers considered here. It is important to note that there was no political movement leading up to Sri Lanka's independence from the British in 1948. In large part, this had to do with the fact that the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie that emerged over the course of the 19th century was, as Kumari Jayawardena has described it, a "dependent" class—or a class whose "creation and continued existence was based on protection and opportunities provided by the colonial state" (Jayawardena 2000:vii). Failing to "attain that maturity and autonomy which was the hallmark of the bourgeoisie in countries where a development of industrial capitalism took place" (Jayawardena 2000:vii-viii), this class never amounted to the actively anti-imperial force which had in India helped to prompt a political independence movement. The emergence of overtly nationalist sentiments in early 20th century Ceylon was associated not with a mass political struggle against imperial rule, then, but with movements that were explicitly "cultural-revivalist" in nature (Silva 1999:202; Spencer et al. 1990). The "whole ethos of assimilation and collaboration" associated with an "Anglicized elite" during the mid-19th to early 20th centuries helped to initiate "processes of resistance based on notions of cultural revivalism" (Jayawardena 2000:248-9). The Ceylon Social Reform Society founded by Coomaraswamy in 1905, for

instance, was more concerned with “cultural and moral rather than directly political or constitutional” reform (Brown and Coomaraswamy 1999:70).

The early 20th century discursive construction of craft as foil to not only industrialization but also the Anglicization associated with British imports thus gained a certain momentum in the decades leading up to independence and the 1956 conference. By the 1930s and 1940s, some of the most incisive expressions of antipathy toward “the West(ern)” saw in “Ceylonese arts and crafts” a barometric gauge for the strength of the nation. Soon after it published an article explicitly calling for a “Cultural Regeneration of the Sinhalese” (Gurusinghe 1936), for example, the journal *Young Ceylon* published a piece titled, “Soul of Lanka in Peril,” in which the author, after lamenting that the adoption of “Western manners, customs, and mode of life” was effectively “destroy[ing] the soul of the nation,” pointed to the “comforting revelation…that there is a gradual realization that imitation does not pay and that there is a slow revival in the interest in Ceylonese arts and crafts” (Pathmanabha 1940:60).

Interest in such a revival culminated with the University of Ceylon’s conference on “traditional cultures” in March 1956. The real work entailed therein was a matter not so much of revival, per se, however, but more fundamentally of fashioning what Duara has called a “narrative of discent,” or a narrative that, in altering how the “boundaries of [a] community” are viewed, places certain “persons and groups associated with objects, acts, and ideas,” to invoke Williams, “at both a pragmatic and an ideological disadvantage” (Duara 1995:65; Williams 1989:435). The concept of discent encapsulates the two primary projects that conference participants undertook, the first, we’ll recall, having to do with privileged difference, the second with the assertion of continuity with or inheritance from the past. Now, it would be misleading to suggest that the intention on the part of the conference participants was to contribute to the

practices of ethnic polarization that would soon engulf Sri Lanka in violence. As legal scholar Janet Blake points out, however, “the identification of cultural heritage is itself a political act” (Blake 2000:68). In this respect, the effort to devise an agenda around the mitigation of what conference participants viewed as industrialization’s tenaciously homogenizing effects—its attempt, as one phrased it, to reduce society to “one standardized drab pattern” (Wijesekera 1956:19)— reinforced conceptual and practical bases for exclusionary processes of identification that helped sustain (and in turn be sustained by) the country’s thirty-plus-year inter-ethnic conflict. The reason for this is that the answer to industrialization, formulated as merely a contemporary instance of the change “humanity [has] always feared,” required an agenda centered on the articulation of something that, if not directly opposed to change, served at least superficially as its conceptual other (Wijesekera 1956:18). But if “tradition,” the something to which conference participants turned, was to somehow counter or ultimately evade the forces of industrialization, then the issue was a matter of not only discerning the social and geographic parameters of that tradition, but also of establishing its continuity with the past while admitting the transformation (and degradation) that necessitated its “revival.” In the following pages, I examine how conference participants tackled each of these tasks. In doing so, I consider how the narratives of discent that they articulated were carefully fashioned in terms of historically salient social distinctions (foreign/local, urban/rural, elite/common) such that the links between certain forms of identification (Sinhala as Buddhist as Ceylonese) were naturalized while others (Tamil as Ceylonese) were muted if not rendered wholly unthinkable. While marginalizing people and practices deemed non-Sinhala, such narratives also served to consolidate a central feature of the burden now born by Sinhala artisans in Kandy to produce heritage for a nation in which they too face marginalization as “low caste.”

The Elevation of Kandy

Fredrik Barth once observed how "much of the activity of political innovators is concerned with the codification of idioms," or "the selection of signals for identity and the assertion of value for these cultural diacritica, and the suppression or denial of relevance for other cultural differentiae" (Barth 1969:35). In this section, I will examine how scholars contributing to the conference on Traditional Cultures in Ceylon deployed a variety of rhetorical strategies by which, through the selective nomination of objects and people (Kandyan, Sinhalese) as insignia of "the nation," they accomplished precisely such codification. Before doing so, however, and to appreciate the broader implications of this codification, I want to begin by sketching a few key features of the moment in which the conference occurred. As Frederick Cooper argues, "the 'political fiction' of the nation…can crystallize, at certain moments, as a powerful compelling reality" (Cooper 2005:63). Understanding how the "fiction" of national craft as rural, traditional and Sinhalese came to be requires at least a superficial understanding of the landscape against which the legacy of "traditional handicrafts" was consolidated.

There are of course a vast number of details that one could amass to capture how social and political currents sweeping through Ceylon when the conference was held would have lent not only a particular significance to the papers presented therein, but also a particular salience to the ideas that the conference participants voiced. In addition to marking the 2500th anniversary of the Buddha Jayanthi (the birthday of Lord Buddha), the year of the conference, 1956, was also one in which Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike was carried to electoral victory by "a wave of Buddhist nationalism" (Spencer 1990: 2). Following the passage of legislation to make Sinhala the official language of the country, this nationalist sentiment fueled (and was further fueled by) communal rioting between Tamils and the Sinhalese majority (Spencer 1990: 2).

A tumultuous economy compounded the antagonisms, increasingly understood in ethno-linguistic terms, plaguing newly independent Ceylon. Despite a short-lived Korean War boom in economy from 1950 to 1951, the years between independence (1948) and the conference (1956) were characterized by rising unemployment and increasing financial pressure due largely to "sub-imperialist" policies that, under the guise of market liberalism, continued to maintain British colonial economic interests after independence (Pfaffenberger 1993:351). Emerging in its newly independent form as a "dependent economy" (Tambiah 1986: 83), Ceylon was a country whose importation of roughly 66 percent of its grains (Moore 1989: 185-186) and whose "traditional patterns of export of cash crops such as tea, rubber, and coconut [were] reducing it to a peripheral status under conditions of worsening terms of trade" (Tambiah 1986: 83).

Paving the way for what is commonly known as The Sinhala Only Act (officially the Official Language Act), grievances around rising unemployment converged with a general realization that "a minority elite of less than 10% of the population practically ruled the country and monopolized the prestigious occupations on the basis of its knowledge of and education in the English language" (Tambiah 1986:73-74). Given its relationship to educational and occupational access and achievement, language had itself come to be viewed as "an economic issue" (Jayawardena 1985:64). Debate surged over which of the mother tongues, Tamil or Sinhala, should take the place of English as the national language. With Bandaranaike's election in the year of the conference, the country not only settled on the latter with the passage of the Sinhala Only Act, but also saw the reversal of the liberal market policies that the ruling party had continued when it took over government control from the British. A long period (until 1977) of expressly "statist, anti-capitalist economic policies" began under Bandaranaike's leadership (Moore 1997:62). By this time, Chauvinist Sinhala Buddhist propaganda, which focused in prior

iterations on “alien bureaucrats, traders and workers said to be denying the Sinhalese their just rights and opportunities for trade and employment,” was “rediscovering” that it was not the British but rather the Sri Lankan Tamils who were the “‘traditional enemy’ of the Sinhalese” (Jayawardena 1985:59). As we will see shortly, the narrative of craft consolidated at this moment became something of a pivot in this “rediscovery.”

The conference was therefore held at a highly charged economic and political moment. Bearing these features of this broader moment in mind as we proceed, it is useful to begin by highlighting that the event’s title suggested a socially and geographically expansive consideration of “Traditional Cultures in Ceylon,” a potentially promising sign at a time when ethnic tensions were running high. And yet, reproducing a pervasive understanding of the region as the last holdout against colonial rule and by extension the culturally unadulterated heartland of the Sinhalese (Pieris 1956:17,2)—an understanding of great consequence at the moment—in the context of the meeting “culture” was semantically “restricted to the traditional arts and crafts, with special reference to the Kandyan provinces.”[26]

Echoing those earlier anxieties associated with Sinhala Buddhist nationalism about the danger posed by the “Christianising” influence of British administrators and other foreigners (Jayawardena 1985:59), most contributors to the 1956 conference took the opportunity in the papers they presented to vent anxieties concerning the distinction between the foreign and the local. Reminiscent of what Abigail McGowan describes as the late 19th and early 20th century

[26] Little over a decade later, in her inimitable survey of The Kandyan Kingdom, Lorna Srimathie Dewaraja reinforces and helps us to appreciate the reasoning for this understanding of Kandy as the site of pure Sinhalese artistic traditions. By the close of the eighteenth century, she writes, “Kandy had become a definite cultural zone with its own art and architecture, arts and crafts, dance and music. Any form of artistic expression that has survived in Sinhala society today owes its origin to or has derived inspiration from Kandy” (1972: 9).

“slippage” in India between “crafts” and “national culture and history” rendering the threat of the Western influence on the former all the more “worrisome,” discerning the “purely indigenous” art and craft forms from those believed to be contaminated by “the foreign” was a central undertaking of the occasion (McGowan 2009:105). In accordance with the popular sentiment that helped to bring Prime Minister Bandaranaike into office that year, it was the threat of all things European, and things English in particular, to which many of the participating scholars directed themselves.

Signaling his dismay over a recent trend to render ersatz “nineteenth century European water-colours” in temples where one once found “the ‘old-fashioned’ traditional murals,” for instance, sociologist Ralph Pieris asserted in his contribution to the conference that there is “ample evidence of external influence and uncritical innovation giving rise to artistic distortion and deterioration” (Pieris 1956:4). The matter at hand as far as conference participants was concerned, however, was not merely the “deterioration” of “traditional” forms, but also a more general onslaught against the “national culture” perpetrated by a small, Anglicized elite. The remarks, for instance, of Ediweera Sarachchandra were particularly pointed in this regard. Just eight months after the conference, Sarachchandra’s would become a household name in Sri Lanka following the debut of his “epoch-making,” rural folk drama-inspired play, Maname (Kirinde 2016). Born Weditantirige Eustace Reginald de Silva in the southern coastal town of Galle in 1914, he was the son of a postmaster father and devout Wesleyan Methodist mother (The Continuing Enigma 2012). Exposed by his “family of devout Christians…to the English language and western music,” Sarachchandra is said to have “rejected his early Christian cum western identity” when, as a young scholar, he became “caught in the ferment of anti-colonial nationalism and Buddhist revivalism” (Obeyesekere 2014). A student of Pali, Sanskrit, and

Sinhala, he wrote in his contribution to the conference that the 1956 "democratic move to give Sinhalese its proper place in the national life has created among the English-educated minority a psychology of self-defense, and their attitude to the national culture has turned from being a negative and cynical one, to an attitude of active antagonism" (Sarathchandra 1956:103; Kirinde 2016).

Conference participants like Pieris and Sarathchandra were in part responding, as Bandaranaike and his supporters were, to features of the economic landscape described above, a landscape that would by the 1960s give way to rampant inflation and the implementation of protective tariffs in the face of a massive shortage of foreign exchange (Wijesinghe 1976:7; Pfaffenberger 1993:350). In the early 1950s, the Monetary Board of Ceylon's newly established Central Bank warned that the country "not only did not reduce, it ever increased its spending on imports as its export income fell and prices of imports rose" (Wijesinghe 1976:7-8). Pfaffenberger has argued that the mid-1950s saw the rise, epitomized in the work and writing of Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement founder A.T. Ariyaratne, of a "reconstitution narrative" that "rejects capital-intensive, Western-style, and urban-based industrialization altogether in favor of labor-intensive, Buddhist-inspired, and village-based development using 'appropriate' small-scale technologies" (Pfaffenberger 1993:364). According to the narrative espoused by Bandaranaike's party supporters, "the colonial value system and those who ape it" were regrettable for measuring "'individual success…by power, wealth, and knowledge of techniques,' while 'character and virtue are of no account'" (Pfaffenberger 1993:364).

One the one hand, the conceptualization of the "foreign" at the conference included those things against which Sinhala Buddhist nationalists had focused past energies—things English, namely. On the other hand, and in keeping with the "rediscovery" in "the chauvinist propaganda

of the Sinhala Buddhists" of Sri Lankan Tamils as a "traditional enemy of the Sinhalese" (Jayawardena 1985:59), in the promotion of the local and the rural-based, the antipathy that conference participants expressed toward things English emerged along the lines of ethnicity and class.

With respect to the first line along which conference participants leveled their criticism against what many saw an English-educated elite, there was little in the conference to suggest an explicitly anti-Tamil sentiment. The equation of the "national culture" with what were believed to be identifiably *Sinhalese* arts and practices, however, as we see in Sarachchandra's quote above, was reinforced by contributors' not only setting the "local" in opposition to the English "foreign," but also denying its equation with that which could be identified as Tamil. This trend is significant given that a "disproportionate number of [the] Anglicized elite" (Peebles 2006:7) with whose "artificial bi-culturality" (Pieris 1956:9) the authors took issue were identified as Tamil.

At a time therefore when, as Tambiah reminds us, Tamils more so than Sinhalese were associated with things English—English language, English education, etc.—the subtle discursive handling of the unique threat posed by "European culture" in the conference papers was of some consequence (Tambiah 1986:78). Remarking on this threat, for instance, Lecturer of Education J.E. Jayasuriya cited the failure of the "Portuguese, the Dutch and the English…to satisfy the socio-psychological conditions for integration with the indigenous cultures" (Jayasuriya 1956:65). He noted that whereas certain of "the Hindu-Dravidian" cultural "elements that entered from outside lost their foreignness in the process of entering, so much so that they became an integral part of Sinhalese culture," identifiably European cultural elements were so alien as to be unable to "infiltrate to the level of the common man" (Jayasuriya 1956:65-66).

Notably, while the impossibility of integration with the "indigenous" and "traditional cultures" was a foregone conclusion with respect to the European "elements," it was also only insofar as what were identified as Hindu-Dravidian elements became absorbed by *Sinhalese* culture that they were rendered "local" and therefore innocuous. Not all such elements passed muster in this regard. In a paper on "Sinhalese Music and Minstrelsy," P. Dolapihilla explained that while "conquerors like Elara must have brought to Anuradhapura Indian Music and Indian Instruments," in the end "a conqueror's gifts are thrown away when reconquest takes place" (Dolapihilla 1956:39). Offering the *thappu* drum as an example, he related that he had "never seen a villager having anything to do with [it]," the explanation given that "*eka demala vadak"* ("that's a Tamil job"). While concluding from this example that the Sinhalese are "satisfied with what instruments they had inherited," Dolapahilla nonetheless lamented that "change is coming over us with a kind of education that had been arranged to welcome foreign things" (Dolapihilla 1956:39).

The conference papers thus restated a notion articulated by E.B. Denhman during his tenure as Superintendent of the 1911 census, that "of the races which are the most numerous in Ceylon—Sinhalese, Tamils, Moors, Malays, Burghers, and British—only [the Sinhalese] can regard Ceylon as the home of the nation and the shrine of its national traditions" (Denham 1911:194). The selective elevation of Kandyan crafts in particular was further justified by the representation of Kandy as the culturally unadulterated heartland of the Sinhalese.[27] T.L. Green, one of two non-Ceylonese contributors to the conference, questioned this ethnic and geographical delimitation, writing, "let me point out that the cultures of Ceylon have several

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[27] As Mick Moore (1992) has observed more recently, "the Kandyans have tended to represent themselves as the sole bearers of authentic Sinhalese tradition in the face of a long assault by outside influences of all kinds" (33).

phases and that, in restricting attention to that which is not merely Sinhalese, but Kandyan, you are neglecting much of your own culture" (Green 1956:95). His, however, was a lone voice. Generally, others echoed Colonial Secretary James Emerson Tennent's much earlier observation that "'from the earliest ages the inhabitants of these lofty ranges have been distinguished by their patriotism and ardent resistance to every foreign invader'" (Tennent 1860:11). For example, P.E.E. Fernando, then a Professor in the Department of Sinhala (and soon-to-be director of the Department's newly created "Swabasha [mother tongue] Office"), concluded in his conference paper on weaving, lacquer work, and metal work, "just as Kandy has remained the last stronghold of the Sinhalese till 1815, so has it remained the last stronghold of arts and crafts of the Sinhalese up to the present day" (Fernando 1956:56). Arthur Molamuré reinforced this assessment, explaining that while "for the traditional arts of the country" the "consequences [of British colonial rule] have been calamitous," the Kandyan dancing with which he was concerned had "retained its fundamental character and its basic purity of technique" because it had been "comparatively immune from foreign influences" (Molamuré 1956:25). Poet, literary scholar and art historian Siri Gunasinghe agreed. Having defended his doctoral thesis, "Technique of Indian Painting According to Silpa Texts," at the Sorbonne just one year prior, in 1955, Gunasinghe argued the prudence of setting aside the painting practices of Ceylon's Low Country since, unlike what he perceived to be the case with those associated with Kandy, the "overwhelming popularity of a new school of temple painting that has been inspired to the last detail by European methods and techniques" had left them "altogether dead" (Gunasinghe 1956:47).[28]

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[28] To gesture toward the contemporary and popular resonance of this perceived difference, Gunasekera has remarked more recently that "[i]t is their lesser exposure to Western European influence that constitutes the basis of Kandyan feelings of superiority *vis-à-vis* Low Country Sinhalese. Although the latter live in a more commercialized society and are in general wealthier

The conference participants thus confirmed the “local,” “indigenous,” and “traditional” as referring exclusively to the “arts and crafts” considered identifiably Sinhalese and Kandyan. They were also keen to stress that it was the rural-dwelling “common man” rather than the urban-dwelling elite with whom they were associated. In the years following independence, it was not the working classes who retaliated most fervently against the economic and political privilege enjoyed by the English-educated and westernized in Colombo. Rather, it was what Jonathan Spencer has dubbed an “indigenous élite,” a “Sinhala-speaking, non-westernized class” of writers, journalists, monks, minor public and private sector employees, small-time traders, ayurvedic physicians, teachers and students to whom “the ideals of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism” had strong appeal (Spencer 35; Jayawardena 1985:64). Motivated by sentiments that also propelled Bandaranaike to power in the same year, and despite most having been at least partly educated in England, then, the conference participants channeled the nationalist impulses of a “Sinhala-Buddhist revival” generally “hostile to the spread of a ‘Western’ style of life” (Tambiah 1986:69). Like Colombo born and Oxford educated Bandaranaike, whose rise to power was facilitated in part by “playing on the traditionalist sentiments of the mass of the people” (Jiggins 1979: 10), and like the relatively new rural and Sinhala-educated intelligentsia “that would in time speak on behalf of the village fold from whose ranks they had sprung” (Tambiah 1986:69; See also Gunasinghe 2007), scholars at the conference bolstered their oppositional stance toward what they deemed the English-educated elite through a representational claim on behalf of a purportedly national “common man.” Evoking the figure Bandaranaike would conjure less than a year later in his University of Ceylon Convocation

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and more sophisticated, the Kandyans claim superiority as the proud upholders of Sinhalese customs, traditions and religion within the Kandyan kingdom” (Gunasekera 1994:9).

Address, “The Age of the Common Man” (Jiggins 1979:13), schoolteacher and principal cum professor of Education Professor J.E. Jayasuriya reflected that, unlike those hailing from the “upper and upper-middle classes,” the “common man…accepts his cultural heritage in its wholeness” (Jayasuriya 1956:65). The son of a postmaster and born in a rural village in southern Sri Lanka, the University of London educated Jayasuriya explained that, “At the level of the common man…there was a total failure in cultural communication [with the English] and it is therefore not surprising that there was no cultural assimilation or integration” (Jayasuriya 1956:66).[29]

In these respects, Jayasuriya and his co-participants articulated a vision of what they hoped would ultimately be a collectively shepherded national heritage, and they had at least attempted to convey an image of this heritage as purified of any “foreign” (non-Sinhalese) elements. There was another and arguably more formidable task ahead of them, however. Jayasuriya’s professed faith in the “common man’s” wholehearted acceptance of “his cultural heritage” was contradicted by his anxious admission that, “in his desire to emulate and identify himself with the upper classes, [the common man] began to neglect and to be ashamed of his traditional culture and to practice it less and less with the passing of years” (Jayasuriya 1956:66). The problem that Jayasuriya identified gestured to a larger one whose remedy also absorbed the attention of his fellow conference participants. To remedy this neglect and, more generally, to make sense of their somewhat urgent cries for the preservation of the “traditional cultures,” Jayasuriya and his colleagues had to establish the antiquity of this heritage and, at the same time, allow for changes that would be consistent with the promises of democratic egalitarianism. In

[29] http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=97904

other words, they had to discern a strand of continuity between past and present while admitting the change that had motivated the conference and justified scholarly intervention in the first place. This entailed the identification of certain phenomena—caste-based identification foremost among them—as elements of a past that, while evidently continuing in the present, were better left behind.

It is worth reiterating that UNESCO initially called for the conference in a climate of alarmist apprehension over the industrialization-driven plummeting "standards of traditional culture" in South and Southeast Asia (Wijesekera 1956:15). Participant Nandadeva Wijesekera, anthropologist, Commissioner of the Official Languages Department, and future President of the Sri Lanka Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (Spencer 1990:198), therefore noted that a central objective of the meeting should be the generation of suggestions as to how the country's "traditional cultures could be studied, preserved, evaluated and attuned to the life of a changing modern society" (Wijesekera 1956:15).[30]

In striking what was ultimately an uneasy conceptual balance between the kind of change associated with "the modern" and the kind of stability associated with "the traditional," conference participants relied upon a variety of rhetorical strategies. In the remaining pages of this chapter, I consider these strategies while highlighting parallels between certain contributions to the 1956 Conference on Traditional Cultures and ones made to a more recent meeting in the country, the 2013 Regional Seminar on Traditional Knowledge and Traditional Cultural

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[30] Wijesekera, whose PhD thesis, "Early Sinhalese Painting," would be published in 1959 by Calcutta University, was also a nephew by marriage of the prestigious statesman, DB Jayatilaka, "the undisputed lay leader of the Buddhist movement" and leader of the Ceylon National Congress, the nationalist party whose "politicians gained an easy domination over the new administration established under the Donoughmore constitution" (K.M. De Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*, 430).

Expressions of South Asia. Convened by the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the seminar was motivated by anxieties that were posed in remarkably similar language to those articulated by participants in the 1956 conference. In the words of the SAARC Cultural Centre's director, G.L.W. Gunasinghe, the "traditional knowledges" with which the seminar was concerned and that are "practiced by the indigenous communities face a threat in the modern world due to the influence of modernization and globalization" (SAARC Cultural Centre, Sri Lanka 2013:v). Echoing the angst over industrialization driving the 1956 conference, Gunasinghe portrayed the urgency of the matter thus: "Heterogeneity which had been an essential component of the South Asian traditions and cultures is now being subjected to change with the extensive reliance on scientific knowledge and homogenization," and "traditional knowledge systems are facing the threat of extinction" (SAARC Cultural Centre, Sri Lanka 2013:v).

Establishing Continuity

In carrying out the second project outlined above, the sanitization of the traditional-as-preservation-worthy of the non-traditional, or the traditional-as-antiquated, conference participants sought to articulate that strand of continuity joining the past and the present while at the same time allowing for (or admitting) the change(s) that justified their intervention in the first place. In this section, I examine the contradictions that resulted from their doing so to highlight the ways in which the politics of the present infused this post-independence consolidation of the traditional craft narrative. As we will see in later chapters, contemporary artisans in Sri Lanka continue to encounter these contradictions as they go about their lives.

Advocates for "traditional" cultures, conference participants were quick in many instances to condemn what they viewed as an unfortunate preoccupation with the "new" or

"modern." In a notable inversion of the statement made by the NCC officer whose words introduce this chapter, for instance, Ralph Pieris noted that, since he and his colleagues were "no longer troubled by any alleged chasm between East and West," it is "no longer necessary to harp on the necessity for innovation and novelty in order to revive interest in the arts which are supposedly 'dead'" (Pieris 1956:5-6).[31] In fact, as his colleague Wijesekera would ruefully observe, it was precisely the beguilement of the "new" that had led Ceylon's urban-dwelling populace—and the "elite" element of that populace, in particular—astray from their "traditional cultures." In periods of foreign conquest, he argued, "the people in cities benefited by an immediate change" by taking advantage of "new processes, pleasures and advantages." In doing so, and in contrast to the inhabitants of rural areas, they "sacrificed their culture and paid for it by loss of national conscience" (Wijesekera 1956:20).

While they readily conveyed their disdain for an uninhibited fascination with the "new," it is crucial to point out that conference participants were loath to deny or decry change entirely. On the one hand, there were phenomena in the present that they, like many of their contemporaries, viewed as anachronistic and better left behind. "In Ceylon today," as Pieris wrote, "few would favour a wholesale reversion to the old order of society," and certain practices historically associated with certain of the "arts and crafts"—those pertaining to "caste," "magic," and "superstition" foremost among them—had "few defenders now" (Pieris 1956 8). Caste in particular was seen as out of place in "modern democratic conditions" and, while there were some who attributed a certain preservation of "something of the [arts'] old vitality" to the "continued patronage" (Sarathchandra 1956:100) that artisans once enjoyed under a highly

[31] Two years later, Peiris was appointed Associate Research Officer to the UNESCO Research Centre for Social and Economic Development in Southern Asia, and, nine years later, became UNESCO's Delhi-Based Regional Social Science Advisor.

regimented system of caste-based service tenure (a notion voiced by some even today), the more prevalent opinion was that "the survival and development of some of the arts and most of the crafts" required that "practice on an exclusively occupational or caste basis should be replaced by practice on a wider basis by all segments of society" (Jayasuriya 1956:69). On the other hand, there were also changes and conveniences from which it was assumed that few would willingly abstain. As Ralph Pieris put it, "a money economy has come to stay, and we have accepted without reserve the cinema, the airplane, electricity, printing, and the radio" (Pieris 1956:8).

To the conference participants, therefore, the task at hand was not the "futile" one of "resuscitating the various art-forms in their pristine purity, uncontaminated by external influences" (Pieris 1956:5). "The revival of the indigenous arts and crafts," Jayasuriya argued, "does not…imply a cultural orthodoxy that builds a fortress round itself and resists the impact of the outside world" (Jayasuriya 1956:68). In other words, conference participants were not interested in claiming an essential sameness between the arts and crafts of the present and those of an imagined point of origin. Had they done so, in fact, they might have signaled their own redundancy as persons committed to the cause of preservation central to what was emerging as a "global norm of heritage governance" (Taylor 2009:41). At the same time, as we will see, they also carved out a rhetorical space to deem themselves and others "competent to express opinions on such matters" (Fernando 1956:57) and to discern the aesthetic and social parameters of the "traditional." While not claiming that the arts and crafts of the present were identical to those of the past, in other words, they sought to arrogate to themselves the authority not only to designate which of the contemporary arts and crafts maintained an authentic continuity with those of the past they envisioned, but also to both discern and explain the basis of that continuity.

Of the contradictions thrown up by conference participants' efforts to carve out this rhetorical space, one the greatest stemmed from the simultaneity of, on the one hand, an allowance for change, and, on the other, a sense of urgency conveyed in the assertion that "there is not much time to lose" (Wijesekera 1956:23). This sense of urgency is echoed in the introductory note of the 2013 SAARC Centre seminar, whose author urges his readers that, if "we" don't seize the present opportunity to safeguard "Traditional Knowledge" and "Traditional Cultural Expressions" from "the influences of globalization, we will not be able to pass down this heritage to our next generations" (SAARC Cultural Centre, Sri Lanka 2013:1). In the conference papers, there on the one hand a seemingly relaxed acknowledgement that "change happens," and that it is only natural and to be expected that the "traditional cultures" will not look the same tomorrow as they do today. On the other hand, there is a sense that something must be done immediately to safeguard them.

One attempt at papering over this contradiction and maintaining a sense of essential timelessness in the arts and crafts centered on invoking a "dynamism" or "flexibility" inherent to "art and crafts, music and dance," and other "traditional cultural elements" (Wijeskera 1956:17). In a chapter titled, "Dynamism of Traditional Cultures," N.D. Wijesekera noted that it was in part the task of the conference participants to consider how "the traditional cultures" could be "attuned to the life of a changing modern society" (Wijesekera 1956:15). Without offering concrete examples, Wijesekera argued that there is a praiseworthy "dynamism" *inherent to* the process of transmission of "traditional cultures" such that the "irrelevant and the non-essential elements" are naturally "sifted and left behind in [the] process of time" while the "main current of values" is maintained (Wijesekera 1956:16). Contradicting this dynamism, however, he noted that it is because "the rural folk are averse to change" that the "traditional cultures" can "take

shelter in [their] heart and mind" and thus be "preserved" (Wijesekera 1956:20). Wijesekera's description conjures what is effectively the "double-edged sword" of "tradition" (Herzfeld 2004:5). In his formulation, their alleged reluctance to change makes rural masses the guardians of traditional culture. At the same time, it is this supposed reluctance to change that is believed to render them unqualified to participate in deliberations regarding the "modernization" of those things that they have unselfconsciously preserved. While these cultures are said to be characterized by an inherent dynamism, it is precisely the "rural folk's" supposed aversion to change that leaves "genuine lovers of culture" responsible for leading the way in striking a balance between "change and stability." Ultimately, in other words, Wijesekera arrogates to more worldly individuals such as himself the responsibility for helping these "cultures" avoid the two unwelcome conditions between which, according to his logic, they would otherwise be forced to choose: "primitiveness" on the one hand, and "total extinction" on the other. Herein lies the contradiction in his narrative: Despite arguing that there is inherent "dynamism" of "traditional cultures," Wijesekera suggests that it is in fact up to newly trained "students of culture" to conduct "field studies" to arrive at an understanding of how, with their aid, the traditional cultures can be "attuned" to "modern society" and "preserved" amidst the shocks of industrialization (Wijesekera 1956:15).

Jayasuriya echoed the contradiction in his colleague's message. He argued that, in "adapting" to the present moment, the "arts and crafts that live must continually expand in new directions" and that this "expansion must come as a spontaneous growth of its active practice" (Jayasuriya 1956:68). At the same time, his suggestion of this capacity for such "spontaneity" is contradicted by his assertion that what was called for was a deliberate "psychological engineering" that would effect a "dynamic change in [people's] values, attitudes and activities"

(Jayasuriya 1956:64). Such engineering was particularly necessary, Jayasuriya argued, when it came to those practices, such as pottery and weaving, that, because they "still have an occupational or caste association," do not enjoy the regard enjoyed by those practices, such as painting and music, that are viewed as "cultural activities" and "considered embellishments in high society" (Jayasuriya 1956:68-69). Again, we find a tension between what is claimed on the one hand to be an inherent capacity for creative adaptability ("dynamism") and on the other the need for proactive manipulation to ensure "survival." This tension reverberates in the framework set forth for the SAARC Cultural Center's 2013 seminar. The "Traditional Knowledge," we are told by the Center's Deputy Director of Research, Sanjay Garg, despite being "old," are "highly adaptive, creative and even novel" (Garg 2015: xviii). As in the "traditional cultures" formulated by Wijesekera, there is a supposed dynamism or adaptive flexibility at work in the "Traditional Knowledge" and "Traditional Cultural Expressions" to which Garg abstractly refers. Yet both Garg and G.L.W. Samarasinghe, the SAARC Cultural Centre's Director, also tell us that with "modernization" and "growing globalization and homogenization, the [Traditional Knowledge] systems and [Traditional Cultural Expressions] are facing the threat of extinction" (Garg 2015:xvii; SAARC 2013:v). The analytical quandary that results from these formulations is as follows: How does one ascertain whether a transformation in these "traditional knowledges" is the (implicitly commendable) consequence of its adaptive ("dynamic") quality or, rather, the (implicitly unfortunate and perhaps even deplorable) outcome of its being "subjected to change" (SAARC 2013:v)? How, in other words, does one recognize a given vector of transformation as positive or negative?

We find both our answer to these questions and the deeply political nature of efforts to define the "traditional" in "traditional arts and crafts" in a closely related strategy upon which the

1956 conference participants also relied: the simultaneous essentialization and abstraction of the "traditional arts and crafts" and "traditional cultural expressions" from contemporary social life. The strategy is not unique. As Néstor García Canclini has convincingly observed with respect to a post-revolutionary project in Mexico to construct the notion of "a unified nation" in the face of socio-political discord, "most of the books on traditional handicrafts, fiestas, poetry, and music enumerate and exalt popular products without locating them in the logic of present social relations" (Canclini 1995:151). Chatterjee relates a similar occurrence in his discussion of Indian "nationalism as a project of mediation," noting how "the popular," in being "sanitized, carefully erased of all marks of vulgarity, coarseness, locality, and sectarian identity," becomes "the repository of natural truth, naturally self-sustaining and therefore timeless" (Chatterjee 1993:72-73). Venkatesan's ethnographic monograph on Indian artisans similarly demonstrates how such makers, even while they secure a certain kind of agency through their association with a conceptualization of "traditional Indian craft," are nonetheless positioned in ways that abstract them from larger social contexts" (Venkatesan 2009:79).

In the case considered here, beyond associating the "traditional handicrafts" with a "Common Man" and calling for their being "uprooted" from their caste associations and practiced "at all levels in the community" (Jayasuriya 1956:69), conference participants also referred to an immaterial essence contained within such "arts and crafts." A "test" of traditionality, as Pieris saw it, in fact, was one that established anonymity, since the traditional crafts were ultimately "impersonal, the manifestation of an experience and feeling which is older and deeper than the emotion or skill of the individual artist" (Pieris 1956:2). Along similar lines, Wijesekera observed that the nation's transcendent "eternal values," or "aesthetic values, human feelings and the national genius," would be stripped of their "eternal strength" were it not for the

fact that people require the “spiritual food” contained within arts and crafts (Wijesekera 1956:19). We find comparable language in Sinharaja Tammita-Delgoda’s recent, florid musings on Kandyan dance. As its “foundations have eroded,” he argues, “the nature of this art form has changed” and, “like all traditional forms of cultural expression, it is in danger of losing its identity and perhaps its very essence” (SAARC Cultural Centre, Sri Lanka 2013:75).

Invocations of an “essence” or “nature” contained within “traditional arts and crafts” or “traditional cultural expressions” are apparently intended to serve as a check on the logical conclusion to which an unbridled “dynamism” within them could lead—they might end up looking like just about anything. At the same time, however, such invocations raise another problem: if, despite their “flexibility” and “dynamism,” there is as these scholars claimed something essential about the traditional arts and crafts, how and, more importantly, by *whom*, is it to be identified and preserved?

Ultimately, the 1956 conference papers suggested, it is up to those who have a “feeling for the arts” to both discern the traditional and to moderate change. Those with such a feeling unequivocally did not include contemporary artists and craftspeople. Actual practitioners of the “traditional arts and crafts” were charged with a “laissez-faire orientation” that had led them to uninhibited and ““indiscriminate experimentation and innovation” (Pieris 1956:4). In Pieris’s estimation, it was precisely such “innovation” that had led to the fact that, while “the exorcists’s masks are rapidly finding their way into ethnological museums…only poor imitations are now produced for sale to tourists as ‘curios’” (Pieris 1956:4). It was also such a “laissez-faire orientation” that had led to what conference participants agreed was the regrettable instruction of Kandyan dance in girls’ schools: “Rather than drill girls in a dance-form suited to the male, it is

preferable to introduce the South Indian *bharata natyam* which evidence indicates was anciently practiced by women in this country" (Pieris 1956:4).

Pieris concluded, "Kandyan arts such as dancing, painting, wood-carving and embroidery are all aesthetically satisfying precisely because the artist adhered to traditional canons which gave this particular art its distinctive form and proportion" (Pieris 1956:5). While he believed that innovation and change were a given in the "traditional arts and crafts" and that therefore "our quest should not be for origins *as such*," he suggested that such innovation results over generations in each respective "art-form attain[ing] a certain maturity" and that, after that point, "innovation or compromise by artists who have lost the tradition only results in poor art" (Pieris 1956:5). As far as Pieris and other conference participants were concerned, their contemporary artists and craftspeople were guilty of just such loss, and were therefore regarded as incapable of the kind of transformation that would ensure the safety of the "essence" at hand. *Dumbara* cotton weavers, to offer an especially fitting example, were chided for engaging in the "production of mere curios," a practice that P.E.E. Fernando regarded as an upshot of their being "brought up and trained in a tradition that was somewhat rigid, not possessed of that flexibility of attitude and imagination to adapt themselves to the changing circumstances" (1956:56). The only change they could successfully manage, in other words, was the debasement of the practices in which they were engaged. (Suggesting similarly that the practices presently denoted by the label "Kandyan dance" had remained static up until the recent past, Tammita-Delgoda laments, "as it has struggled to survive in the modern world, Kandyan dance has been forced to change" and "many people no longer know what *real* Kandyan dance is" (SAARC Cultural Centre, Sri Lanka 2013:75; emphasis added).) The task at hand, then, as one contributor to the 1956 conference put

it, was a controlled "evolution of society" in which the "judicious judgment" of a select few could be used to arrive at "fusible doses" of change (Wijesekera 1956:22).

References to an "essence" or inherent dynamism can therefore accomplish only so much in terms of maintaining the illusion of cultural fixity to which Herzfeld refers. In the end, as we have seen, the strategy buckles under its own weight as these scholars seek to capture that arbitrary strand of continuity or timelessness and define what is "traditional."[32] While admitting the inevitability of historical transformation through the generous ascription of "flexibility," the authors considered here demonstrate an ultimate interest in defining the parameters of change according to social and aesthetic sympathies about which they are reliably un-self-reflexive.

To gesture once again toward what I presented earlier as the burden borne by contemporary artisans in Kandy, I want to offer an example of what this ultimate arbitrariness looks like for those presently engaged in what have come to be known as the country's "traditional arts and crafts." About a century ago, the individuals who participate in what is presently referred to as the *hana* industry used the fiber of a different plant, *niyanda,* to weave mats and other items still created in Atwaedagama. Even today, weavers in the village use the terms *niyanda* and *kaendi* (fiber) interchangeably when referring to the strands that they extract from the *hana* plant. However, the combination of a decline in the availability of *niyanda* throughout the early 20th century and a preference for the comparatively longer and thicker fibers yielded by the much bigger *hana* plant (a feature that, while not lending itself so well to the production of especially fine mats, does shorten labor time), motivated artisans to abandon it

[32] Jonathan Spencer locates a comparable phenomenon in his analysis of Martin Wickramasinghe's *Aspects of Sinhalese Culture*, noting: "Wickramasinghe's arguments about cultural elasticity and borrowing would seem to lead inevitably to a radically contingent view of cultural identity. Yet his own position as a nationalist intellectual demanded, ultimately, that some element of continuity be postulated" (Spencer et al. 1990:286).

altogether. Today, *hana* is regarded as the traditional material used by these artisans and, in fact, as I will discuss in Chapter 4, it is often equated with the "identity" of the industry. Many of the individuals presently engaged in these productive activities, however, now find *hana* increasingly scarce and, as in the past, are turning to more readily available alternatives—in this case, woven fiber mats, or *paeduru*, imported from India—to meet certain of their needs. Their decision to do so is met with a combination of contempt and sadness by at least some designers and dealers in Colombo, individuals and businesses who, regarding it as a deviation from the true "traditional art," refuse to purchase items in which such substitute materials have been used. The reaction evokes the "'spectres of inauthenticity'" that Sahlins (Sahlins 1999a:411) has associated with one of the central (and "not too enlightening") "illusions born of the Western self-consciousness of civilization," which, in ascribing a "historyless character" (which is also to say a timeless one) to "indigenous cultures," bolsters the conceit that "when *we* change it's called progress, but when they do—notably when they adopt some of our progressive things—it's a kind of adulteration, a *loss* of culture" (Sahlins 1999b:ii). I would argue that this double standard is exposed by the fact that that one could just as easily imagine this contemporary instance of substitution—one understood as the adulteration of a "traditional craft"—being regarded instead as an instance of the "dynamism" to which Wijesekera refers. The example indicates the simple point that any appraisal of negative change or positive adaptation is ultimately an interested one. Making it seem as anything *but* interested, however, is among the chief undertakings of certain contributors to both the 1956 conference and the 2013 seminar.

Concluding Remarks

Insofar as the "rhetoric of tradition and modernity is not only the epiphenomenal expression but one of the most critical instruments of hierarchy," Herzfeld reminds us,

anthropologists ought to "be less concerned to identify particular traits as traditional or modern than to describe the political dynamics in which such attributions are made" (Herzfeld 2004:30-31). Orienting the discussion to the political dynamics to which Herzfeld refers, the preceding pages have examined the discursive production and handling of Sri Lanka's traditional handicrafts at a post-independence moment marked by growing nationalist fervor. Gaining momentum in the decades leading up to independence, the early 20th century conceptualization of "crafts" as an obvious foil to industrialization and the Anglicization seen as accompanying foreign imports emerged as a central component of an expressly *Sinhalese* "cultural regeneration" (Gurusinghe 1936). The two post-independence projects examined in the preceding pages characterized efforts entailed in this regeneration. I have suggested that these projects encapsulate something that Duara calls *discent*, or the imposition "of a historical narrative of descent and/or dissent on both heterogeneous and related cultural practices" (Duara 1995:66). First, participants at the 1956 conference at the University of Ceylon engaged in the selective privileging of items and practices associated with Kandyan Sinhalese as uniquely representative of the nation. This selective privileging accomplished more than the marginalization of communities, practices and things deemed non-Sinhala, however. More relevant to my purposes in the following chapters, it also consolidated a practical and ideological burden on the part of artisans in this region for reproducing what was and continues to be conceived of as collectively held national heritage. As we will see, despite calls both then and now to expand the practice of the "traditional arts" beyond those regarded as their lineage-based heirs, and despite the fact that such expansion has to some degree occurred, artisans in Kandy are reminded in varyingly subtle ways of their role as primary culture producers. To appreciate why this is so, we must consider the second project in which conference participants engaged, or their

efforts to establish the antiquity of these “traditional arts” in a way that would warrant their intervention. In establishing that thread of continuity linking past and present through craft, contributors were compelled to identify a path for craft that would be acceptable given “modern democratic conditions” and “a money economy [that] has come to stay” (Sarathchandra 1956:100; Pieris 1956:8). In articulating an abstracted and essentialized vision of the “traditional arts,” they were eager to silence a reality of social life, caste-based identification, that continues to trouble the notion of this heritage as one in which all Sinhalese, much less all Sri Lankans, have an equal stake. Such silencing would have been a reliable expedient in fashioning an image of such arts as ahistorical or, in Ralph Pieris’s words, “impersonal, the manifestation of an experience and feeling which is older and deeper than the emotion or skill of the individual artist” (Pieris 1956:2). And yet, as Herzfeld puts it, “[s]ocial relations on the ground disrupt [the] timeless fictions—or eternal images—of national culture” (Herzfeld 1996:28). As we will see with respect to both Atwaedagama and Redigama, conceptualizations of collectively shepherded heritage articulate in locally meaningful ways not only with practical and ideological entailments of a market economy and liberal democracy, cultural forms in which many Sri Lankans are fully invested. They also articulate, and with considerable unpredictability, with caste-based concerns that, as we will see, are often erroneously considered the purview of low caste individuals.

To conclude, then, my aim in this chapter has been to examine a narrative of “traditional crafts” that, along with the contradictions found within it, continues to have salience in the lives of contemporary artisans. In the following chapters, I turn my attention to the ways in which the sentiments and logics driving the projects described above—the conviction that craft should be sanitized of caste, the notion that artisans themselves cannot be trusted with respect to the craft traditions for which they are nonetheless held responsible, the belief that those who engage in

craft production must not have economic gain as their chief motive, for instance—are reproduced and continue to do work in the present even as they are challenged by artisans themselves.

Chapter 3
Heritage or Hana *Bundle?*
The Indignities of Inheritance in a Sinhalese "Craft Village"

On an afternoon in August 2014, I ascended the steep walkway leading to the Kandyan Art Association (KAA), one of Sri Lanka's longest-running organizations established to support artisans in and around what is now regarded as the country's cultural capital, Kandy. I had come in search of Damayanthi, a resident artisan at the KAA and a woman who, as a participant in what is known locally as the *hana* industry (*hana karmantaya*), is renowned locally for her skill as a weaver of the distinctive—and, by popular estimation, distinctly "traditional"—variety of woven fiber mats, *Dumbara rata paeduru* (Dumbara design mats), for which her village of Atwaedagama is known. Damayanthi and I had met on previous occasions, and she would always greet me warmly. The week prior, in fact, she had gone out of her way to assist me in locating another individual. Those positive encounters motivated my visit this day and, not knowing whether I would find her, occasioned my delight when I spotted her engaged in casual conversation with another artisan on the southern end of the building's wide verandah. As I approached and began to explain that I had come to speak with her about her work, however, her eyes widened in resistance and, stiffening her posture, she waved her hands defiantly and declared, "Madam, I'm not going to tell *you anything! Not* after what they have put in the papers! A*poo*! How can our children show their faces?!" When I persisted and stressed my interest in learning about how Damayanthi had come to weave, I was startled by her reply: "What's there to be interested in? This industry is worthless." Observing with approval that *hana* mat weaving is dying and that the next generation will not carry the tradition forward, she noted that a newspaper had recently published an article about the industry and, without her permission, had featured her photograph. "You see how our own people treat us? They are our

same flesh and blood [*ekama mas le*], and still they treat us like this. What has the president told us? The president has told us that we need to live—all Sinhalese, Muslims, and Tamils—together, as one. But even one of our own has done this to us. And why is it? Just because we do this industry?" "Anyway," Damayanthi concluded, her voice dropping almost to a whisper, since she acquired her skill in a class, she really didn't know anything about *Dumbara rata* mat weaving. Unlike others in the village she calls home, she came to weave not because it was her family's occupation—her children, she stressed, have nothing to do with it—but out of financial necessity.

The setting of our encounter, a nearly century-old organization established to support the country's "traditional craftspeople," exaggerated the curiosity of Damayanthi's outburst. The organization has long supported the variety "traditional arts and crafts" with which participants to the 1956 conference discussed in the foregoing chapter were primarily concerned. Damayanthi, whose skill has earned her a presidential award, is locally renowned as an accomplished practitioner of what is regarded as among the country's *most* traditional industries. Yet here she was not only describing her knowledge, a knowledge she seemed eager to disavow, as an accidental expertise, but also forswearing the manner of family-based learning locally considered the truest mode of artisanal knowledge reproduction. Though taken aback by the scene, I admitted to myself that Damayanthi's fervent reaction to my interest in her work was not unexpected. Beyond the threat that her words posed to the resolve of my fieldworker self, they were simply the latest utterance of a chorus I'd heard with disquieting regularity since I had begun my fieldwork in Atwaedagama some five months prior. Indeed, if there was one thing that the village's residents had made sure to impress upon me in that time, it was their distrust of "researchers" and the sense of humiliation that they have felt as a consequence of their and the

hana industry's scholarly and journalist representation as, among other things, especially ancient as "passed down from generation to generation." The refrain that Damayanthi echoed, I reminded myself in this instance, centered on what many in Atwaedagama take to be the careless writings of scholars, students and journalists not at all unlike myself. More specifically, it centered on writings in which, usually through references to "old things," the work in which Damayanthi and others in Atwaedagama engage is reaffirmed as the work of a people who are essentially different from and inferior to other Sinhalese. In this refrain, as I elaborate in the following pages, "old things" generally served as a euphemism for something that, while the subject of many of my conversations in the village, was rarely discussed directly, "that caste issue."

***

There is a phrase in Sinhala, "*hanamiti adahas*" (literally, "hana bundle ideas"), that is generally used to comment on the unfavorable intrusion of old-fashioned or outmoded patterns of thought into contemporary life. The saying refers to an element of the work carried out by the individuals with whom I am primarily concerned here: that is, to the collection of the raw plant material, the leaves of the large succulent *hana*, from which those in the village of Atwaedagama extract long, floss-like fibers used to produce decorative woven mats and other handmade items. It is ironic that the phrase is typically used to condemn "backward" thinking since, to many of those actually engaged in the *hana* industry, it is *others*' ostensibly old-fashioned thinking about them that is worthy of critical comment. To these individuals, this thinking, and more specifically what they regard as an anachronistic concern with caste-based identification, is nowhere so obvious as in popular and scholarly writing in which they figure as exemplars of the country's traditional artisans. For over a century, students, scholars, journalists and filmmakers

have rendered accounts in which their village and their work are portrayed as demonstrative of an essential socio-temporal difference to be studied, documented, and preserved in its archaic splendor. Until little more than a decade ago, the residents of Atwaedagama were far removed from the outlets of such representations, many of which took form in publications intended for an English-speaking readership. Today, however, as my encounter with Damayanthi illustrates, they are well aware of their portrayal in writings that, while often arguably intended as celebratory appraisals of Sri Lanka's cultural heritage, they view as re-inscribing their difference by identifying them with a past they would just as soon forget. In this chapter, I analyze the double bind in which these men and women find themselves as they attempt to combat such representations. I will argue that, ironically, both their interpretations of what they regard as the insult at hand as well as the strategies that they adopt to wrest some control over the situation serve to re-inscribe the very social boundary they are anxious to overcome.

January 30, 2011

January 30, 2011

The ethnic variety in Sri Lanka

63rd Independence Day

Read the sentences and underline the most suitable word for each blank

1. By the time the British arrived in Ceylon, the largest ethnic group was Sinhalese who ________ they were descendents of Vijaya and his followers.
   (a) declared (b) believed (c) refuted (d) confirmed

2. The Tamil population consisted of the ________ Tamils in the North and the East, and the Tamil estate employees.
   (a) original (b) aboriginal (c) indigenous (d) local

3. From the ninth century onwards, Muslims ________ arose around ports such as Beruwala, Galle and Puttalam.
   (a) settlements (b) suburbs (c) commune (d) invasion

4. The Malays ________ in Sri Lanka in the period of the Dutch.

5. The Dutch Burghers, followed Christianity and ________ English.
   (a) communicating (b) interaction (c) spoke (d) conversant

6. The Veddah People are believed to be ________ of Kuweni and Vijaya.
   (a) ancestors (b) descendents (c) follower (d) forefathers

7. Colombo Chetties, a business community, ________ during the Portuguese

A Sinhalese

A Kinnara couple - they were indigenous people

A Kandyan Sinhalese

A Malay

A Muslim

A low country Sinhalese lady

A Tamil lady

A Hindu priest

A Kandyan Sinhalese lady

A Chetty

A Kandyan Sinhalese

Figure 8-From *The Nation* newspaper kids' section celebrating the country's 63rd Independence Day in 2012. In a series intended to showcase the country's "ethnic variety," the second photo clockwise from the top left is captioned: "A Kinnara couple-they were indigenous people." Save a photo captioned, "A Kandyan Sinhalese," all of the remaining pictures are intended to represent groups regarded today as ethnically distinct from the Sinhala.

This chapter begins with an examination of the historical trajectory of scholarly and popular fascination with Atwaedagama and those who live there, and more specifically with a discussion of a mid-20th century swell of interest in the village on the part of local and international scholars and student researchers. While writing on the village and, more generally,

“the Kinnara,” the caste group to which its residents are said to belong, extends back to much further, it is during the 1960s and 1970s—a time when largely tourism-driven demand for the area’s famed *Dumbara paeduru* was peaking—that the village was consolidated as an object of scholarly and popular interest.

The second part of the chapter details not only Atwaedagama residents’ reactions to their portrayal in contemporary writings, but also the way these reactions are subsequently interpreted by so-called outsiders (*pita minissu*), scholars and student researchers chief among them, who have visited and in some cases published accounts about the village in recent years. In general, some anthropologists have observed, “artisans do not control the publicity related to their work but instead make the most of the writings of outsiders” by capitalizing on their representation therein (Colloredo-Mansfeld 2002:118). The conversations that I had with the residents of Atwaedagama suggest that, for most of them, it is generally only the first element of this observation that bears out. In accounts that the casual observer might deem gratuitous marketing for the “heritage-rich” industry in which Atwaedagama’s residents engage, many of them do not see opportunities for financial gain. Rather, they explicitly condemn textual and photographic representations of what is typically depicted as an “ancient” and “traditional” industry as callous reminders of their historical marginalization as a socially and economically degraded community. To them, such representations not only misleadingly portray a community frozen in a decidedly unsavory state, but also reflect their authors’ preoccupation with what is often figured as among the most *hanamiti* or old-fashioned phenomena of contemporary Sinhalese social life, caste-based identification.

As we will see, however, in both the articulation of and response to what they perceive as their unfavorable portrayal, Atwaedagama’s residents unintentionally collude with the local

students, scholars and journalists whose writings they begrudge. In formulating the object of their concern as a myopic fascination with “old” or “historical” things, they reproduce a logic that is used by others to undermine the legitimacy of their grievances. Figuring caste as a thing of “the past” that bears little force in contemporary Sri Lanka, they recapitulate the notion that grievances articulated in its terms cannot be taken seriously. What is more, the strategies of self-preservation that many of Atwaedagama residents’ have adopted in retaliation for the collective insult they feel they have suffered at the hands of untrustworthy researchers are interpreted by the latter as evidence of the essential, caste-based difference initially assumed in their accounts.

The Making of A “Traditional Handicraft Village”

The fascination that Atwaedagama’s residents and their “traditional handicrafts” hold for contemporary scholars, students and journalists is itself a tradition. While it gained momentum in the 1950s and 1960s, scholarship on the village and the *hana* industry can be traced back much further to the work of art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy. Strongly influenced by William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement of the late 19th century, Coomaraswamy was in fact instrumental in the classification of what is today referred to as the *hana* industry and an array of other lineage-based occupational activities (including metalworking, Dumbara weaving, and wood and ivory carving) as “arts and crafts.” In the early 20th century, Coomaraswamy dedicated the brief, penultimate chapter of his *Medieaval Sinhalese Art* (1907) to a discussion of the fiber mat-weaving practices for which Atwaedagama is known. For all his more popular and heavily romanticized representations of “the traditional craftsman” in this work and in his subsequent *The Indian Craftsman* (1909), the chapter itself is notable for its emphasis on the bare procedural

and technical elements of mat production.[33] Coomaraswamy spares few remarks for the lives of those who produce these mats. However, both the chapter title, "Mat Weaving by Kinnarayo," and his observation that the decorated mats with which he was concerned are "made by men and women of the Kinnaraya caste, practically the lowest of Kandyan castes," reinforced the notion of a foundational link between this form of mat-weaving and the social inferiority of those engaged in it (Coomaraswamy 1907:426). In an Appendix to the chapter, he also reproduces what he describes as "a Kinnara song relating to mat weaving" and, in a note buried in the text, mentions Atwaedagama.

A more substantive treatment of what many of Atwaedagama's present-day residents regard as "unnecessary information," or the area's sociological topography, began with the work of M.D. Raghavan. In 1946, Raghavan was hired away from his founding chair position in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Madras to serve as an ethnologist for the National Museums of Ceylon (Raghavan 1962; Vidyarthi and Rai 1977). From this position, he carried out his ambitious ethnological survey of Ceylon and, beginning in 1951, served as a member of the country's Backward Communities Development Board, a committee aligned with his own personal determination to "promote the living conditions" of "the Kinnarayas" and other populations that, as his Ceylonese colleague Richard Spittel agreed, had been "long neglected" by the government (Raghavan 1962:xiii). By the early 1950's, Raghavan's writing on "The Tribe of Mat Weavers," whom he portrayed as having "little or no interests outside their craft" (Raghavan 1951:221), was hailed as a model for anthropological scholarship deemed "still in its infancy" in Ceylon ("A Ceylonese Tribe" 1952). Raghavan's accounts of Ceylon's "traditional

[33] For a comprehensive discussion of Coomaraswamy's writing on craft in India and Ceylon, see McGowan 2009.

arts and culture” elaborated upon the anthropological data he had gathered in the course of his Ethnological Survey (Raghavan 1962:xvi). Like Coomaraswamy in linking the social set-apartness of “the Kinnara” to the productive activity for which they were known, Raghavan portrayed these people as unlike any others he had encountered. Lamenting the inadequacy of Robert Knox’s cursory 17th century mention of ‘the Kinnaraya,’ Raghavan expounds in his own writing upon the “peculiar tribal traits,” dwelling structures, agricultural activities, household economies, and various caste-based proscriptions on behavior and dress that he and his collaborators observed in Atwaedagama and other villages so populated (Raghavan 1962:184).[34]

Raghavan’s usage of the term “Tribe” is significant here. The Sinhala term “kulaya,” as noted in the Introduction to this dissertation, is typically translated as “caste.” As John Rogers (1994) points out, however, the meaning of the term is contextual. In keeping with this contextuality, and reflecting the ever-evolving technologies of identification in sociological writing across the 19th and 20th centuries, “the Kinnara” have been referred to at different points in time by each of the meanings given by Clough (1887) for the term “kulaya”: a tribe, a caste, and a race (see, for instance *Supplement to The Tropical Agriculturalist’s* “The Rodiya Commission and its Work-Who are Lower in Race: The Kinnaraya or Rodiya?” 1905:2). While “there was a gradual tendency [beginning in the 1820s] to use the word ‘caste’ to refer to groups that were employed for organizing the state’s compulsory labour,” there was little concern among the British administrators “about whether a particular group should be called a ‘caste’ or something else” (Rogers 2004:635). It is likely that it is in part due to this comfort with ambiguity that 20th century accounts identify the Kinnara variously as a “caste,” a “tribe,” and a

[34] Bryce Ryan, whose seminal *Caste in Modern Ceylon* (1953) was published at around the same time, similarly reported, “The insignificance of the Kinnara in a meager literature of Sinhalese caste is striking, since their status is so low as to have attracted more attention” (130).

"race" (in his 1909 *Ancient Ceylon,* for instance, Henry Parker wrote, "There is only one race in Ceylon with curly hair; they are the Kinnaras or Karmantayō, the mat-weavers, the lowest caste in the island" (44)).

The inconsistency in sociological vocabulary throughout much of the 20th century also stemmed, however, from the varying extent to which the Kinnara and other groups were perceived as integrated in broader Sinhalese society. In fact, in his 1951 *Ethnological Survey of Ceylon*, Raghavan was centrally concerned with documenting the degree to which the Kinnara and other groups were "absorbed" into "the general Sinhalese society" (219). He surmised that the Kinnara's "integrated culture" and unique "technique of handicrafts" would ensure that it would be many years before they were so "absorbed" (Raghavan 1951:219). His use of the term tribe reflected his prediction that the rate of "cultural disintegration" among the Kinnara would be slower than that among the Veddas, for instance.

Raghavan's work likely helped to inspire the attention that Atwaedagama received in the 1960s and 1970s when the village became a destination for foreign and local researchers and filmmakers seeking to document the newly independent island's "traditional handicrafts." In the early 1960s, Diongu Badaturuge Nihalsinghe, a man who later served as founding chairman of the National Film Corporation and earned recognition as having pioneered filmmaking in the country, collaborated with his undergraduate classmates at the University of Ceylon (soon thereafter the University of Peradeniya) to produce *Niyanda Rata*, a short documentary that featured the village and its mat weaving tradition. The student who conceived of the project, Lucky de Silva, first happened upon the village as a student at Kandy's Trinity College. Participating alongside his classmates in a school-sponsored social service initiative much like those called for by the Backward Communities Development Board on which Raghavan served,

de Silva had visited the village to deliver medical supplies and, as he put it to me, "teach them how to look after themselves." At the University of Ceylon, de Silva drew upon his experiences in writing an essay about the village for an undergraduate geography course before suggesting the idea for the film to his peers in the University Film Society and the Peradeniya University Social Service League. Though screened only a few times, *Niyanda Rata* was praised for its contribution to "documenting[ing] the vanishing crafts of Ceylon" (Gunawardena c.1963).

Beginning in 1966, just a couple of years after *Niyanda Rata* was completed, an American potter and Associate Professor of Art at Kent State University made repeated visits to Sri Lanka to study the country's weaving traditions. James "Mel" Someroski, or, as his name is localized by those who remember him in Atwaedagama, Samarasinghe, Someroski shared his own approach to design composition while commissioning a collection of decorative wall-hangings from the weavers in Atwaedagama. For approximately six months in 1968, Someroski stationed himself at the Queen's Hotel in Kandy and traveled regularly to Atwaedagama to oversee the creation of these items, most of which were of his own design. The wall-hangings would ultimately be displayed in a series of exhibitions upon his return to the United States ("Art Tent" 1969:3).

In a brief account of his time in the village, "The 'Real' Beautiful People,"[35] Someroski recalled his initial encounter with the area's residents, writing, "when I first discovered them…I thought something had to be done fast to preserve some of this historical way of working for the future." Confessing "a kind of romantic notion…in working with the Dumbara mat weavers," Someroski reflected on an irresistible appeal in what he deemed an awareness of the fact that "they were weavers to the Sinhalese Kings" and "that nothing has changed much, that my wall hangings were produced the same way their great, great, great, etc., grandfathers produced mats." This notion of a direct continuity between the Atwaedagama he encountered and an ancient past prompted Someroski to suggest that, "like the folk parks in Norway…and Sweden and the United States (Hale Homestead in Ohio)," the village should "take its place as an historical treasure worth preserving," a "place where people from all over the world could go and see old houses and accoutrements of village life preserved just as they were…[w]ith the old looms still

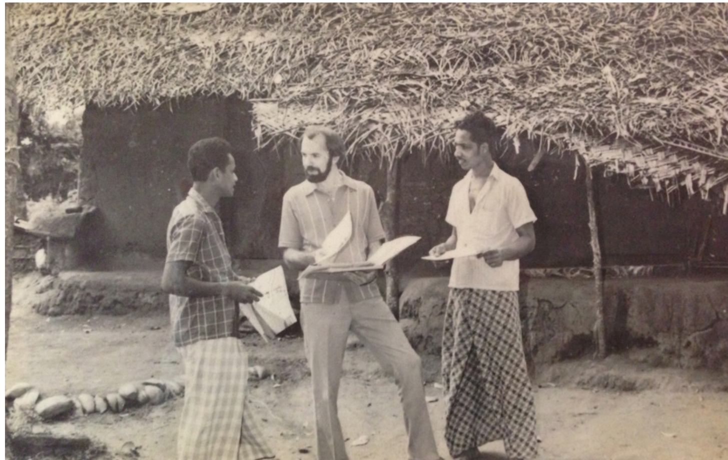

Figure 9-Mel Someroski with two of the Atwaedagama weavers he commissioned to produce wall-hangings in the late 1960s.

[35] I have been unable to verify the source and date of this item, a magazine clipping that Someroski gave to one of the weavers he had commissioned in Atwaedagama. Although the article was written in English and the weaver who showed it to me decades later could not read English, he knew the contents of the article. When he presented it to me, he noted that it reminded him of the positive working relationship that he and others had with Someroski.

set on cow-dung-and-mud-verandahs and weavers demonstrating their ancient art under thatched roofs."[36]

In 1985, evidently motivated by something like the Boasian "salvage imperative" characteristic of much early 20th century American anthropological scholarship (Stocking 1989:211), Someroski produced a short film, *The Mat Weavers of Ceylon*, with the explicit purpose of capturing Atwaedagama before the signs of its antiquity disappeared for good.[37] Reminiscent of James Clifford's "ethnographic pastoral" and its "relentless placement of others in a present-becoming-past" (Clifford 1986:114-115), the film's initial scenes of the village are accompanied by a voice loosely quoting the forward to Mary Webb's *Precious Bane* (1982):

Figure 10-Wall-hangings Someroski commissioned in Atwaedaga are displayed alongside pottery in this 1996 exhibition photograph. The photograph is presently in the possession of one of the weavers with whom Someroski worked.

> To conjure even for a moment the wistfulness that is the past is like trying to gather in one's arms the color of the distance, but if it is achieved, what sweetness, that vivid present of theirs, how faint it grows. The past is only the present become invisible and mute, and because it is invisible and mute, its memoried glances and its murmurs are infinitely precious. We are tomorrow's past. Even now, we slip away. The dial turns, and we that were the new thing, gather magic as we go. The whir of the spinning wheels is ceased in our parlors, and we hear no more the treadles of the loom, the swift, silken noise of the flown shuttle, the thud of the batten. But the *imagination* hears them, and theirs is the melody of romance.

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[36] Thanks to Magnus Fiskesjö for pointing out that these parks in Norway and Sweden were not pre-existing villages.

[37] While *The Mat Weavers of Ceylon* was Someroski's original title for the film, and the title noted in the film itself, the documentary has been re-titled *Weaving of Ceylon*, and is cited as such in the bibliography.

For Someroski, the encounter with Atwaedagama's present was an encounter with the "wistfulness" described by Webb, the village representing, as he put it, "a remarkable link" with the past. Importantly, and in keeping with a "globalist" notion of cultural heritage gaining traction at the time (Blake 2000:75)—a notion owing greatly to UNESCO's efforts around "the task of preserving the crumbling remains of…the 'global patrimony'" (Betts 2015:249)—Someroski conceived of the "historical treasure" to be found in Atwaedagama as belonging not just to the past of Ceylon, but more broadly to "Our past," a shared past of humanity in general.

A team of Smithsonian Institution-sponsored researchers carrying out an island-wide "ethnotechnological" study would soon follow on Someroski's heels. Their efforts would also reinforce the area's representation as the seat of an ancient technology on the brink of irreparable loss to mankind. Beyond the many disciplinary scholars standing to benefit from the study of the "materials, processes, skills and artifacts of Ceylon's highly creative arts and crafts," the principal investigator of the study argued, "the world itself needs to know of their existence" ("Department of Anthropology Ancient Technology Program—July 1970").

To give a sense of the general and somewhat ironic impetus for this project, an excess of imports and a drop in the price of agricultural exports throughout the 1950s helped motivate Ceylon's participation in the Food for Freedom program, an aid initiative that the United States implemented in the mid 1950s under The Agricultural Trade Development and Assistance Act, otherwise known as Public Law 480 (Bjorkman 2008; K.M 1958; Steinberg et al. 1982). A persistent drought between 1954 and 1956 compounded the difficulties that Ceylon already faced in meeting domestic food requirements, and the absence of a robust industrial basis from which exports might help to mitigate losses left it facing a tremendous shortage of foreign exchange (K.M. 1958; Pfaffenberger 1993; Wijesinghe 1976). An ensuing reliance upon the importation of

surplus agricultural products from the United States (made available through "Food for Freedom") led at the same time to the country's placement on the United States' list of "excess currency" nations, or those for which, by the mid-1960s, the "U.S. government technically held staggering amounts of local currencies" (Lewis 2003:93). In 1965, after the U.S. Congress mandated that the money be spent, the Smithsonian Institution, which falls under Congressional authority, implemented its large grant-making "Foreign Currency Program." Ceylon, along with Poland, Egypt, India, Pakistan, and several other countries, was targeted for a series of zoological, entomological, archaeological and anthropological projects, one of which was a "Study of Disappearing Traditional Crafts, Industries and Technologies" ("Abstract of Specific Projects"). Coomaraswamy and others had earlier lamented that the trend toward increasing reliance on foreign imports had left the "arts and crafts" of Ceylon "worsened and often wholly perished" (Coomaraswamy 2004:1). Ironically, this same trend had now helped to furnish conditions for the study of what Smithsonian Institution administrators, recapitulating a now firmly established narrative of perpetual demise, described as "the technology of the rapidly disappearing traditional crafts and home industries" ("Abstract of Specific Projects").

Figure 11-A man in Atwaedagama demonstrates the production of "dusters" for Smithsonian Institution-sponsored researchers, circa 1970. Human Studies Film Archive, National Museum of Natural History.

As part of the subsequent effort to spend these sums of foreign currencies, between 1968 and 1973 Smithsonian-sponsored researchers from the United States, Ceylon, and Australia

descended upon twenty-three local sites selected as exemplary of Ceylon's "ancient technology." Four of these sites were in Kandy, the region in which Atwaedagama is located. Researchers collected samples and documented the core technical elements of brass work, lacquer-work, ivory work, wood carving, mask making, pottery, and gold and silver work. In Atwaedagama, selected for its *Dumbara* mat weaving, they generated an array of photographs and film footage of the area's residents. The silent film footage is a series of carefully choreographed demonstrations of individuals constructing a loom, weaving mats, producing "fly-whisks" (*chamara*) or what are today more popularly referred to as "dusters," carrying bundles of *hana* leaves, and scraping, dyeing, and spinning the leaves' long, white fibers ("Making a Whisk Broom, ca. 1970"; "Dumbara Spinning and Weaving"; "String Making," "Preparation and Spinning of Jute Fibre; ca. 1970"; "Dumbara Spinning and Weaving").

Perhaps in part owing to the dictates of the videography equipment at hand, the need for light foremost among them, the Smithsonian researchers' relatively abstracted portrayal of such activities also suggests their minimal concern with what contemporary residents of the area regard as "unnecessary, sociological information" unfit for wider consumption. Several lags between recording and action reveal the directorial contrivance behind the film's subjects' engagement in a sequence of undertakings that, while ordinary in purpose, are unusual in the context of their execution. Activities that, today at least, are otherwise pursued amid the bustle of household and village social life are filmed against more quiet backdrops to privilege their bare technical elements. A loom is constructed along the middle of a mud path under the blazing mid-day sun, and a duster is fashioned by a man in the center of a field at the perimeter of the village. This relative decontextualization notwithstanding, in field reports collected alongside the footage researchers were sure not only to mention and thereby reinforce the industry's caste association,

or the very "sociological detail" whose continued prominence in contemporary writing Atwaedagama's residents resent so wholeheartedly, but also to highlight that caste "community's" continued dwindling. Echoing a popular narrative of the industry's regal origins, they observed:

> The Kinnarayo Caste have for centuries woven the traditional mats of Ceylon, using natural materials and dyes; they were in the time of the Ceylonese kings under royal patronage. Today few of these people are to be found and one of the principal centres…is in the Central Province. Full records were made of the craft, moving from the initial spinning with the ancient hand spindle, to the operation of the primitive loom. Examples of mats and all equipment were obtained for the Smithsonian Institution (SI Application, Ceylon and Pakistan).

Clifford Evans, the Smithsonian program's coordinator and then Chairman of the Department of Anthropology at the National Museum of Natural History, received a letter in February 1974 requesting financial support for a study of the sort of information with which the Ancient Technologies project was only peripherally concerned. P. Wimalasiri, then a Research Officer in the Department of Education at the University of Ceylon, proposed to study the "Persistence and Change of Kinnara Villages" ("Department of Anthropology Ancient Technology Program, Haynes—January 1973"). Focusing on thirteen locales, including Atwaedagama, he would engage in the "collection of facts and data concerning the social, economic, and educational aspects of the Kinnarayas" in "order to get a complete picture of the community" ("Department of Anthropology Ancient Technology Program, Haynes—January 1973"). Wimalasiri's project was not ultimately funded, the Smithsonian-sponsored research initiative on Sri Lanka's Ancient Technologies having already wrapped up by the time his request was received. His proposal, however, is indicative of Atwaedagama's by then established place in the scholarly imagination as the site not just of a "traditional handicraft," but also of a population whose identification as

essentially traditional and socially unique would, to the dismay of the area's present-day residents, recommend it for scholarly and journalistic investigation for many years to come.

The Troubles of an "Exalted" Heritage

Earlier scholars who visited Atwaedagama remarked on the enthusiasm with which residents related tales of the area's past and of the *hana* industry's origins. Raghavan, for instance, reported, "[T]hey are easily drawn into talking of themselves. They tell of the past, of their traditions and their ancestors, [and of] the brothers Satta Duraya and Gabada Duraya appointed by royal favour to supply mats to the Kandyan court, conferring on them the village site…by a royal decree or Sannas" (Raghavan 1951:221). Likewise, in *The Mat Weavers of Ceylon*, Someroski recounted the spontaneity with which the weavers he knew narrated the "former days":

> The mountains are home for the world-renowned Dumbara weavers. In a settlement near Kandy, the former capital, they have lived for ages, simple lives, pursuing their craft of mat weaving. They will tell tales of former days, when their ancestors wove mats for the Kandyan kings, who in turn conferred the village site on them by royal decree. The old men nod in the tropical sun, but if you disturb their peace, they smile and are quick to reminisce about days past.

A variation on this reported eagerness to "reminisce about days past" is reiterated in the comparatively recent writing of independent scholar Patrick Harrigan.[38] Referring to "the Kinnaraya" as one of several indigenous communities in Sri Lanka, Harrigan writes of a tendency among them to trace their communal origins. The language he uses to characterize this phenomenon reinforces the image of a culturally integrated people set apart from broader

[38] Harrigan, a native of Michigan, has periodically lived in Sri Lanka since the early 1970s. He is reported to have focused his doctoral research in comparative religion on the country, although "his dissertation was never accepted" (Patton 2009).

society.[39] Hailing them as "a community" who, "despite harsh economic conditions…still preserve a sizable share of the island's indigenous heritage," Harrigan explains that the Kinnara possess a "*trait* of tracing…ancestors back to the realm of yakshas and other semi-divine spirits" (Harrigan n.d., emphasis added).

My own observations regarding Atwaedagama residents' orientations to the past, made decades after Someroski and Raghavan visited the area, are quite different. I found that, to many such residents, there is a significant association between occupational departures from the industry for which the village is known and the positive transformation that they believe it has undergone since the period in which scholarly interest in the area first flourished.

When I first arrived in Atwaedagama, I was explicitly advised by a local representative of the National Crafts Council (NCC) *not* to inquire of the area's residents about their "past." As I soon learned, "history" (*itihaasa*) was something of a dirty word, a term whose very invocation was one of the surest ways to terminate a conversation even before it had begun. Offering an illustrative example of the manner in which the sort of nationalist narrative of Sri Lanka's traditional arts and crafts examined in the foregoing chapter articulates with the present-day operation of ostensibly pre-modern hierarchical forms, the man who advised me thus would, just a short time later, invoke "history" in a strikingly public forum. In a community meeting that, like all community meetings, was held in the village's "*Dumbara* mat training center" (*Dumbura paeduru puhunu madhyastaaneya*), he delivered a speech (undoubtedly in part for my benefit) in

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[39] Harrigan's idiosyncratic use of the term "indigenous" recalls the inconsistency in the Kinnara's sociologically categorization (as "tribe," "caste," and "race") over the 19th and 20th centuries.

which he implored the roughly fifty men and women in the audience to enjoy the pride that he sees deriving from the industry and, in particular, its history:

> [W]e must think, 'my god, this is our industry. Are these the things that should be studied at the university level?' And the answer is, 'Yes, these are the things that should be studied. These are village-based industries. Their histories, how they have evolved.' Such research is done and books are published because, in the end, that's what will remain…You may also know that Ananda Coomaraswamy has written about this industry. You may have read that. Is there anyone here who has read the book? Have you heard about the Dumbara verses [*kavi*]? Have you seen them? Have you heard these? So, definitely, the present generation, you must have that pride [*abimaaneya*].

In a move reminiscent not only of Someroski's equation of Atwaedagama's present with "Our past," but also of the discursive construction of *collectively* held national heritage examined in the previous chapter, this NCC officer refers to the industry as "ours" before setting the imperative to feel the "pride" emanating from it squarely on the shoulders of those convened. Of more immediate relevance to the present discussion, however, is his invocation of a past about which, as he is aware, those in his audience express remarkable unease. In doing so, the officer recapitulates the NCC's more general interest in establishing the deep historical roots—and, thereby, reaffirms the connection between these roots and the contemporary legitimacy and praiseworthiness—of the country's "craft heritage." Elaborating upon what is presented as an "uninterrupted" history of "our crafts," for instance, the homepage of the agency's website draws upon the tale of the Theri Sanghamitta in delineating the origins of the country's "ancient" and "exalted" heritage:

> When the nun Sangamitta, daughter of Emperor Asoka of Kalinga of India, came to Sri Lanka bringing a sapling of the Bo (Peepal or Pippal) Tree under which prince Siddhartha attained enlightenment, along with her she brought people of 18 castes (castes meaning crafts or professions). Commencing with such august beginnings, our crafts have, over almost 2500 years of development, chartered…[an] independent trail of artistic creativity and creative craftsmanship that is distinctly our own (National Crafts Council 2013).

The equation of caste with “craft” or “profession” is notable for its simplification of the many and historically variable social, political and economic implications of caste-based identification in Sri Lanka.[40] It thus conjures the early post-independence efforts detailed in Chapter 2 to sanitize craft of its caste associations so that it might properly serve as the embodiment of *national* heritage. This narrative of the venerable origins and inherent worth of “national crafts’” may also deflect a reckoning, however, with the poverty that Atwaedagama’s residents have endured and that many of them associate with a history of caste-based marginalization.[41] The notion of an illustriousness believed to stem from “august beginnings” has in fact at times competed with the impulse motivating Raghavan’s efforts to document and address the social and economic deprivation suffered by the so-called Backward Communities of the 1950s and 1960s. In a review of *Niyanda Rata* published in the *Ceylon Daily News,* for example, author A.J. Gunawardena (c.1963) engaged in a certain whitewashing of such poverty in writing of Atwaedagama thus:

> Its tumbledown dwellings, ill-clad, unkempt children tell the sad tale of indigence common to such villages. But [Atwaedagama] is also different, as the sight of certain special activities informs the visitor. For it is here that the famed Dumbara mats are made. So, despite the appearance of material poverty, the people are actually rich: they possess a wealth of inherited and acquired skills. Those who own or have seen Dumbara mats and other ‘hana’ crafts will know what these skills are like (Gunawardena c.1963).

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[40] See, for example: Nirmal Dewasiri, *The Adaptable Peasant;* Newton Gunasinghe, *Changing Socio-Economic Relations*; Kumari Jayawardena, *Nobodies to Somebodies;* John Rogers, “Post-Orientalism”; Yalman, “The Flexibility of Caste Principles”; Silva et al, “Castless or Caste-Blind?”; Uyangoda and De Mel, *Reframing Democracy.*

[41] As Uyangoda has written elsewhere with respect to those identified as Kinnara in particular, “Poverty (*duppathkama*) is an indexical reference to both their economic deprivation and social marginalization” (Uyangoda 2013:290). Jabbar (2005) has recently documented this link between economic deprivation and social marginalization regarding caste status more generally: “Among the high castes—irrespective of location, a majority (75% and 54%) have an income level above the upper poverty line. In contrast, among the lower caste villages, only 45% of semi-urban and 30% or rural villagers are at this income level. The difference in income between the low and high caste villages is wider in rural areas than in semi-urban areas” (9).

For Gunawardena, the evident "material poverty" one would have witnessed in Atwaedagama in the mid-1960s obscures its residents' enjoyment of a more substantial if less immediately perceptible affluence, the richness that obtains in the "inherited and acquired skills" entailed in "the traditional handicrafts of the Sinhalese people." In a similar vein, the narrator of *Weavers of Ceylon*, as if anticipating a pitying response from the film's viewers, soothes his apprehensive listeners, "If there is a certain poverty here, there is also a certain peace, and perhaps they are better off for that." Citing "a Sinhalese folk song," the voice beseeches an illusory, idealized artisan to suffer the indignities of his destitution for the sake of his knowledge as a craftsman:

> Oh, brother, if thou art bent on play and sport all the time, no crafts thou will learn and a silly man thou will be. Though clad in rags and going abegging, give up not the love to learn. With knowledge thus acquired, a bright future will be thy reward (Someroski 1985).

As noted above, in my own encounters with the present-day residents of Atwaedagama, I found little to suggest an essentially positive orientation to the past described by these authors. Nor did I observe anything like a happy acceptance of a trade between a wealth of "craft knowledge" and conditions of destitution. While many of my interlocutors were happy to report that poverty in the village has diminished considerably in their own lifetimes, they indicated that they identify that former poverty with the *hana* industry. To be clear, this is not to suggest that craftspeople and others in Atwaedagama are uniformly bitter toward the variety of activities denoted by "the *hana* industry." Much like the narratives about them and their work, their sentiments toward the industry are multiple and even at times contradictory. Many of those engaged in such activities stress their appreciation for the "freedom" (*nidahasa*) of *hana* work—the ability to work at one's own pace and while looking after one's children, for instance—something seen as wanting in factory employment and other potentially more lucrative alternatives outside the home. Despite

the extent to which they feel the industry's association with being "low" is reinforced in popular and scholarly accounts, several in Atwaedagama in fact voiced a preference for *hana* work because it does not require them to work "under" anyone else. However, in my conversations with them, in any case, individuals tended not to reference the industry's "august origins" in expressing such preference. The ambivalence that I found tends to overwhelm expression of such liking for the work congeals around a discomfort with aspects of a "past" highlighted in contemporary representations of the village and the *hana* industry.

To appreciate expressions of this discomfort and the plea that often accompanies them—to consider the implications that the scholarly and popular fixation on their "history" and purported indigeneity has not for the adult residents of Atwaedagama, but for their children—I would argue that is necessary to recognize something that neither Someroski nor any of the other researchers and writers who descended on the village in the second half of the 20th century could have anticipated: to the degree that Atwaedagama's present-day residents assert their removal from the penury that dominates representations of their past, they most commonly attribute such improvement not to realizing the "bright future" promised by their engagement in the *hana* industry, but to the alternative opportunities for wealth accumulation that they have met in the intervening years.

In the time since Someroski and others described above visited Atwaedagama, the village has transformed in remarkable ways, the most significant and immediately noticeable of which as far as its residents are concerned pertains to the quality and durability of the homes to be found there. In my written correspondence with Lucky De Silva, he related, "While researching and filming *Niyanda Rata* I stayed almost two weeks in the wattle and daub houses with thatched roofs in the village that were so cool. The floors were polished with fresh cow dung. We slept on

rattan mats." By 2013, only a couple of wattle and daub buildings still existed in Atwaedagama, and neither was occupied. When I emailed him a photograph of a house typical of the structures that have taken their place, de Silva replied with a statement of his unequivocal aversion toward such "awful cement brick houses…now popping up in rural Sri Lanka." He echoed a relatively common reaction among upper-class Sri Lankans as to the transformation from what they tend to view as sustainable architectural practices to those largely cement structures encouraged if not forced upon people by economic transformation. The residents of Atwaedagama do not share this sentiment, however, a fact that is unsurprising when one considers that, as Uyangoda has pointed out in discussing the dictates of a "caste-defined rural architecture," there was a time at which those identified as Kinnara were "not supposed to build houses with permanent or semipermanent features such as mud or brick walls, or even roofs covered by coconut leaves" (Uyangoda 2012:39; see also Gilbert 1953:300).

In my conversations with them, many in Atwaedagama pointed with pride to the structures that have taken the place of their once wattle and daub dwellings. They delighted in recalling what they regard as the exceptional generosity of "Premadasa Mahathaya," or Prime Minister and later President Ranasinghe Premadasa, who they credit with this transformation. Premadasa's own low caste status made his rise to power unprecedented in Sri Lankan politics and, while I did not encounter the idea in Atwaedagama, it is not unusual for those discussing his commitment to policies around rural poverty to invoke the leader's lowly caste and class background to explain his efforts in this regard. In 1986, as part of Premadasa's ambitious and highly controversial national housing development program, The Million Houses Project, Atwaedagama's wattle and daub dwellings—much like such dwellings in hundreds of other villages around the country—were replaced with simple but comparatively durable brick and

cement block homes. Their roofs are no longer thatched, but made of tile or *takaran* (corrugated metal or asbestos sheeting). When increasing numbers of women from the area began taking employment as domestic workers overseas in the mid to late 1980s, the village's newfound wealth was directed toward adding onto these homes or, in some cases, paving them over with foundations for entirely new and equally durable structures.[42]

For all but a few of Atwaedagama's present-day residents, the ability to independently finance the construction of brick and mortar homes or to add onto those built under Premadasa's development program derives not from their success in the *hana* industry, but from avenues of employment that demand skills far removed from those they are said to have "inherited," and more specifically from labor overseas. In his mid-20th century reports, Raghavan noted that "The Kinnaraya" not only "remains rooted to his traditional mooring in out of the way quarters of the Island, where even to ferret him out is difficult," but also possesses "little or no interests outside [his] craft" (Raghavan 1962:180; Raghavan 1951:221). Raghavan would undoubtedly be surprised by the diversity of employment in Atwaedagama today. Sixty percent of the village's ninety households reported in the last census (2011) to be somehow engaged in the *hana* industry.[43] In fact, there are few households in which no one can be said to carry out at least some form of *hana* industry-related activity, whether it be weaving, sewing, making dusters, or something else. At the same time, however, there are few households for which earnings from such an activity are not just one among several streams of income, the others generally flowing from casual labor well beyond their "traditional mooring." Mat weaving has always been and

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42 Bernardo Brown (2011) documents a comparable phenomenon among Sri Lankan Catholic migrant workers in Negombo who, unable to translate wealth earned overseas into upward social mobility upon returning home to Sri Lanka, pour their earnings into the construction of large homes and the consumption of luxury goods.

43 Unpublished data acquired at the Department of Census and Statistics, Colombo, 2015.

continues to be privileged in accounts of "the Kinnara," and in this sense serves centrally in the reification of "the Kinnara" as a social category conceived variously as distinct from and belonging but inferior to the Sinhalese. At the same time, however, this occupational diversity was documented in the early 1950s and very likely existed much earlier than that. About a decade prior to Raghavan's observations, Ryan reported of the Kinnara in the Kandyan region that "their major sources of income are through weaving a particularly attractive mat, and through casual labor" (1953:130).

Today, many men from Atwaedagama take advantage of day labor opportunities in the development of roads, housing, and telecommunications infrastructure both locally and in other parts of the country. There are several lorry, bus, and three-wheeler drivers, as well as a small number of young men and women who have taken up employment in a nearby garment factory. Within the village, there is a family that operates a spice grinding business, another that produces poultry feed, and several that run small shops or *kades*.[44] By far the most popular form of employment beyond the *hana* industry, however, and the one that most consistently delivers good returns to those who engage in it, is that which may be secured overseas (See Chapter 1). At the time of my research between 2013 and 2015, at least one person from almost every household had either been abroad, was abroad, or was looking forward to going abroad as soon

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[44] It is important to note here that, despite the range of employment opportunities available to Atwaedagama's residents, there is very little in the way of "white-collar" jobs. This is consistent with recent findings on the relationship between caste and poverty among the Sinhalese and, in particular, with Jabbar's observation that "the abandoning of caste-based occupations is not a sufficient indication of equal upward movement on the social ladder" and that "although the practice of hereditary caste occupations has declined substantially, it appears that the type of work and status available under the modern occupational hierarchy continues to reflect a caste dimension" (Jabbar 2005:16).

as her children were old enough.[45] Engagement in the *hana* industry, though ubiquitous in Atwaedagama, typically supplements these other sources of household income or is resorted to when other opportunities dry up.

As already indicated, dominant attitudes toward the activities that Atwaedagama residents today refer to as *hana* work are ambivalent. They bear little of the categorical pride to which geographer Chandima Daskon, reproducing the post-independence narrative of Kandyan craft superiority examined in the previous chapter, writes when she argues that "rural Kandyan villages with sufficient traces of traditional culture, skillful craftsmen, and their handiworks" may claim "superiority as the proud upholder of traditional customs, religion and national cultural identity" (Daskon 2010b:46). (Daskon is referring specifically to artisans in Atwaedagama and several other villages around Kandy.) Neither do such dominant attitudes conform to the surprising claim made more recently by another author with respect to Atwaedagama: "Members of the caste here do not look down upon this age-old occupation of theirs and have turned it into a lucrative business" (Hussein 2013:240).

While it is true that some have turned relatively strong profits from the *hana* industry, they are a small minority. Many more express reservations about the work, and they do so precisely *because* it is so often written about, as it is in Hussein's remarks, in reference *to* their caste status. Speaking of what he perceived as a decline in the number of people who dedicate themselves to the industry rather than to pursuing alternative employment opportunities outside

[45] In June 2013, the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment issued a highly controversial circular mandating that all women must file a Family Background Report (FBR) before departing for overseas domestic employment and banning any woman with a child under the age of five from migrating (Jayasundere, Abeyasekera, and Idemegama n.d.:7).

of the village, a middle-aged man echoed Damayanthi's declaration as to the "worthlessness" of the industry, noting, "It's already mostly gone, and we like it like that."

I found pointed remarks such as this to be somewhat rare. More common were efforts, like that of Damayanthi, to establish a certain distance between oneself and the industry. During my initial visits to Atwaedagama, I was struck by the number of men and women who downplayed their involvement in or even denied outright that they engage in any sort of activity related to the *hana* industry. Gayan, a man in his early thirties and one of the first individuals I met in the village, was one such individual. When I first encountered him, he was standing at the edge of a narrow and soon-to-be paved dirt lane, casually engaged in one of the more elemental tasks entailed in *hana* work, preparing a bunch of recently dyed and dried bright orange *hana* fibers for the dusters he makes and sells to small shops and on the street in towns throughout the country. With his left hand, he gripped one end of the long fibers and, with the right, vigorously brushed out any tangles that might impede his labor later on. Catching his eye, I introduced myself and told him of my interest in learning about the work in which he was presently engaged. Gayan stuck out his tongue to indicate his displeasure and, kicking gently at the orange specks of dust settling at his feet, nodded over his shoulder toward the newly constructed and freshly painted lime green home directly behind him. "This," he explained, turning out his hands to offer up his present task, isn't really what he does. A smile lighting up his face, he related that he was in Qatar until recently and that it was with the money he earned as a driver there that he has been able to build his own home. "I had a van before, too, but I sold it to finish the house," he noted with satisfaction. In my ensuing conversations with Gayan, many of them, it must be noted, carried out while he was sewing dusters in his neighbor's small weaving workshop, he

would often stress his ability to do “any kind of job,” and would eagerly reminisce about his adventure living overseas.

Assurances like Gayan’s as to the possession of skills beyond those required of the *hana* industry came most often from men in their 20s and 30s. On several occasions, they prompted a discussion about what residents perceive as their humiliating portrayal in local newspapers and scholarly accounts. Such discussions, which will be the primary focus of the remaining pages of this chapter, revealed a wish on the part of many of Atwaedagama’s residents to sever the industry from its historically recognized lineage basis, something that, though typically highlighted in writing about the industry, they deem irrelevant in the present. As importantly, they demonstrated the often creative indirectness with which nearly all my interlocutors in Atwaedagama would talk about that thing which, among the Sinhalese, is not to be discussed publicly: caste. Whereas a few individuals, including two I shall quote at length, were explicit in locating the impetus for such claims to shame in the publication of caste-related details, invoking either the Portuguese-derived English term “caste” or the term often regarded as its closest Sinhala approximation, *kulaya*, most were loath to broach the topic so directly.

Where Caste is Past

I arrived one afternoon at the home of an elderly widow, Yuvani, to find her sitting in the doorway to her small, blue house, bunches of orange and yellow *hana* fibers strewn across the floor behind her. A dozen or so Albizia branches, stripped of their bark and waiting to be shaped into smooth cylindrical handles, were neatly arranged against the outer wall of her home. Yuvani escorted me through the darkened entry hall behind her, where several more branches lay beside a heap of thick, green *hana* leaves, and into her living room. Pointing fondly to her husband’s framed photograph hanging on the wall, she explained how, until about five months prior when

he passed away, she had worked alongside him to weave entire mats and then incorporate the woven fabric into doll-shaped letter holders that he would either peddle on the street or sell to a middleman in the village. Without her partner in a task generally considered to be a two-person undertaking, she had given up weaving and was now exclusively making dusters.

As Yuvani recounted the difficulty she now faced working on her own, a young man appeared in the doorway. Introducing him as her neighbor, Yuvani noted off-handedly that the man's wife also made dusters. Turning to me and responding as if I myself had made the statement, he declared defensively, "No. Are you crazy? We don't do it just because she [Yuvani] does it. Is this a job? This is no use!" Not long after our meeting, I would meet this man's wife, a bunch of *hana* draped over her left forearm as she brushed the knots out of another, and would come to discover that his mother, Malini, was once regarded as among the most highly skilled weavers in the village. In Someroski's 1968 film, Malini appears as a child joyously assisting her own mother in threading her loom. Referring to making dusters as a "disgusting job" (*jaraa rassawak*), her son now dismissed my suggestion that perhaps he finds the income insufficient and instead clarified, "This job just doesn't suit us…there are so many other jobs to do, now." Later, when we were alone again, Yuvani explained her neighbor's and others' fear that my ultimate intention was to do as they believed other writers have done—that is, to "write *all* these things" and to "look down upon the industry." His performed abhorrence toward the industry stemmed, she suggested, from a belief that, I was like other students and scholars who have written of the village in recent years. He feared, in other words, that I would ultimately belittle Atwaedagama's residents by reaffirming the industry's caste basis or, in her words, writing about it "in such a way that it becomes historical" (i.e. reaffirming in the written historical record that the industry is caste-based).

> He's worried that you'll write *all* these things and take it and put it in the papers, right? Like you will look down upon the industry [*eeka karmaanteyaTa helaadaekimak washeyen*]. They don't like it. Even recently there was something written. [Lowers voice] It's like disrespecting one's race/nationality, right [*tamange jaatiyata agawuruweyakeranawa wage nee*]? …You know, [writing about] it in such a way that it becomes historical [*itihaasagatawena widiyata owa keranawa*]…A lot of people write things down and go and write books and publish it in papers, and they do this and that. You know, people don't like it, right? Now, we can say that the elderly people will die soon, but what about the next generation?

Before our conversation ended, Yuvani volunteered that it is her own financial desperation that motivates her to make dusters: "I don't want to lie, but I'm doing this because there is no one to look after me. I rely on this so that I can at least buy bread. I have two daughters, but they also have kids, so they don't look after me and, after my husband died, I just started doing these things to earn something."

On another occasion, my research assistant and I had been sitting in the workshop adjoining an elderly couple's home, asking them about the kinds of work in which they had engaged as artisans over their lifetimes. As we were chatting, a group of six curious men settled into the space to listen to our conversation. Requesting clarification with respect to a division of labor across the village, noting that "some people clean *hana,* some stitch, some do both," my assistant was abruptly cut off when a young man now settled against the brick workshop wall interjected, "Some are against it all!" Registering a look of disappointment on our hosts' faces, I reassured them of our admiration for their work and suggested that they must feel proud of their abilities. To this, the same man replied with indignation, "You mean we should be proud of *this* job? Oh, man, we are so fed up with it!" Echoing Gayan's emphasis on his ability to do "any kind of job," he nearly shouted before falling silent, "There are plenty of other jobs that we can do!" Several of those present, including our hosts, began to explain his outburst by recounting the industry's portrayal in a recent Sinhala newspaper article. My hostess reiterated how this

portrayal had resulted in a reluctance among the area's residents to speak to students and scholars visiting the village (many knew that I had encountered this reluctance and was grappling to understand it.) Almost apologizing her for the young man's behavior, she offered me an explanation peppered with references to villagers' visual depiction in such accounts and to the "improper" inclusion of "unnecessary information" in writing about the industry:

> All the people are scared because of the newspaper article. They have taken pictures of people shirtless and of how women clean the *hana* plant and how they prepare the thread. *Everything* is in the papers. It was said like—it was put down in an improper way [*nomanaa widiyata dalatibba*]. We are telling the truth. That's why nobody likes to give information about us. Students from Colombo used to come to get information from us, but now nobody likes to give out any details at all. It's okay to take information and it's even okay to put it in newspapers, but one should know how to put it properly. Unnecessary information should not be put in papers. It brings shame upon us [*lajjaawata patkeranawa*].

A middle-aged man agreed, "[they] come and take ugly pictures of us…[and describe] how this job is done by the lineage, how only the people who come from certain families do it." When another noted that their primary concern was with the implications that such representations have not for themselves but, more importantly, for their children, an older man sitting beside him elaborated, "Right, even when it comes to getting the kids into a school, they will say, 'Oh, this child is from *that* village, so they are like this and that, so…' So that's why [we're upset]." After a young man pointed out that, despite there being several other villages in the area, Atwaedagama had been singled out, others agreed, one reiterating that journalists "ridiculed us and put it in the paper [*charter kerala dala tibe*]," and another adding, "It's a huge disgrace [*kaelala*-black mark, stain, dishonor] for us."

Sarath and his wife, Chandi, both in their mid-sixties and reliant upon making and selling purses to meet their daily expenses, expressed a similar concern during a conversation in their home. "The thing is," Sarath explained, "[people] come here and write *everything,* like from the

beginning. How we were born, *everything*. So, it hurts us, and our children also don't like it. That's what it is. That's why it's not nice. It's okay to write about the industry, and 'this is how they do the *hana* work,' but they write about our lineage, our great grandparents' time—[for example], 'this is what they did, this is how they did it…' Some people put *everything* about our racial differences [*jaatibheda*], this and that [*ananmanan*], and everything."

Ruwan, a man who, along with his wife and several close relatives, would become one of my most trusted and generous interlocutors in Atwaedagama, also complained of the popular and scholarly preoccupation with the industry's supposed origins and with the "old ways" associated with the area's residents. On an afternoon in early May 2014, my assistant and I visited him in the village's training center (*madhyastaaneya*) to see if he could shed some light on the evident wariness with which many in the area received "outsiders" like ourselves. When we found him, Ruwan was vigorously pumping his foot at an old electric sewing machine. Noting that he had found the center without electricity when he arrived in the morning, he was now working tirelessly to complete an order for several dozen small change purses. As was always the case, however, he welcomed us with a smile and, despite the less-than-ideal working conditions, patiently explained:

> Some people collect information and put it in papers and they say this and that [*anang manang*]. We were insulted [*sauttukera*]…There was a person from Colombo and he collected a lot of information and then wrote it a very bad way. In the old way [pause] old stories [*parana widihata…parana kataa*]. He mentioned how it was before, in the olden times.
> Q: What do you mean by 'old stories'?
> What I mean by old ways is how this job came into being. But those are things that are not relevant [*adaala*] to him. Collect the information nicely. That should have been it.
> Q: Why did that upset people in the village?
> The paper said how the job was done in the old ways. How it's all lineage-based [*paramparika*]. The younger generation doesn't like that. He mentioned a lot of things about the old ways. Things about the olden times [*hanamithi kaale*] were mentioned. In those days, people were very poor. Because those things were mentioned, people didn't

> like it. They didn't even have proper clothing at that time. They wore the *amude*[46]…So, he had collected that information, all this old news [*paranuwa puwat*], and put it in the newspaper.

As Uyangoda has observed with respect to the Kinnara, "poverty (*duppathkama*) is an indexical reference to both their economic deprivation and social marginalization" (Uyangoda 2013:290; See note 36, this chapter). This excerpt from my conversation with Ruwan indicates that the shamefulness of such portrayals obtains not only in their highlighting that the industry is based in lineage, taken generally as a reference to caste status, but also in their representation of what many in the village recall as the severe, caste-based poverty that past residents of the village suffered.

Importantly, the accounts of Ruwan and the others presented here illustrate the indirectness and discomfort that I often encountered when it came to identifying the insult at hand. While many would readily launch invectives against the writings of "outsiders," they became hesitant and discomposed when our discussions turned to the object of their complaint. Like Sarath and others above, my interlocutors in the area would generally not only become noticeably quiet when discussing their representation in writings about the village, but also would often rely on ambiguous expressions such as "writing in *this* way" (*mehema liyanawa*), "writing unnecessary things" [*ona naeti dee liyanawa*], or "writing old things" [*parana dee liyanawa*] to identify the general offense. Combined with references to lineage, poverty, origins, and "old ways," such expressions served as references for caste, something that was not named explicitly.

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[46] The *amude* has been described as "a piece of cloth used to pass between the legs from the front to behind for the purse of tucking up the lower garments" (Clough 2010 [1892]: 44). It is often translated as a "loin cloth" or "span cloth," the latter amounting to "a broad cover piece hanging in front and a narrow band of cloth at the back" (Lakdusinghe 1999: 21).

To relate an especially remarkable instance of such obliqueness, my research assistant, Shifna, and I had been having a conversation with a young woman, Roshani, about newspaper articles that have referred to the village when the latter complained that writers "demean the job" [*ee rassaawa baaldukeranawa*]. I asked Roshani to clarify what she meant, and with adroit circuitousness she explained that the crux of the insult resides in the village residents' identification as socially inferior: "That means, this job…that means, 'this job is not good for you all.' You know...have you gone to the police station in [the nearby town]? There is another village near there, so, like *that*…we are like that, so," pausing as if to swallow her words, "[they're saying] that we don't match their status [*tarama*]."

The nearby village to which Roshani refers is known locally to be inhabited by individuals identified as "Rodiya," the only group commonly regarded as inferior to those in Atwaedagama in terms of caste status. While making clear that writers don't simply demean the job, but more significantly the people *doing* that job, Roshani draws on this local knowledge to convey her message indirectly, noting in reference to the nearby village, "we are like that."[47]

In addition to using phrases like "*mee paramparaawe jatiya*" (this kind of lineage) or "*mee game minissu*" (people in/of this village), my interlocutors in Atwaedagama would regularly discuss the social difference reinforced in popular and scholarly writings about the village by deploying—and even still very hushedly—more ambiguous terms such as *jathiya* and *jathibheda,* words commonly glossed as "nationality" and "racial differences," respectively, and,

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[47] While the word "Kinnara"—the name used to identify the purported "caste community" to which those in Atwaedagama belong—is bandied about in the scholarly and popular writing with which residents of the village take issue, I never once heard it invoked by anyone from Atwaedagama. This is not unusual in rural Sinhala areas. As sociologist Kalinga Tudor Silva and others have pointed out, "caste names are rarely used in public," individuals often using phrases such as "'our one' (*ape ekkenek*) or 'an outsider' (*pita minihek, pita minissue*)" to identify themselves or others in terms of caste (Silva, Kotikabadde and Abeywickrama 2009:30).

as Stirrat has pointed out with respect to the former, more closely "related to the idea of 'kind' or 'species' or 'variety'" (Stirrat 1982:10).

Ultimately, it is in reference to caste-based identification or, more specifically, to "the subterranean ideology of social superiority and inferiority associated with hierarchically imagined caste distinctions" (Uyangoda 2012:36-37), that the full substance of complaints about being photographed shirtless or being described as engaged in an industry "passed down from generation to generation" comes into focus. Indeed, these two particular grievances refer directly to signifiers of social difference long enfolded into practices of caste-based identification among the Sinhalese in and around Kandy.

With regard to the first complaint, toward the end of the 19th century, John Ferguson, editor and co-owner of the *Ceylon Observer* wrote, "the people who consider themselves of the higher castes are now on the *qui vive* in many places to resent those of alleged lower castes dressing themselves above the waist" (Ferguson 1887:367). Well into the 20th century, A.P. Kannangara writes, "it could be said that the lower one was in the caste hierarchy, the less of one's body one is permitted to be covered [sic]" (Kannangara 2011:170). In 1949, Nandadeva Wijesekera called specific attention to Rodiyas and Kinnaras as among "the outcastes…prohibited by the villagers from wearing the normal peasant dress" (89), and it is likely to such prohibition that Jayadeva Uyangoda refers when he remarks more specifically on a recent practice among elderly women identified as Kinnara "not to wear a jacket or a blouse to cover the upper part of the body" (Uyangoda 2012:39). The erroneous notion that this particular practice is alive today is found in at least some popular literature: In his 2012 *Grandeur of the Lion,* Carl Muller cites Viscount George Velentia's early 19th century observation that "'the privilege of caste extends to the dress of females'" (Muller 2012: 84-85). "Even today," Muller

writes, “there is a general feeling that the low caste person should dress with no ostentation and women of the Pali, Kinnara and Rodi castes seldom wear a covering over the waist, avoid bangles, and the men wear no fancy sarongs, belts or shirts” (Muller 2012: 84-85). In light of such disparity in dress, the publication of photographs in which individuals historically regarded as among the most degraded of the Sinhalese castes are shown without their shirts may be understood as having a particular salience.[48]

The “caste structure” of the Kandyan kingdom is commonly regarded as “essentially a system of labour organization,” castes being “endogamous occupational groups” whose membership “was determined by birth alone” (Dewaraja 1988:288). It is fitting, then, that an emphasis on the lineage basis of this “traditional craft” would also be interpreted as a concern with status. We might recall here not only Damayanthi’s effort to distance herself from an image of lineage-based, generation-to-generation transmission of weaving knowledge, but also the aforementioned claims to occupational latitude made by many of the young men in Atwaedagama.

Unfortunately, as indicated above, such claims to occupational latitude say nothing of the role that caste status continues to play in one’s opportunities of occupational mobility. None of the alternative forms of employment in which residents of Atwaedagama are engaged would qualify as “white collar.” In the late 1990s, anthropologist Bob Simpson wrote, “[T]here is a progressive backing away from hereditary, stigmatized occupations among the low castes…such that the last vestiges of caste-based identity are rapidly being expunged” (Simpson 1997:44). As Jabbar notes, however, although there may be a general decline in the “practice of hereditary

[48] Also see Lakdusinghe 1999.

caste occupations…it appears that the type of work and status available under the modern occupational hierarchy continues to reflect a caste dimension" (Jabbar 2005:16).

Initially confused as to why emphasis on the *hana* industry's generation-to-generation transmission would be so troubling to them, I would often ask my interlocutors in Atwaedagama whether what we were talking about (without *naming it as such*) was in fact caste. While they would almost always nod their heads vigorously in confirmation, few would voluntarily enunciate the words "caste" or "*kulaya*" themselves. The indirectness and evidential discomfort with which they tended to broach the topic is remarkable because it typifies the very norm whose violation may be said to underlie the impassioned misgivings these residents harbor toward the journalists, scholars, and students who visit the village in the first place. For most Sinhalese, Jiggins writes, the discursive status of "caste" resembles that of "sex in Victorian society": It is a "'taboo' subject, and rarely spoken of openly" (Jiggins 1979:7).

One of the central reasons for this silence around caste, which, as I will argue, ultimately serves to disadvantage those in Atwaedagama who reproduce it, is that, as detailed in the introduction to this dissertation, caste is publicly regarded as, if not already in the past, then fast on its way there. Lakshman, a man who, as a skilled weaver, was highly regarded by all I met in Atwaedagama and someone who expressed a sharp sense of betrayal by one scholar who had visited and written about the area, both echoed this sense and demonstrated how his own grievances have been discounted as a result of it.

Lakshman was unusually forthright with me in discussing the portrayal of backwardness that he and others find in dominant representations of the village. In one of our conversations about the issue, he began with an oft-repeated account of the industry's caste-based origins. Going on to highlight the popularization of another historically caste-based practice, Kandyan

dancing and drumming, Lakshman criticized what he regards as the inclination among scholars to discriminately reinforce the link between such origins and the *hana* industry as it exists in Atwaedagama today:

> Of course, in Sri Lanka, when you take an industry from the beginning—there was a division of labor [*waeda wasankremaya*] fifty years ago…These industries belonged to several castes [*kula*]. It had been divided like that [*venkera tibuna*], but in the present [*warthamaaneya*] nobody likes it because now people even play the drum. Even though it belongs to a caste, even school children play the drum and dance. So, when this is the situation, which was *not* the case in the past, and they single us out and publish something about us in the paper, nobody likes it. So, when they see these things in the paper—you know, people come from universities to get information about our traditions and our lifestyle—those things are not necessary, right? They write down those kinds of things. I mean, things like habits and customs and traditions and language. So, they write and publish all of these things…Now, you see, this is a changing society, and we don't just stay the same from day to day. In the past [*yata giya dawas*], like fifty years ago, society was very different… So, when they try to equate what the society was like then to what it's like now, there will be problems!

Lakshman was evidently troubled by what he perceives as scholars' failure to admit changes in Atwaedagama, or to admit that what "society" was like "in the past" is not what it is like today. He decries such scholars' neglect of the dissolution of a once-dominant caste-based division of labor (*waeda wasankremaya*) among the Sinhalese. To Lakshman, this dissolution is exhibited in the widely known popularization of ritual dancing and drumming, or what Susan Reed has described as the "classicization" and "rationalization" processes through which practices "once regarded solely as the province of low-caste Berava males became respectable within the context of Sinhala nationalism" (Reed 2002:247). In theory if not in actuality, this transformation of dancing and drumming signals the success of efforts described in Chapter 2 to purify the "traditional arts and craft" of caste and to render them valuable as expressions of a *national* heritage to be engaged in and shared by all Sri Lankans. There is a subtle contradiction in Lakshman's account, however, that illustrates one way in which this nationalist vision of

heritage articulates with concerns with caste-based identification that, despite and perhaps even in part owing to the post-independence discursive sanitization of the “traditional arts,” are very much alive today. While things may not be as they were “fifty years ago” when there was a “division of labor,” the fact that suggesting otherwise has real implications, as Lakshman and his son would go on to indicate, points to the salience of caste in the present. When I asked Lakshman whether he had complained to anyone about the village’s representation in the publication with which he took greatest issue, he explained:

> I didn’t know about this book, but then I learned about it. There was this person who worked in Kadawatta. He got this book and he showed it to me and he said, ‘Look, there’s something being published about us, so look at it.’ So, I saw it and some others also read it and got really angry about it. After that, I gave [the author] a call and told him, ‘You even had *tea* at our place! We had a connection, we had a relationship, and you came to me and I helped you.’ I told him that what he had done was wrong and he said, ‘Oh, it’s not a problem for you all.’ [I said], ‘Well, look at the people who are politicians and big people—do you think that they would like their things [*eyaalage dewal*] to be published? Even *you* wouldn’t want such things to be published! So, it’s the same for us as well.’

The publication of “old things,” Lakshman explained, has induced the distaste that many in the village now express for the industry: “Now, see, our father’s generation also did this industry and we had that pride in us, but then, now, when the old things [*parana dewal*] come out in papers, even our children refuse to continue it.” Lakshman’s son, Nimal, agreed with his father and, echoing Yuvani’s complaint above, stressed a tendency for “people who come from campus” to engage in a thoughtless repetition of what they read about “the past.” “They read about us in books and they already have an idea in their heads,” he explained. “They come here and they see something *completely* different, but instead of reporting the things that they see, they report the things that they already have in their heads.” Nimal likened this vast difference between “the things written in those books and what you see when you walk through this society” to that

between "the sky and the earth." To Nimal and his father, the fact that Atwaedagama's economic development since the 1960s and 1970s doesn't figure in such scholarly portrayals of the village is rooted in a sociological preoccupation not with the *hana* industry, but with "the society *doing* that industry." Reflecting on the relative prosperity that his family has met, Nimal referred to a higher-caste childhood classmate who "is now at a lower level than we are." "We have gone a little ways [*api tikak dure gihilla inne*]," he explained, "so how things were in those days is very different from how things are now." When his father noted writers' focus on "things about our society [*samaaja toraturu*]," Nimal elaborated:

> They observe our society [*apee samaajeya*] and go and talk about our society. They come only for that, to gather that information. Now see, in campus there is a subject called 'sociology' [*samaaja widyaawa*], right? In that subject, they don't talk about the *industry*. They talk about the society *doing* that industry and things like that…so, they come to get information like that. But they have previously read things about it and already have an idea that they bring with them.

The charge that journalists and scholars simply reproduce what they find in "old books" is not unfounded. Sri Lanka's *Divaina* newspaper's 2013 publication of an article titled "The Kinnara Community of Sri Lanka" (*Sri Lankaawe Kinnara Jatayaa)* is an exemplary instance. Praising recent efforts by local newspapers and scholars to "impart a great deal of important information and knowledge regarding Sri Lankan culture and lifestyles to future generations," the author relies almost exclusively on late 19th and early to mid-20th century texts to convey precisely the portrait that Lakshman and his son find so troubling (Athukorala 2013). The article includes two photographs. The first is of a small family going about their work in front of a thatch-roofed, wattle and daub structure. A young girl and the toddler she hold look at the camera while a shirtless man, presumably their father, squats at her left and slices into a large jackfruit. His wife, smiling, pounds rice while a small boy, squatting beside her in just a loincloth, rests his eyes and

fingertips on the sandy ground. In the second photograph, a shirtless man and a woman hold up woven mats for the camera. Through these images and un-contextualized references to 19th and early 20th century intellectuals like Wilhelm Geiger, M.D. Raghavan, James Emerson Tennent, and Ananda Coomaraswamy, we are introduced to "The Kinnara." The bulk of the text is comprised of direct quotations from and paraphrases of Reverend Wimalawansa's *Apee Sanskruktiya* (*Our Culture)*(1964), Nandadeva Wijesekera's *Veddas in Transition* (1964), and Degammăda Sumanajōti's *Saelelehini Saŋdeshaya* (1957). Citing Wijesekera in particular, the author of the piece remarks that members of this "very strange group of people…lead a very miserable life" and, noting that "they are usually looked down upon as low caste people," locates "an unresolved mystery" in the fact that "people of such disgraceful origins are able to produce graceful mats" (Athukorala 2013). Before concluding that "the media" bears responsibility for "bridging the gap between tradition and modernity and also the gap between social groups," the author stresses that "it is important to not neglect primitive communities and their cultures in the journey towards a global society" (Athukorala 2013).

Lakshman and Nimal's accounts give a relatively coherent form to the anger, resentment, and sense of humiliation that incite so many in Atwaedagama to refuse to speak to the scholars and students who have visited the village in recent years and have subsequently written accounts such as Athukorala's. It is crucial to note, however, that the writings with which they take issue are the products of individuals whose actions, like those of the Atwaedagama residents who feel humiliated by them, are thoroughly conditioned by these individuals' own structural situatedness. That is, they are conditioned by the fact that they are often in conversation with broader, globally resonant notions regarding cultural preservation. These writings, for instance, are in fact often consistent with narratives of cultural loss that, just as they were at the time of the

1956 conference on "traditional culture," remain central in transnational efforts around the protection of traditional arts and knowledge. As just one of countless examples, take UNESCO's recent statement on "Globalization and Culture": "While [globalization] promotes the integration of societies and has provided millions of people with new opportunities, it may also bring with it a loss of uniqueness of local culture" (UNESCO 2016). This potential for loss, the author adds, "is especially true for traditional societies and communities, which are exposed to rapid 'modernization' based on models imported from outside and not adapted to their context" (UNESCO 2016).

The authors of the publications in which individuals in Atwaedagama see their caste-based humiliation, I would argue, are as much persuaded by narratives of such loss as the scholars considered in the introduction to this dissertation are by the notion that liberalist political and economic development will necessarily deliver the demise of caste. It is in part an envisioned authenticity of "the old ways," not a desire to offend, that motivates their reproduction of the accounts that Atwaedagama's residents resent so wholeheartedly.

Such writers' documentation of what they view as the true social history of *hana* craft production also aligns with broader transnational calls for the respectful consideration of the various "contexts" of craft industries around the world. In a paper published jointly by UNESCO and the Craft Revival Trust, for instance, UNESCO Chief Indrasen Vencatachellum writes, "Crafts stem from a relationship between humans and their environment within their historical, cultural, and social contexts," and argues that this "intimate relationship should be understood and respected by designers attempting to develop crafts" (Craft Revival Trust, Artesanías de Colombia S.A. and UNESCO 2005:vi).

An instance of the articulation considered more generally here between broader narratives of heritage and caste-based identification, however, the documentation of such "contexts" does not translate universally as a demonstration of "respect of ['artisanal communities''] cultural identity" (Craft Revival Trust, Artesanías de Colombia S.A. and UNESCO 2005:vi). Indeed, what is privileged as "context" itself emerges in and out of local histories and patterns of meaning making. Such local histories complicate efforts toward the understanding and respect championed by entities like UNESCO. In Atwaedagama, in fact, many expressly view concerns with "context" or, as it is often described, the "unnecessary information" that typically surfaces in accounts about the industry, as *dis*respectful. When I inquired of Lakshman and Nimal what they might say in response to the students and scholars whom they regard as willfully blind to the changes that Atwaedagama has undergone over the last half century, Lakshman began, "This is the thing: they can write about the industry, but things that are *with* the industry [*karmante eka tiyena dee*], like, you know…" After trailing off momentarily into a soft murmur, signaling the unspeakableness of the matter at hand, he clarified, "what I'm saying is, for example, a person who plays the drum [*bera*] or dances, they also belong to some kind of caste. But they don't talk about *that.* So, that's the thing."

The Work of Humiliation

There is a logic not only to the claim of humiliation that so many in Atwaedagama make, but also to concomitant expressions of disdain toward the work that, as Lakshman points out, their grandfathers also did. Gananath Obeyesekere's writing on the "socialization of shame" among the Sinhalese is informative in this regard. Such socialization is not only ultimately generative of "anxiety or fear of 'exposure' to the contumely and scorn of others," but also "leave[s] the individual particularly vulnerable to loss of self-esteem" (Obeyesekere

1984:502;504). A resulting sensitivity to "status precedence," he argues, engenders a certain dread among many Sinhalese of "slights and ridicule especially *in public*" (Obeyesekere 1984:506; emphasis in original). Given that, as Obeyesekere and others point out, "humiliation in public through posters, notices and the media is not uncommon" in Sri Lanka, there are actual precedents for the insult that Atwaedagama's residents perceive in writings about themselves (Matthews 2004:92). To further appreciate their interpretation of and reactions to such writings, however, it is also important to recognize that the oblique identification of another's low caste status is not a tactic that is unheard of when it comes to such public acts of defamation. As an example of this, Bruce Matthews explains how, when political scientist Jayadeva Uyangoda's article series, "Inequality and the Hierarchy," was published in the early 1990s, an "angry critic" wrote in a letter published in the *The Island* newspaper, "'We know who your parents are,'" a move that Uyangoda subsequently interpreted as an assault intended to "publicly humiliate and silence him by identifying his caste" (Matthews 2004:92).

Even presumably innocent public disclosures of individuals' low caste status have prompted what might seem severe and perhaps even unintelligible reactions when considered without reference to the subtle ways in which concerns with caste identification continue to operate in Sri Lanka (a phenomenon that, we'll recall, has prompted sociologist Kalinga Tudor Silva to call caste a "hidden identity" among the Sinhalese (Silva 1999:212)). Lakshman's challenge to one author to acknowledge that he, not to mention "politicians and big people," would not want his "things" to be aired publicly, for instance, recalls the Government of Sri Lanka's reported 1989 deportation of a Canadian journalist for noting what were subsequently described in one article as the "humble origins" of the country's first low caste President, Ranasinghe Premadasa (1988-1993). Recounting the episode, the journalist, a correspondent for

Toronto’s *The Globe and Mail*, conveyed the grievousness of the supposed slight thus: “‘Under the darkest days of President Marcos, I described him as a killer and a thug, and was never expelled from the Philippines…And yet here I simply accurately mention the caste of the President and get thrown out’” (Nuttall 1989:10). It is perhaps none too surprising that even Premadasa’s long-time friend and biographer, Bradman Weerakoon, makes no mention of caste in his book, *Premadasa of Sri Lanka: A Political Biography* (1992), published shortly before Premadasa’s assassination in 1993. If caste, particularly for those who are deemed low caste, is regarded as something best kept private, and if shame, as Herzfeld puts it, “centers on the revelation of matters considered as unfit for wider consumption,” then the claims to humiliation that we find in Atwaedagama are perhaps most productively read as entirely suitable reactions (Herzfeld 1987:64).

Atwaedagama residents’ claims to humiliation are not just fitting reactions to their representation in popular and scholarly writing, however. They are also claims to status. For these men and women to claim the capacity for humiliation is to also claim a sentiment typically denied to low caste people in Sri Lanka. This sentiment, *lajja-baya* (literally “shame fear,” meaning “‘fear of ridicule or disapproval’”) is something low caste people are said not to have (Obeyesekere 1984:504). As Obeyesekere elaborates, “In Sinhala society, the higher a family’s social position, the greater the preoccupation with *lajja-baya* in socialization, and it reaches its epitome in educated urban people” (Obeyesekere 1984:504). If, as he explains, such variations in preoccupation with *lajja-baya* are gauged by one’s “[sensitivity] to the reaction of others who may shame them” (Obeyesekere 1984:504), then to claim that one has been shamed is to therefore also assert that one had status in the first place.

There are two primary and revelatory ways in which residents' interpretations of popular and scholarly representations of Atwaedagama, and the reactions that they are held to justify, are challenged by individuals who have visited or written about the village in recent years. First, such visitors and writers do not interpret the grievances detailed above as reasonable reactions to the public disclosure of sensitive information, or as demonstrations of what Natalie Kwok describes in her own work on shame as the "acute self-consciousness and often painful inadequacy which arises when one is exposed…to the critical gaze of others" (2012:29). Such interpretations would require an acknowledgement of caste. Rather, they see these grievances as further *evidence* of the lowliness of those who express such complaints. They view them as proof, in other words, that at a moment in which the logic of a market economy and the promises of liberal democracy are publicly held to reign supreme, there are some who simply can't seem to "get over" caste. The second and closely related challenge to Atwaedagama residents' complaints stems from the convergence of popular attitudes toward caste as "not a problem" or "a thing of the past" and caste's sanitized portrayal in scholarly and popular writing as something stripped of any discriminatory potential. We have already seen an instance of the latter phenomenon in the National Craft Council's characterization of "caste" as meaning "crafts or professions."

Ayomi, an employee in the Kandy office of the Department of Industrial Development and Enterprise Promotion, had visited Atwaedagama some years prior to our meeting in the hopes of collecting data both in her capacity as a government officer and as a master's student studying Sri Lanka's "traditional handicrafts." Relating the suspicion that she encountered and the reluctance of the area's residents to speak with her, she explained very quietly but matter-of-factly that the problem was "because of their caste. They're at the bottom, right? So they always

suspect that others are trying to get them—it's in their blood." Noting that it has been less than two hundred years since the British overthrew the last ruler of the Kandyan Kingdom, an event marking the beginning of caste's demise, in Ayomi's opinion, she went on, "That means that it has only been a few generations since then, so, do *you* think that the things that are rooted in them will go away anytime soon? No. It will take around fifty to a hundred years!"

Sanuthi, a young Goyigama (high caste) student from a neighboring village who was writing her undergraduate thesis on rural development, related that she selected Atwaedagama for her studies because its residents "live as a backward community" [*eyaala godak pasugami widiyaTa jiiwatwenna janakotaasheya*]. When I asked what she meant by "backward," she replied:

> When you compare them to the people who live around them, in *every* way they are backward. Like, the way I understood it was, they are not interested in developing their economy and making their lifestyle any better [*ee kiyanne maTa terenne widiyeta eyalla economyeka developkeregena eyaalaTa honda lifestyle-ekak hadanne uwamanaawak naehae*].

I pressed Sanuthi further, asking how she could tell that her neighbors were "not interested in developing their economy." Her response revealed a core contradiction in her assessment of the area and indicated the predicament that Atwaedagama's residents face in their efforts to set caste aside:

> Well, one thing is that they don't want to develop their business. And the other thing is, when we went there, they wanted to charge us for showing us how they do the industry. And they try to sell whatever items they have, thinking that we might buy those items. Those are the kinds of expectations that they have. They always consider their economic objectives, but they don't want to protect their culture or take it forward. They have *no* interest in that.

At the same time that Sanuthi reports her neighbors' lack of interest in "developing their economy," then, she also criticizes them for being, as she sees it, entirely money-driven. In this,

Sanuthi not only reproduces the notion that Atwaedagama residents are responsible for the reproduction of heritage claimed for the nation, but also echoes that strand of Sinhalese nationalist ideology privileging a "non-commercial image of the essence of Sinhalese culture" (an image linked, as Moore and others have argued, to post-independence "statist, anti-capitalist economic policies") (Moore 1997:62). More significantly, as we will recall from Chapter 2, this orientation to commerce was linked to the early-to-mid-20th century idealization of craftspeople. That idealization, promoted perhaps most forcefully by Coomaraswamy, figured artisans as individuals who, unlike "men who take only a pecuniary interest in the productions of their factories," are fundamentally devoted to their craft for its own sake. On the other hand, while Sanuthi indicated that her would-be informants are concerned solely with the financial profit that their encounters with her might bring, she does not consider that such a motive might underlie their reluctance to freely share information about their work (that, in other words, the information might be made available to her for a price). Explaining that her neighbors in Atwaedagama "hide a lot of things from us when we talk to them," Sanuthi suggested that the "reason could be because of their culture [*'cultural'*]—or because of their caste issue." To point to one contradiction here, while lamenting a disinterest on the part of the village's residents to "protect their culture," Sanuthi suggests ultimately that it is *because* of their "culture" that they are reluctant to give information away freely. The paradox recalls the discursive contradictions around dynamism encountered in Chapter 2. More germane to the present discussion, however, is the fact that Sanuthi ultimately attributes this reluctance to share information to caste, something she described as "a big problem in their minds" [*loku awula egolange 'mindeke'*].

A Sri Lankan design student completing her degree at a European university reported similar challenges in carrying out her research. Like Sanuthi, and echoing mid-20th century

scholars Pieris and Jayasuriya's identification of caste as an impediment to the development of the arts and crafts (see Chapter 2), she pointed ultimately to caste as the reason why, as she sees it, the local industry is flagging. Efforts to "sustain the craft," she explained, are encumbered by "the caste system that prevails in the Dumbara weaving, especially in Atwaedagama."

Each of these students explain the reticence they encounter in Atwaedagama (reticence that, I should reiterate, I too encountered) by suggesting that the concerns with caste-based identification emanated from or constituted a feature of the village or the industry itself (take, for instance, the simple phrase, "rooted in them"[49]). In a Catch-22, then, the very strategies that Atwaedagama's residents deploy—silence, avoidance, denial of knowledge—in the hopes of securing a position of integrity in a situation that they feel is otherwise beyond their control, are

[49] The notion of caste as being "rooted in them" effectively places the reproduction of concerns with caste-based identification at the feet of those already regarded as low. I encountered similar ideas among certain scholars of handicraft industries as well as among actors differently situated within them (as, for instance, buyers, designers, and government officers). A buyer at one of the major crafts emporia in Colombo, for example, argued that an apparent tendency among the "younger generation" of individuals deemed inheritors of lineage-based artisan knowledge to "shirk" their presumed duties as artisans was due to their "bad attitude." Those who turned away from their "inherited profession," he explained, suffered from an unhealthy preoccupation with the historical caste-basis of the "traditional crafts" and were therefore incapable of recognizing the virtue of craft production. We find something similar in recent a master's thesis on the "nature, problems and challenges" of the handicraft industry in Sri Lanka for the Department of Geography at Norwegian University of Science and Technology. Noting that, "after independence…the importance of the caste system became weak and an opportunity was opened for anyone to learn any knowledge," the Sri Lankan author writes: "Craftsmen, who engage in the traditional crafts impart their knowledge and skills handed down from father to son, from generation to generation. But the present younger generation of these families seems to refuse to accept the family profession and has endangered the continuity of crafts" (Masakorala 2002:56;73). In this formulation, the choice among young would-be artisans to pursue alternative and what they regard as less stigmatized modes of employment is figured as a selfish relinquishment of duty that threatens the country's "traditional crafts." In these respects, the burden placed upon such individuals is two-fold: to conserve the traditional crafts and, at the same time, to "get over" the caste-based origins of such industries. If, as is suggested, caste is a "thing of the past," then any failure to achieve the latter may be attributed to nothing other than a combination of shortsighted self-interest and backward reactionism.

read not as justifiable acts in accordance with local norms governing the proper disclosure of caste details, but as confirmation of their lowly and backward status. It is possible that these residents' silence has the unintended consequence of impelling students who wish to write about Atwaedagama or the *hana* industry to turn instead to "old books" and thus reproduce the narratives of social difference that these residents deem so problematic.

A second and closely related source of trouble for claims to humiliation in Atwaedagama, and one in which we find a similar instance of residents' unintentional collusion, pertains to the popular portrayal of caste as an "old thing" out of place in a modern Sri Lanka. Kalinga Tudor Silva, quoting Benedict Anderson, describes the 20th century promulgation of an "ethno-nationalist conceptualization of 'a deep horizontal comradeship,'" or an "egalitarian ethos" among the Sinhalese (Silva 1999:212). The convergence of this promulgation with what political scientist Jayadeva Uyangoda (1999) has characterized as a widespread public denial of caste's significance in a modern liberal democracy provides steady ground for the ubiquitous claim among many I encountered during my fieldwork in and around Kandy that caste is "not a problem." While it is not unchallenged, there is a popularity to the notion espoused even by some scholars that, as historian Mahinda Somathilake put it, "in the context of a modern society…a person who was compelled to be known as a man of low caste [can] now…raise himself in the spheres of educational, economic, political and social status" (1998:358).

In her work on artisans in Atwaedagama and other areas around Kandy, Daskon adopts an orientation similar to that of Somathilake. While noting that in "historical Sri Lankan society, caste was an important factor," she explains that, in "the context of present day Kandyan communities," it is not considered significant and therefore not relevant to her analysis of "cultural traditions" as "real assets" (Daskon 2010a:16). At the same time, Daskon notes that

"caste-based professions, Kandyan ancestry and traditional craftsmanship are crucial determinants of these groups" (Daskon 2010b:50). Quoting a "key government informant," she accepts without reservation that Kandyan "'traditional craft communities,'" as "'a separated 'group' distinguished by their crafts, knowledge and even in their behaviour, social attitudes and caste," simply "'understand things differently than we do'" (Daskon 2010b:50). While espousing the very notion of cultural "set-apartness" criticized by residents of Atwaedagama, Daskon avoids the suggestion of social inferiority with which they and others in the village take issue. To the extent that caste *is* relevant, she argues, it is figured "positively as a 'social honour and prestige' of these communities rather than as an ideology that stratifies the society" (Daskon 2010a:16-17). The implications of caste-based identification are by no means exhausted by the experiences of those whose voices we hear in the above discussion. However, Daskon's generalization and its purported application to Atwaedagama at best conceals and at worst delegitimizes the more complicated and indeed harmful consequences that the persistence of caste-based identification may have for contemporary artisans in the very villages about which she writes.

I encountered a similar understanding of caste's irrelevance with regard to contemporary instances of discrimination in a conversation I had with the author of the offending article who, upon hearing Lakshman's complaints about his depiction of Atwaedagama in a publication on Sri Lanka's "indigenous peoples," reassured him that the representation was "not a problem" for the village and its residents. Echoing a common refrain among many Sinhalese that considerations regarding caste status are limited to the domain of matrimonial matchmaking—that, to cite an (erroneous) example he found expedient, one would never in contemporary Sri Lanka witness someone refusing the food of someone lower in caste status than himself—the

author stated adamantly and sincerely that the grievances of Lakshman and others in the village are unfounded. At the same time, however, and to return to an issue raised already, he concluded that their sensitivity just confirms their low and backward thinking—that is, *their* inability to let go of caste.

Emerging from a structural position in which the reality and consequences of caste-based identification are less salient, this author's denial of the legitimacy of Atwaedagama's residents' claim to humiliation as illegitimate is not to be understood here as an instance of malice or willful misapprehension. This denial relies in fact upon the same logic implied by such residents' general characterization of the insult at hand: that is, that it has to do with the publication of "old things." More pointedly, it relies on the notion that caste is a thing of the past. As we saw earlier, Lakshman refers to the popularization of Kandyan dancing and drumming to suggest the limits of caste distinctions in present-day Sri Lanka and, by extension, what he sees as the inappropriateness of referring to such distinctions when writing about the *hana* industry. Likewise, the author who Lakshman believes has betrayed his trust suggests that, caste being a "thing of the past," claims of humiliation or marginalization that make reference to caste are unfounded. In both accounts, we find the confidence to which Uyangoda refers when he writes, "even raising the question of intercaste equality in the public domain is stigmatized in the belief that Sri Lankan society is adequately egalitarian not to make caste-centric demands public" (Uyangoda 2012:88). When I inquired of a local government officer about a rumor I had heard that some of Atwaedagama's residents had sought to bring a lawsuit against one of the authors who had written about them, she explained the impossibility of such an endeavor by referring to a general legal proscription against caste-based discrimination as a pre-emption to such a course of action. Indicating the contemporary significance of caste-based identification, she stressed

both the "reality" of caste and the "reality" of its public disavowal to accomplish the sort of stigmatization described by Uyangoda:

> There couldn't be a lawsuit because you can't talk about caste or mention it because, in reality, one's caste cannot be mentioned anywhere. Because, even if that's the reality, we cannot mention caste. We can't reprimand people just because of their caste. We can't scold them by saying that they are of a low caste. In those days, there were Berava, Padu, Panna, Kinnara, Rodi—these people are Kinnara—write that down. They are Kinnara.

In the instance with the author recounted above, in fact, the mere suggestion on the part of "low caste" individuals that their public representation as such will adversely affect them and their children elicits a delegitimizing response that says, "That is absurd because we all know that we are *beyond* caste." In a place where, as Uyangoda argues, caste is publicly refused "as a source of social prejudice and violation of group rights" (Uyangoda 2012:88), the idea affording this and other authors the latitude to write freely about Atwaedagama's residents' "unnecessary information" is the very notion—caste is a thing of the past—that renders his account so disagreeable to its subjects. In the event, we find a recapitulation of the suggestion that a concern with caste is somehow a feature of the village or the industry itself. This suggestion evokes something Satish Deshpande (2013) and Ajantha Subramanian have elaborated upon with respect to caste in India, or the "persistence of caste privilege in the form of castelessness," where "upper castes are naturalized as the 'legitimate inheritors of modernity' while lower castes are hyper-visible as the illegitimate purveyors of caste" (Subramanian 2015: 294-295). Importantly, the logic at work here recalls the discursive handling of traditional craft explored in Chapter 2. There, we saw how early post-independence scholars figured (low caste) artisans as individuals naturally averse to change, a quality lending to the latter's simultaneous designation as bearers of tradition and as incapable of seeing that tradition through a course of adaptation to modern conditions. While in this contemporary Sri Lankan instance it becomes the privilege of

one untouched by caste-based discrimination—one who, for instance, need not worry that his own children will be ostracized or treated unfairly in school because they are regarded as essentially “low"—to deny caste, it becomes the burden of those who do fear such treatment to affirm its relevance in their own lives. Ultimately, this affirmation is itself taken as demonstrative of their distinctly non-modern and “low thinking.”

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined some of the ways in which Atwaedagama’s distinctiveness in the popular and scholarly imagination has been reproduced over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The ethnographic material detailed above represents a significant departure from what I discussed in the preceding chapter as the mid-20th century ideal of crafts sanitized of caste, and more importantly of crafts as fundamentally symbolic of a unified and homogenous nation of Ceylonese. Through a consideration of exchanges that have centered on the area and its residents’ representation in journalistic and scholarly accounts, we have seen how those both within and beyond Atwaedagama share a responsibility not only for the reproduction of caste as a relevant category of identification, but also for the reproduction of the general silence around this category of identification. In the following chapters, 4 and 5, which focus on some of the more immediately local ways in which Atwaedagama’s set-apartness is both challenged and reinforced in the present, I examine a wider range of circumstances in which this reproduction—and the contradictions it so often entails—is unfolding in the present.

To summarize, I began this chapter with a description of an instance in which I encountered Atwaedagama’s residents’ reactions to the village’s and their representation in contemporary writing. My intention in the ensuing pages was to situate such writing in terms of Atwaedagama’s mid- to late 20th century consolidation as a research site for those interested not

only in an ostensibly ancient and traditional handicraft, but also in a population thought to be characterized by its socio-temporal particularity. As I have shown here, the area's present day residents perceive restatements of this particularity in contemporary scholarly and popular writing as neither gratuitous marketing for the heritage craft in which they engage, nor as welcome statements of the sort of "identity-as-difference" that could be used to "carve out specific niches of value production" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009:4).

That it might be otherwise is not inconceivable. Toward the end of my stay in Atwaedagama, I met a designer, Nimal, who, having worked with a weaver in the village to develop a business catering to an "upscale" market for woven wallets and other *hana*-based accessories, envisioned for Atwaedagama something very much like the "identity incorporation" described by John and Jean Comaroff in their *Ethnicity, Inc*. (2009:5). In a discussion of the area's residents' negative response to their representation in contemporary writing, Nimal suggested a solution: Rather than be ashamed of or "hide" their identification as Kinnara, the men and women of Atwaedagama ought to be proud of it and, seizing its marketing potential, use it to harvest "the economic power of cultural difference" (Colloredo-Mansfeld 2011:51). There are few in Atwaedagama, however, who seem willing to "concoct traditionality and re-create archaisms to fit the cultural stereotype of outsiders" in the hopes of profiting from a global "cult of heritage" (Forshee 2001:4; Lowenthal 1998:1). Nimal's suggestion that the area's residents try such an approach accords with the fact that, in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, a "globalizing idea of culture," in proving "useful for generating income and securing recognition, particularly for indigenous peoples," has in many places driven a "proliferation of essentialist

claims to identity" (Sylvain 2005:356).[50] As Mary Taylor has noted, however, the "accumulation of capital through claims to cultural authenticity that frame both the uniqueness of a cultural product and its recognizable presentation also relies on processes that produce and reproduce differentiation and diversity in the process of uneven development" (Taylor 2009:51). Many of Atwaedagama's residents are perhaps all too aware of this unevenness. In the way they respond to their representation by others, and in the way in which those others in turn interpret these responses, we find that the neoliberal ideal inherent in Nimal's suggestion runs into the ground of lived and historically situated experience. Here, what we encountered in the previous chapters as a discursive formation around Sri Lankan national heritage in which craft is sanitized of its caste associations articulates with the subtle but powerful reproduction of caste-based difference as a difference that, for all the silence around it, continues to matter. In the subsequent chapters, I continue to examine how this is so while arguing that, throughout its uneasy articulation with other cultural forms—democratic egalitarianism and neoliberal entrepreneurialism for instance—caste is reproduced not by particular groups or individuals, but by actors across social strata.

Chapter 4
Knowing One's Place

[50] It is important to note that, in terms of the marketing of items such as those produced in Atwaedagama and Redigama, while their characterization as "traditionally Sri Lankan" or "traditionally Sinhala" may appeal to their mostly foreign consumers, any reference to their historical association with a particular *caste* group is less likely to resonate. As Hannerz (citing Terence Turner) has pointed out, if "the assertion of difference is intended to mobilize support"—or, we might add, dollars—"among distant others…it probably helps if these can readily recognize one's distinctiveness by way of established criteria" (Hannerz 1996:53). "Too alien an otherness," such as caste, "may not do" (Hannerz 1996:53).

For residents of Atwaedagama, the reproduction of caste-based difference considered in the previous chapter with respect to popular and scholarly writing is just one mode within a much broader array of identificatory practices. Instantiating the kind of boundary making theorized long ago by Fredrik Barth (1969), these practices range from innocuous and even celebratory statements of difference (such as the cheerful circumambulation of the village during the annual Kathina festival, an event I had the opportunity to witness in October 2014) to palpably antagonistic articulations of hierarchical distinction (including, as we will see, public and aggressive restatements of Atwaedagama's residents' social and intellectual inferiority). As I argued in Chapter 3, in responding to their unfavorable representation by scholars, journalists, students, and others, the residents of Atwaedagama inadvertently help to maintain the boundary that they are otherwise anxious to overcome. The practices by which the distinction between village residents (*mee game minissu*, lit. "people in/of this village") and "outsiders" (*pita minissu*) is reproduced are not, in other words, the sole purview of the latter. Conceiving of them under the rubric of *knowing one's place*, in this chapter I examine how such boundary making practices illuminate the articulation between logics of neoliberalism, caste, and democratic egalitarianism in present-day Sri Lanka. As we will see once again, these practices challenge a popular and to some extent scholarly pattern of thinking regarding caste. This pattern and its implications are discussed at greater length in the introduction to this dissertation. Put simply, it centers on the notion that, with the ascendance of a fundamentally capitalist economic formation grounded in a market economy, we will soon see, if we have not already, an exchange of "the logic of [*ascribed*] caste identity" (Ciotti 2010:209) for neoliberal practices of identification that foreground (economically and consumer-based) *achieved* social status (Friedman 2002:295-296).

We do not encounter plain evidence of such an exchange in and around Atwaedagama. Neither, however, do we encounter anything like an unreserved grip on caste-based identification as a "tradition" to be upheld. Reminders of one's proper social and geographic "place" are inflected with caste-based concerns. Further, in many instances, the forms that these reminders take indicate that historically recognized markers of caste distinction, while re-ordered amidst shifting patterns of social mobility, continue to have purchase even as caste itself is publicly disavowed. At the same time, these reminders suggest deep ambivalence (on the part of both high and low caste individuals) around the flux in moral and financial economies that recognizably neoliberal operations and ideological commitments have entailed. Many of my interlocutors in and beyond Atwaedagama would explicitly refer to the country's national economic development in favorable terms as the ruin of caste, and would regularly invoke instances of mobility on the part of low caste individuals and communities to corroborate convictions as to caste's demise. At the same time, however, there is a widespread if implicit notion that caste, while *concealable* by the trappings of monetary gain or "money power" (*salli balaya*), nonetheless remains something to be discovered. Here, I argue that money serves alternately as a "frightful leveler" (Simmel 1969:52), permitting people to forget or hide their "true" place, and, in its capacity as "naked" or "mere economic power" (Weber 1998:180), as a mediating buffer in social transactions that might threaten the maintenance of hierarchical, caste-based social distance.

Reminders of Place

In September 2014, a small party of sharply dressed senior representatives from the local branch of Sri Lanka's Regional Development Bank convened a meeting in Atwaedagama. The purpose of the meeting was to promote Isuru, a micro-finance program for women earning below the poverty line, and to publicly recognize a number of women who were already to receive

small group loans. The event, attended by approximately fifty women and perhaps half a dozen men, was marked by considerable fanfare. A representative from the National Craft Council, himself a resident of Atwaedagama, spearheaded the organization of a small exhibition of residents' "handicrafts" (*atkam nirmaana*). In the days leading up to the occasion, a few eager volunteers aided him in soliciting such contributions from their neighbors and, by the morning of the meeting, had arranged a colorful display of wall-hangings, wallets, change purses, pencil cases, letter holders, handbags, and cushion covers on a row of tables along an interior wall of the village's *madhyastaaneya*, or training center. (Notably, more than half of the items were partly or exclusively made of *paeduru*.)

The occasion was marked by levity and felt more like an award ceremony than a meeting to distribute loans. In freshly laundered blouses and skirts and with their hair combed back into neat ponytails, the women in attendance smiled with anticipation as the festive event got under way. Eventually, the name of a representative from each of five groups of five women was called out. Approaching the bank officers seated at the front of the room, the women stepped forward one by one to receive white envelopes, some offering a slight bow in return, before returning to their seats, wide smiles across their faces.

The bank's executive director, also a professor of economics at the University of Peradeniya, presided over the meeting. Offering her audience some thoughts on how "to lead a good life" (*jiiwita yamkisii gamanak yanne*), she lectured on the value of saving and on the often overlooked economic and social burden of loans. She began, however, by establishing what seemed a rather basic point. In the presence of the objects displayed upon the tables to their left, she asked the audience assembled before her, "What do you do?" With a delay bespeaking a sense among the crowds that the answer was all too obvious, the men and women in attendance

at last replied in unison, "*hasta karmaanta* [the handicraft industry]." "And what do you *do* in the handicraft industry?" Observing a silent collective nod toward the items along the wall, she pressed them further, "Things produced using hana, *right*? I *know*, but I wanted to hear it from *you*. Now, you are not giving answers—you're just looking there and thinking, 'Why are you asking this question? Can't you see it right there?!'" An eruption of laughter confirmed the truth in her words and, encouraged, she went on, "So, I *know*, but I want to know if you choose to do this industry because it comes from generation to generation…" Pausing to receive an affirmative reply that never came, she continued after a moment of heavy silence, "that is, whether you do this because you've gone to the market and seen the demand that you have for these products, or whether you keep doing it because you have been doing it from generation to generation." Questioned directly, several in her audience replied as if they knew what she expected to hear, "We do it because we do it from generation to generation."

Beginning with a collective verbal affirmation that "we do a handicraft," attendees at this meeting were compelled to endorse a pointed reminder that the *hana* industry is "what they do," and that they do it not primarily because it presents lucrative employment, but more fundamentally because it is what "they" have done from generation to generation. The meeting was intended to advertise the bank's efforts to alleviate poverty by supporting the growth of small-scale entrepreneurial enterprise in general. Held in a building constructed for training to "do the industry," and in the presence of the items displayed along the wall, however, it served as a moment for collective self-identification along lines about which we already know many of the residents of Atwaedagama to be deeply ambivalent. Considered in light of grievances regarding the journalistic and scholarly preoccupation with the fact that "this industry is passed down from

generation to generation," this collective pronouncement was not simply a neutral comment on the lineage-based transmission of knowledge.

Individuals within and around Atwaedagama remind themselves and one another in varyingly explicit ways of their proper "place" within what many among them perceive to be a rapidly transforming social and economic landscape. The example just given offers a glimpse of an uneasy friction that often characterizes such reminders, or the abovementioned divergence between the "logic of [*ascribed*] caste identity" (Ciotti 2010:209) and economically and consumer-based *achieved* social status (Friedman 2002:295-296). The bank's executive director began her lesson by challenging her audience to explicitly root their engagement in the *hana* industry either in their "inheritance" of that industry or in an economically motivated calculation. In doing so, she not only posed the choice as a mutually exclusive one, but also indicated that, while she expects her audience is engaged in the industry because it is "what they have always done," they *should* be doing it because it is financially sustainable. In the lecture that followed, she stressed the primacy of sound financial planning in the development of one's business, but she would have been loath to directly question the sensibleness of engaging in this "handicraft" simply because it is what has always been done. That the lineage basis of the enterprise would ultimately and reasonably serve as the justification for its pursuit was admitted without challenge and thereby publicly reinforced. While individuals within and beyond Atwaedagama assert the supremacy of pure economic logic, the moment presents a powerful instance of a competing logic—one bound up with investments in caste-based distinction—as regularly reinforced as it is disavowed.

The examples that I consider in the following pages further instantiate an uneasy articulation between caste-based identification and a market logic in which exchange value

trumps all else. They center, more specifically, on an irresolvable tension between individuals' convictions as to the leveling influence of economic development and the sense, at times regretful and at times celebratory, that such leveling is ultimately partial. In the moments in which such tension becomes most salient, we find the simultaneous maintenance and destabilization of hierarchical distinction.

"*Like Stirring an Empty Pan": On Negative Monopolization and the Limits of "Money Power"*

One of the primary contexts in which hierarchical distinction between residents of Atwaedagama and the "outsiders" in their vicinity is renewed is in the articulation of boundaries around activities associated with the *hana* industry. There are a small number of individuals who, though not considered "from Atwaedagama," for various reasons participate in activities associated with *hana* work. In the area across the main road from the village, for instance, there are several families who, because they own sewing machines, are paid by residents of Atwaedagama to, for instance, finish off the edges of letter holders. Likewise, in another neighboring village, there is a woman who, given the parts to assemble, sews purses by hand. The explanations such people offer for their engagement in these activities point not only to the boundary work that attends this craft labor, but also to the tensions that obtain in efforts of individuals around Atwaedagama to remind themselves and one another of their "place." Here, I approach them in terms of what Weber conceptualized as "monopolization," or the fact that certain "special trades," among other things, may "become objects for monopolization by status groups" (Weber 1998:191). Such monopolization, Weber elaborated, "occurs positively when the status group is exclusively entitled to own and to manage them; and negatively when, in order to maintain its specific way of life, the status group must *not* own and manage them" (Weber 1998:191). Borrowing Weber's notion of monopolization here, my concern goes a step

further to consider the social complexities and contradictions that are revealed when the expectation of negative monopolization is compromised.

The "Fox Lady"

Amani, a resident of Atwaedagama's neighboring village Hisgoda, was in her mid-thirties and a mother of two when we first met. She lived in a small, two-bedroom home with her husband with their two children, her parents, her younger sister, and her younger sister's toddler. Her parents operated a small dairy while Amani had ambitions to build a food dehydration business. On a wide porch skirting the back of her house, a tall, metal dehydrator that she had secured with a small business loan collected dust kicked up by the two cows kept just feet away. Amani had completed a certificate program in food processing. However, the proximity of the cows, something that neither she nor her parents could do much about, posed a risk of contamination, forcing Amani to put her business plans on hold for the time being. Despite the relatively steady if modest income of the dairy, the household was under considerable financial strain at the time of our initial introduction. Amani's husband had lost his office job in Kandy, and the family's two alternative streams of income were insufficient to cover expenses for all in their crowded dwelling. Amani eagerly offered to assist me in my research, and, as someone not actually *from* Atwaedagama, presented herself as a disinterested outsider uniquely positioned to help me get to the "truth" about her neighbors there.

Over the course of many conversations, most of them held in her home, Amani demonstrated the more widespread sense of inconsistency between what she described as "this current economic system" and the resolute presence of "old ideas." She often declared the contemporary reality of caste-based identification as a phenomenon that, in a context suffused by the leveling promise (or threat) of money, is devoid of purpose or, in her words, "like stirring an

empty pan." In this, Amani would communicate her faith in the advancement of an egalitarianism deriving ultimately from what some scholars have, I would argue, overstated as an "intense proliferation of exchange-value as the sole value metric" (Peacock 2015:9). Indeed, while convinced in some sense of caste's irrelevance—what is the use in "stirring an empty pan?"—Amani also demonstrated the limits of this "proliferation" and the leveling it is thought to entail. Money, for Amani, ultimately militates *against* such a leveling, safeguarding the ideological and social space for, if not the appreciation of caste's value, its steady maintenance.

Soon after we first met at a local Samurdhi meeting for residents of the two villages, Amani confronted me about a rumor she had heard regarding my efforts to recruit a woman from Atwaedagama as a research assistant.[51] As far as Amani was concerned, the woman's ultimate refusal of my request would be something of a blessing. While it would be fine for her to accompany me to households *within* Atwaedagama, she advised, the woman's low caste status should deter me from taking her to areas or households beyond the village. Although concerns with caste are neither "truly Buddhist" nor in keeping with a moment in which "people are measured based on the economy," she explained, they are a reality nonetheless, and one which would interfere in my coming to an appreciation of the lowly *past* of her neighbors in Atwaedagama. As far as Amani was concerned, I would learn little about this past were I guided in my research by someone known to be "low." The problem was not merely that my conversations with those beyond Atwaedagama would go nowhere were I accompanied by such a woman, but also that, as a rule, the interest of the village's residents to "conceal" their inherited lowly status would ensure that they give me *waeredi* (incorrect) or partial information to throw

[51] As explained more comprehensively in Chapter 6, Samurdhi is a government micro-finance scheme introduced in Sri Lanka in 1995 to eradicate rural poverty.

me off course. Those in Atwaedagama objected specifically to the telling of what they regarded as irrelevant information concerning the industry's origins and the details of their past and present social life (Chapter 3). Amani, by contrast, stressing that she understood my needs as a researcher, maintained that I must have the "complete picture." "If your book is about an elephant, and you only write about the ear or the nose or the tail," she advised me during a chance meeting on the road one afternoon, "it won't be complete. You have to write *everything*." On another occasion, in her home, Amani pointed to what she believed to be the shallow efforts of those who study the *hana* industry *without* attending to its social and historical context, and in particular to caste. Referring to one of the more ubiquitous animal designs found on Dumbara mats and wall-hangings, she advised, "It's like this: You can ask about the *hana* industry and say to everyone, 'Do you think the elephant is beautiful?' But without writing about *this*, you can't explain the 'gap.' *This* is the 'gap.'" At the outset, Amani knew little more than that I was interested in the *hana* industry. And yet, like many in the area immediately beyond Atwaedagama, she was adamant that understanding the industry necessitated knowledge of the village residents' past, including what was often figured as the central aspect *of* that past: their caste status.

Amani's intervention demonstrated her sense of conflict between the present *economic* moment and concerns with caste. At the same time, particularly in this privileging of an attention to the past as essential to comprehending the present, it also aids our understanding of how this conflict is negotiated. As we will see, the value of such attention derives not merely, as Amani suggests, from its illumination of the present, but more practically, in Yalman's terms, from its capacity to serve as a "blueprint for the present": "As a justification for the internal hierarchy within the Goyigama," he wrote, "people appeal to the past—the time of the Sinhalese kings"

(Yalman 1960:87). In my meetings with Amani and other residents in the area immediately outside Atwaedagama who enjoyed a higher caste status than those in Atwaedagama, initial conversations would almost always immediately veer toward the ways in which "they," residents of Atwaedagama, "used to dress," "used to talk to us," or otherwise "used to" embody their inferior status.[52] Undoubtedly, the phenomenon may be explained at least in part by such residents' familiarity with the kinds of inquiries most commonly carried out by students and scholars visiting the area; that is, the inquiries of individuals concerned with producing the sorts of accounts considered in the previous chapter. That such active recollection may be an artifact of conditioned expectations about the kind of knowledge that inquiring scholars, journalists or students are after, however, is a partial explanation. There are also two qualities of the accounts in which these eager retellings of the "past" tend to feature that suggest the kind of "blueprint" capacity to which Yalman refers. First, elements of this past are often narrated alongside examples of ways in which hierarchical social distances are maintained today. Relatedly, and of equal note, they are often invoked in narratives that demonstrate profound ambivalence around

[52] I cannot be sure of the caste status of my informants in the surrounding areas. P. Wimalasiri, a Research Officer in the Department of Education at the Unviersity of Ceylon reported in the mid-1970s that the village was "surrounded by other low-caste villages" ("Department of Anthropology Ancient Technology Porgram, Haynes--January 1973"). While, as noted later in this chapter, there is a village nearby that is known nowadays to be populated by individuals identified as Rodiya, the only caste typically considered inferior to Kinnara, government officers and residents of both Atwaedagama and the surrounding areas reported that the villages in Atwaedagama's immediate vicinity are mostly populated by Goyigama families. I received at least one report that there is some caste diversity, however. According to one self-identified high caste (Goyigama) family in Hisgoda, that village was also home to "one or two" families belonging to Batgama, Berava, and Durava castes, all of which are considered low. It was also, they reported, home to one Timbili family. Scholarly references to this latter identifier are scarce. Ryan suggests that Timbili is another term for Patti and that those identified as such are considered an inferior "subdivision" of "undifferentiated" or "good" Goyigama (1953:100).

what are presumed to be the economically rooted challenges *to* such social distance. As Amani put it to me:

> The thing is, because I do social work [through Samurdhi], I try to maintain my family's status and try to be fair with [her low caste neighbors in Atwaedagama]. The reason is that they give us a lot of foreign exchange. We don't go for marriage contracts, but we are friends. These are old-fashioned ideas [*hana miti adahas*], but I can't move away from [stop considering] my family. Now, say, when they come here and they shout out, "Amaniyo, Amaniyo,"[53] it's a problem for my mother. In those days, they used to call us Haamine, Mahathaya.[54] In those days, they didn't know our names. So, they used to call me Sudu Haamine [*lit.* fair/white madam]. So, now when they shout out, "Amaniyo, Amaniyo," then it becomes a problem for my mother, because they need to speak respectfully [*nambuwa diila katakeranna oone*]. This is one of the reasons why I have left the Samurdhi society. But, that aside, this is why I said that you should try to help them…We treat them as our friends. I have never treated them badly—but I don't go there to eat. I refuse, and I say I don't want it. But I am always 'friendly.' I have been to their funerals, as well. Because they know me, they don't offer me food…Even my mother went to a funeral because she could not avoid it. But we don't go to eat. They also come to our funerals, and we treat them [to tea, etc.], and it's not like in those days, because in those days there was a separate plate and cup for them. There was a bench set outside the house for them to sit upon, and once they had finished eating, the leaf was thrown out, just like that. It went *that* far. Now, of course, there is this thing about old-fashioned ideas [*hana miti adahas*], and people are measured based on the economy. So, we are not 'update' with this society. Of course, we try to be friendly with them, but when they presume kin relations with us by using kin terms, we say, "don't use kin terms" [*naekam kiyanna epaa*]. You know, at Samurdhi meetings, one called me "Amani Akka" [*lit.* big sister Amani], and I said, "No, all of you can address me by my name, and I will address you by yours." [55] Because I have to consider my family.

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[53] The addition of -iyo is a diminutive modification to proper nouns generally used to indicate affection toward or closeness with another.

[54] The terms *Haamine* and *Mahathaya*, translating typically as "Madam" and "Sir," are most commonly used as terms of respectful address toward one's social equals or superiors.

[55] Kalinga Tudor Silva has remarked on the emergence of a "notion of a brotherhood/sisterhood within the majority ethnic group" beginning in the late 1970s and associates this emergence with the influence of the Sarvodaya movement, which began around 1958. Noting its prevalence among office workers as an example, he explains: "[It] signifies the diffusion of a broad-based but somewhat diluted kinship ideology as a moral bond linking known people of similar rank irrespective of their caste backgrounds. It is likely that those who share such a perception of 'a deep horizontal comradeship' typically come from one's own ethnic/linguistic community" (Silva 1999:211)." In "the emerging ethno-nationalist conceptualizations," he writes, "all Sinhala-speaking people, irrespective of their caste and social status, are increasingly projected as members of *an extended kin group*. In offices all workers of similar or nearly similar ranks

My concern with this excerpt is with the way Amani navigates the conflict she feels between her loyalty to her family—a proxy here for status (caste) maintenance—and her felt obligation to be "fair" to her low caste neighbors. Amani's narration of extreme modes of caste-based boundary-making in the past ("It went *that* far") depicts present efforts to remind her neighbors of their "place" as comparatively relaxed. While not going quite "that far," Amani still considers such reminders to demonstrate "old-fashioned" thinking. Indeed, she regards her own impulse to deny her neighbors a position suggested by the egalitarian relationality presupposed by the use of personal names or kin terms as temporally out of step with a paradigmatic feature of the authentic present, or the measurement of people according to the economy. Her own justification for working with her low-caste neighbors through Samurdhi is, after all, rooted in their financial contribution to the country. Amani simultaneously acknowledges and discounts the calls for "forms of equal recognition" described by philosopher Charles Taylor as marking a general historical shift from an ancient "notion of honor" premised on hierarchy to a "modern notion of dignity" premised on human equality (Taylor 1992:27).[56] As the following illustrates, where kin relations are concerned, to Amani the question of something like honor remains, and it is the

address each other as older brother (*ayya*) or younger brother (*malli*) and older sister (*akka*) or younger sister (*nangi*) depending on their gender and age" (Silva 1999:210).

[56] Appropriately, given this example, Taylor remarks specifically upon the displacement of honorific forms of address in modern democracies. In noting a replacement of "honor" ("*honor* in the ancient regime sense in which it is intrinsically linked to social inequalities") by "dignitiy," he writes of the latter being "now used in a universalist and egalitarian sense, where we talk of the inherent 'dignity of human beings,' or of citizen dignity. The underlying premise here is that everyone shares in it. It is obvious that this concept of dignity is the only one compatible with a democratic society, and that it was inevitable that the old concept of honor was superseded. But this has also meant that the forms of equal recognition have been essential to democratic culture. For instance, that everyone be called 'Mr.,' 'Mrs.,' or 'Miss,' rather than some people being called 'Lord' or 'Lady' and others simply by their surnames—or, even more demeaning, by their first names—has been thought essential in some democratic societies…" (Taylor 1992:27).

idiom of money that serves centrally in reminders to oneself and others of one's proper—that is, essential and historically sanctioned—place. To Amani, it is through money's leveling capacity that all individuals are potentially subject to a modern, standard mode of evaluation. At the same time, she suggests, it is by virtue of money's quality as a neutral mediator of interpersonal exchange that their hierarchical, caste-based distinctiveness may in fact remain uncompromised. As she explained to me in her home one morning,

> My mother's family was far better off economically than we are now…We were doing *much* better. Then, one of our uncles' daughters got married to [a low-caste] man from *this* village. Not from *that* village [Atwaedagama], but from *this* village, from *here*. Because of that, problems arose and the whole family left the village. They went away and our family in this area became even smaller.

To Amani, her family's downfall from a position of social and economic strength was directly precipitated by a caste-based violation—that is, by the shame brought upon them because of her uncle's daughter's marriage to a low-caste man who, being from the same village, could not hide his caste status. Amani's uncle and other relatives departed the area following the union. Amani and her family chose to stay, but in doing so they have found it necessary to regulate their encounters with the couple to stave off the threat that the match continues to pose to the status they claim to have inherited. Money, defending against the intimacies of social proximity, has served centrally in this regulation.

When, for instance, Amani sold a mosquito net to the woman in exchange for money that she acknowledged was undoubtedly "his" (the woman's husband's), it was money that saved her from the notion that the closeness suggested by the exchange might threaten her or her family's status. Evoking "Vespasian's axiom," *"pecunia non olet*" ("money does not stink"), she defended the transaction by stressing that what she had received from the woman was "just money, so it's no problem." I would argue that the safe mediation of money or, in Weber's more

eloquent terms, the limitation of all 'social' intercourse that "is not subservient to economic or any other of business's 'functional' purposes" (Weber 1998:187), counters any threat that Amani's family's periodic interactions with the couple may have in terms of their own social position. It is also this notion of money's fundamental indifference to status hierarchy that arose as central to Amani's own self-preservation when, many months after we first met, she was financially compelled to take up sewing purses for a woman in Atwaedagama. Early on, Amani had explained the social (that is, caste-based) significance of work associated with the *hana* industry thus:

> Remember that day when you asked why others are not doing that industry? They are considered to be lower caste, and this is something that has been in existence since the time of the kings [*raje kalaa indan*]. So, nobody 'moves' with [engages in] that industry [*kawurut karmante 'move' wenne naeae*]. Someone who does it is low, so people see those who engage in it as nobodies [*wasalaya*]. "This is not good. This work is not good." Like, our mothers, they won't go [to their houses].

Some ten months later, I was surprised to see Amani leaving a home in Atwaedagama, a plastic bag filled with unsewn *hana* purses hanging from her arm. As I approached, she scrunched up her face to signal her displeasure and confirmed ruefully, "I'm sewing now." A few days later, I sat across from her on a small couch in her parents' living room and listened to her explain her engagement in this work reserved for "nobodies." Explicit that what she was doing was "purse *mahanawa*" (sewing purses), not "*hana* work," she nonetheless took great care to stress the superiority of the *hana* industry to other forms of identifiably low-caste labor. Offering the laundering work of "Dhobi people" for comparison, she noted that *hana* work is "clean" and "independent." Irrespective of this, anyway, she emphasized that the caste status of an individual has little bearing on whether they can aspire to be a "good business person." Reiterating the shared vulnerability implied by a notion of the "inherent 'dignity of human beings'" (Taylor

1992:27; see note 32 above), she elaborated, "I mean, high caste people are doing heroin, right? *That's* not smart! You can be low caste and clever, independent, a good business person!" In this formulation, the association of *hana* work with *wasalaya* (nobodies) is eclipsed by Amani's conviction in one's capacity for entrepreneurial self-invention. Amani went on to stress that her focus is on responding to the desires of her customers, relating that her foremost concern is with their *satis* (satisfaction) and with her own performance as a businesswoman. "My God is my customer," she affirmed with self-assurance, and, intending to stress her cleverness as a businesswoman, added, "I am a fox lady." Articulating a firmly neoliberal subjectivity, Amani expressed her chief concern as residing with business, not caste status, and thus sought to avoid the socially hazardous implications of her involvement in the *hana* industry and her interactions with the "nobodies" she deems to be its heirs.

In and around Atwaedagama, then, one form of negative monopolization is the (re)definition of the labor itself such that its performance may not be mistaken as a demonstration of lineage-based occupational ownership. Amani stresses that the work is to be understood as a purely business-motivated undertaking (though, crucially, she still takes great pains to qualify the labor as superior to that associated with other low castes).

Figure 12-Products made of *hana* at a government-run Hana Training Center not far from Atwaedagama

To offer another example, not far from Atwaedagama, a group of around five women convene regularly throughout the week at a government-managed "Hana Training Center." There, with *hana* purchased from a weaver in Atwaedagama, they dye and plait the long fibers

before coiling them to create table mats, coasters, and other items sold at government-owned handicrafts emporia in Kandy and Colombo. As for those in Atwaedagama, *hana* serves as the foundational material in this work and, indeed, one could reasonably assume that their activities fall under the category "*hana karmanteya*" (*hana* industry). During a visit to the center, however, when I remarked upon the similarities between the work done there and that done in Atwaedagama, I was quickly disabused of the notion. Following on the combination of giggles and alternately surprised and stern expressions indicating the absurdity of the comparison, the manager of the center patiently asserted the fundamental difference between the two. Reminding me that what people in Atwaedagama do is a low-caste, lineage-based occupation, she stressed that the labor of the women in *this* center is more properly understood as a hobby (*hobi ekak*), a leisure activity that they choose to do to pass the time between domestic chores.

On the Directionality of Aid and the Limits of "Money Power"

Signaling *hana* work's embeddedness in a moral economy, the labor itself is in these ways qualified to militate against appearances of equivalence with what residents of Atwaedagama are understood to do. There is another manner, however, in which individuals considered "outsiders" to Atwaedagama achieve such negative monopolization despite engaging in productive activities that, *were* such persons considered to be members of "*ee kattiya*" (that group), would be recognized without question as "*hana waeda"* (*hana* work). Here, it is not so much the work itself that is qualified, but rather the nature of the exchange that prompts such work to begin with. To offer one example, I was standing in the garden at the home of a family in Atwaedagama one morning when my hosts' neighbor, Thali, appeared at the low fence dividing their land from hers. She had heard my voice and, as it had been some time since we'd last met, had evidently come to see what I was up to. I could see that she was busy with her

hands and, as I approached to greet her, realized that she was sewing up the edges of a small *hana* change purse. I asked if, in general, she was sewing purses these days and, like Amani, Thali frowned slightly and gestured toward the home of a family on the other side of Atwaedagama. "For them [*EyaalaTa*]," she replied with quiet resignation. Thali's family, the only Tamil family in Atwaedagama, has lived in the area for many decades and has enjoyed relative affluence by comparison to most of the surrounding households. Recently, however, she found herself struggling to provide for her four children. Within weeks of this exchange, she would depart for Kuwait, where she would take up a job as a housemaid and begin sending remittances to help cover her children's educational and other expenses. Despite this, Thali made no reference to the income she earned from occasional sewing as mitigating the financial pressures upon her. As she would explain to me later in the privacy of her home, she and others in her family sew strictly out of a desire to help their neighbors. Invoking the logic of a market economy, she explained that they step in to assist "only if they are in a hurry" and "really need to meet a deadline."

A similar explanation related to helping was offered by a seamstress, Sayuri, who, though not residing in Atwaedagama, is regularly hired by village residents to carry out some of the more labor-intensive sewing that may be done by machine. Sitting in her roadside workshop one afternoon and remarking upon the dramatic development that Atwaedagama has undergone in recent decades, Sayuri, like Amani, drew comparisons between the asymmetrical inter-caste dynamics of "the past" with the relative parity that one may observe today:

> Now, I'm telling you, even when his mother [her husband's mother] was around, if she had been walking on the road and they saw her, they would come out to the road to greet her [to show their respect]. These days, it's not like that. They come and sit with us. They talk to us. That's the situation [*tatweya*] now. Why? Because of money power [*salli balaya*].

"Honestly," she concluded, "everything is second to money now, isn't it?" Despite this "money power" and the leveling that it purports to effect, however, the seamstress nonetheless took great care to emphasize her difference from those for whom she sews and, like Thali, to highlight that she takes on such work not because *she* benefits from it, but rather because her neighbors in Atwaedagama require her assistance. "Generally speaking, I'm an outsider," she explained, "because that [work] is done by a certain group [*kotesheyak*]. It's because they *asked* me to do it that I'm doing it."

The social relational connotations of gift giving, commensality, and unidirectional hospitality in Sri Lanka and other parts of South Asia may facilitate our appreciation of the local significance of this stress on *helping*—that is, on *giving* rather than *receiving*—when it comes to "outsiders" such as Thali and Sayuri engaging in productive activities associated with the work of Atwaedagama residents. There is a wealth of scholarship on India and elsewhere in the region examining how unilateral giving maintains caste-based hierarchical distinction (Hardgrave 1969; Holmberg 1996; Parry 1986; Raheja 1988; Roy 2010; Solomon 2015). As Michelle Gamburd observes, "[i]n Sri Lanka, gifts given from patrons to clients and vice versa presuppose hierarchy and inequality" (Gamburd 2000:111). Such asymmetricality is central when it comes to commensality and to hospitality more generally, for, as Yalman has noted of the Sinhalese, "food exchanges are one of the critical ways in which caste inferiority and superiority is expressed" (Yalman 1973:288).

We have already caught a glimpse of the significance of such asymmetricality as it pertains to commensality. Amani notes that she refuses to accept food prepared by her low-caste hosts. However, the reverse, that low caste guests would refuse her food, is not the case. In my

conversations with high caste individuals, I should note, such refusal was typically framed not in terms of a concern with purity and pollution, but in terms of indicating "connections" (*sambandekam*) that would imply, at best, status parity, and, at worst, a reversal of the hierarchical relation. It is framed, in other words, in terms of "interactional restrictions" like those Robert Hardgrave documented many years ago with respect to commensality among Hindus in India: "To accept cooked food from a person of another caste is to acknowledge inferiority to that caste; to refuse food is to assert superiority" (Hardgrave 1969:4). In this regard, the "refusal to partake with or of the other," as Parama Roy has put it more recently, "is an important breakdown in or rejection of ethical reciprocity with the other" (Roy 2010:14).[57] This is not to say that, among the Sinhalese, concerns with "purity" do not figure at all in the refusal of food prepared by someone who is low caste. Uyangoda (2013) reports, in fact, that in the mono-caste Kinnara village of Kohomba Kanda, "the monks of the local temples refused food prepared by residents of the village" (288). According to "upper caste temple patrons,"

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[57] A former GN for the area in which Atwaedagama falls explained to me one afternoon: "They may offer a cool drink. They'll bring it from the shop along with a plantain and a biscuit or a piece of cake. Beyond that, however, they never give us anything that is made in the house, like rice or tea. They know that we will not eat or drink [from them]." To highlight the risk of accepting such hospitality, she explained how her younger sister's as yet unmarried status had compelled her to decline an invitation from a man in Atwaedagama to attend his daughter's wedding. The "connections" that would have been implied by her attending the wedding, she stressed, could have imperiled her family's efforts to find a suitable (i.e. like-caste) marriage partner for her sister. She explained, "If the story gets out that I went to a Kinnara family wedding, it's not good." Observing that "all of the people he invited were big, big people," the woman and her colleague noted that the man from Atwaedagama had figured that, if all of the high caste people he'd invited had actually attended, it would have given him "a good position." The latter elaborated, "They try very hard to get that social status, what they didn't have before." The example speaks directly to Uyangoda's concern with the ways in which "the institutions of local government do, or do not, constitute social and political spaces for democracy" (Uyangoda 2012:83). For my purposes here, however, it is also worth considering insofar as it demonstrates the limits of any latitude we might expect a governmental position to afford—that is, of the extent to which one might justify one's attendance at such an event by reference to one's duties as a government officer.

Uyangoda explained, the monks did so because the houses of the individuals who had prepared the food "were unclean (*kilitu*) and unhygienic (*apirisidu*)" (288). (Notably, the monk at the local temple in Atwaedagama always accepted alms from the village's residents, and when residents of Atwaedagama prepared a feast for monks from the larger temple in the nearby town as part of a Kathina alms-giving ceremony, I did not witness any of the monks refuse the offerings.)

To offer an example that illustrates both the stakes of such reciprocity and the limits of "money power" [*salli balaya*], a pair of high caste, local government officers assigned to the area encompassing Atwaedagama related to me on one occasion how a Rodi man in a nearby village who had amassed considerable wealth performing *gurukam* ("maledictive incantations" (Holt 1991:219) devised a subterfuge to "trick" the high caste members of a local temple into receiving food and drink from him. Secretly acting as the sponsor of a special event at the temple for *Awuruddu*, the Sinhalese New Year, they reported, the individual drew all of the "big people" from the temple to sit and dine with him in the same place. In the midst of this inadvertent commensality, the announcer divulged the name of the sponsor and the high caste attendees suddenly realized that they had been duped. Low caste individuals will do such things, the officers reported, because, having accrued power or strength (*shaktimat*) through their financial earnings, "they think they have a higher status" and, in "showing off," hope to achieve recognition for that status. In this way, the officers figured the man's attempt at hospitality as a kind of agonistic giving, a moment in which the purported goal amounts to an aggressive attempt by one regarded as low caste to assert his relative equality, if not supremacy, through others' very act of consumption (Mauss 2000; Sherry 1983). In this instance, the man's accrual of *shaktimat* through the acquisition of "naked economic power" (Weber 1998:192) comes up against the officers' (and likely others', as well) "movement of reprisal" (Hardgrave 1969), or

their refusal to recognize and therefore sanction or legitimize his apparent claims to higher status. If, as Weber once argued, "all groups [who] have interests in the status order react with special sharpness precisely against the pretensions of purely economic acquisition" (Weber 1998:192), then I would argue that it is with just such "special sharpness" that the two officers interpret the apparent pretension recounted here: When I asked whether the man's status had actually changed, they replied before giving a laugh, "Well, in *his* mind it has!"

It is also out of an attentiveness to such "economies of hospitality" (Roy 2010:14) or, put otherwise, to the hazards of accepting the hospitality of one's lower-caste neighbors, that those near Atwaedagama stress the vast difference between attending a funeral and attending a wedding. In general, one is not "invited" to a funeral. One simply attends, and the act is perceived as one of compassion. What is more, one is not obligated to accept food prepared at a funeral. By contrast, to attend a wedding, one must have received and *accepted* an invitation, the latter act also constituting an acceptance of the invitation to consume the food to be offered. Unlike a funeral, then, a wedding is perceived as an act of deliberate socialization, an acceptance of hospitality that communicates one's willingness to engage in "ethical reciprocity with the other" (Roy 2010:14). It is for these reasons that Amani noted that she and other high caste neighbors in the area will attend the funeral of those in Atwaedagama (and they theirs). Defending her own family's refusal to attend the weddings of those in Atwaedagama, however, Amani explained,

> Other people will think that we are associating [*ashreya keranawa*] with them and will not 'care' for us. You know that saying about marriage, that 'for the marriage and for the *muttettuwa*' [co-operative paddy work or other labor]? You know how rice is served in the *kamatha* [a clearing that serves as a threshing floor]? The message of the saying is, 'We should exchange food with people of our own caste' [*kameak ganadenu keranna one apee 'same' kula ekka*]. We maintain that idea.

To stress the implications of violating this norm, an elderly gentleman in Hisgoda explained:

> If we go to weddings, in the end we'll have problems. Some people would accuse us, saying, you know, "You went to *this* person's wedding." It would mean that we have connections [*sambandekam*] with them and it won't work out. Other help, we'll do. If it were a funeral, we would go and help because we must, because we need to help them when there is a sad occasion, and because it's the humane thing [*manusakama*] to go.

Helping, figured as a no-strings-attached charitability, is regarded therefore as a mode of sociality that is immune to the flattening implied by the "connections" that one might inadvertently develop by virtue of *receiving* aid or hospitality. To explain one's engagement in *hana*-related activities as nothing more than a willingness to help*,* then, is also to invoke a set of locally meaningful understandings about the mutual constitution of hierarchical distinction and the roles of giving versus receiving. I consider such explanations to be among the other strategies of "negative monopolization" considered above. Where circumstance finds one engaging in work associated with "nobodies," one might adopt, as Amani does, something Simmel described as a "blasé attitude," or a "mood" that, effecting a "blunting of discrimination," seems a "faithful subjective reflection of the completely internalized money economy" (Simmel 1969:52). Alternatively, one might characterize the work as a "hobby," an activity connoting raw, self-motivated *choice* deemed altogether lacking in an industry that, in the final instance, one is expected to carry out not even because it is marketable, but because it is "passed down from generation to generation." Finally, as we see in the above, one might characterize the activity as emanating from a charitability through which one may preserve not only distance, but also a position of removed superiority.

On the Conflation of Work, Place, and People

To understand the efforts of Amani and other "outsiders" to distinguish the labor or the justification for the labor from the activities carried out by their neighbors, we must consider the

mutual imbrication between characterizations of *hana* work and what are often vehement re-inscriptions of the boundaries of Atwaedagama. There is a more literal sense in which articulations of *hana* work serve as reminders of place, and it is through the boundary making this entails that the "insider"/"outsider" distinction emerges in the first place. To those in Atwaedagama's immediate vicinity and even, as we shall see, to some *in* Atwaedagama, the range of employment activities in which the village's residents presently engage are of secondary consideration to a more fundamental fact alluded to by the bank official who, certain that she already knew the answer, asked her audience *why* they "do this industry": to be *of* Atwaedagama is to do *hana* work, and to do *hana* work is to embody one's identification as Kinnara. This tripartite association between place, people, and work marks the resilience of something scholars long ago regarded as having faded. As Gilbert wrote in 1945:

> The land rights and duties of the various castes under royal command have all lapsed since the abolition of compulsory labor or Rajakariya in 1832, and one cannot as a rule be sure of telling a man's occupation from his caste. With the disappearance of the occupational character of caste restrictions has gone also the ecological linkage whereby particular artisan castes were located in the special localities that furnished the raw materials for their work (Gilbert 1953:300).

It is true that one "cannot as a rule be sure of telling a man's occupation from his caste." Furthermore, as we have seen, Atwaedagama's residents are increasingly compelled not only to venture further and further away to find *hana*, but also to rely upon more readily available store-bought substitutes. To some extent, these latter phenomena might be interpreted as signaling the disruption of an "ecological linkage," in Gilbert's terms. In this instance, however, such disruption stems not from a "disappearance of the occupational character of caste restrictions," but rather from the deforestation that has accompanied population growth and housing and road development in areas around Kandy. In important respects, the characterization of those who do

hana work as being yoked to a specific *place* and, at the same time, as being identifiable along caste lines, persists. While this persistence owes substantially to the scholars and journalists who have written about Atwaedagama and the *hana* industry, it is those in nearest proximity to Atwaedagama who, for very different reasons, are most keen to maintain it. To them, "Atwaedagama" signifies not a geographical area, but rather an articulation of people, place, and labor.

To give an example of the way this tri-partite association is reinforced, soon after I began my research in Atwaedagama, my assistant, Kumoda, and I were invited into the home of a family who lived at the intersection of the major road running along the western perimeter of the village and the southernmost of three lanes running perpendicularly away from it. The home was more lavish than others on the lane, and I had been curious about its occupants, who I assumed must be engaged in some other form of employment more lucrative than the *hana* industry, since I had arrived. Owing in part to the shoulder-height cement block wall running the length of the small property, however, I did not feel as entirely comfortable "dropping in" on its inhabitants as I did with the surrounding non-walled properties. Still, I had hoped early on that I would at least meet everyone in Atwaedagama, and so was delighted when, one morning, a woman of about thirty greeted me over the wall and invited my assistant and me to come inside. We cheerfully accepted her invitation and moments later were comfortably settled upon two soft chairs along the wall of her tiled living room. I began to explain why I was in the area, telling our hostess, Chamali, about my interest in the *hana* industry and in learning about the lives of those engaged in it. After a minute, she gave a friendly indication for us to wait and disappeared through a doorway at the back of the room. An elderly woman with striking silver waist-length hair followed behind her when she returned moments later. This, she explained, was her mother in-

law, a woman who had resided in the village her entire life and would therefore have much more to say to us than she, a relative newcomer to the area. Devika, the elder of our two hostesses, as though preparing to "get down to business," twisted her hair into a neat bun at the base of her neck and, taking a seat upon a chair to our left, readied herself for a barrage of questions. Not at all certain that we weren't interrupting more pressing work, my assistant and I wasted no time in broaching some of the more general topics with which we typically began many such impromptu, semi-structured interviews. The conversation began with our asking whether our hosts had other family members in the village and, if they were not engaged in any of the activities associated with the *hana* industry at present, what their household's primary source(s) of income happened to be. The exchange proceeded thus:

Chamali: All my mother's relatives are around us in this village.
Shifna: So, a lot of people in this village are doing the *hana* industry, but now—
Devika: Oh! *That* village is different, and *this* village is different.
Chamali: *That* piece is Atwaedagama. The next door and the next door's next door and the next door's next door's next door [three houses away]—after them, only, those people are like a family. They do hana.
Devika: *That* is different, *this* is different.
Shifna: So this is not Atwaedagama?
Chamali: No, this is not Atwaedagama.
Aimee: What is the name of this village?
Chamali: Hisgoda
…
Devika: This is a different place. This area doesn't do that kind of work, and we are not those people [*mee hariye ee waedekerannet naeae—ee minissut neweri*]
Chamali: You know…those people…you know that *jāti*…*jāti beda* [caste differences] and all…[laughs][58]

Not convinced that she had successfully disabused us of any notion that we were in Atwaedagama, or that we might not yet mistake them, our hosts, as Kinnara, the elder of the two

[58] In this instance, *jātiya* is most properly translated as "caste," and, in keeping with the general discomfort around public discussion of the topic, may be considered a less direct reference to the "difference" being discussed than the term *kulaya*.

invoked an old name by which Atwaedagama was once officially known and persisted firmly: "Those people are Kinnara people. That is Kendapitiya. Those people weave mats [*paeduru*]. People from Kendapitiya weave mats…Along this [main] road, no one weaves mats. *No one*. People who weave mats are up there. People here are not Kendapitiya people. *Those* people are from Kendapitiya."

Chamali began to explain how, under one of Premadasa's large-scale housing development projects in the early 1980s (the same development scheme under which Atwaedagama's residents received new homes), new names had been assigned to villages all over the country, including Atwaedagama (formerly Kendapitiya) and the neighboring village (Hisgoda) in which we presently found ourselves. In fact, as is rumored to be the case with regard to many of the village names that were changed under Premadasa, Atwaedagama's renaming was by all accounts intended precisely to challenge the area's reputation as low caste, the village's old name by then associated at least locally with the lowly caste status of its residents.[59,60] The effort has been undermined not only by scholars and government officials who

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[59] To gesture toward one aspect of the significance that the name Kendapitiya carries for area residents today, Amani recounted to me how her son, in a fit of rage at a classmate who had called him an objectionable name, responded to the offender, a boy from Atwaedagama, by calling him "Kendapitiya." According to Amani, the boy's mother had even come to her home to complain about the episode and seek an apology. "As people with humanity *[manushya dharmeya]*," Amani explained to me, "We can't just say, 'you are from Kendapitiya.'…So…since these things are not in keeping with the times, I had to tell him, 'even if they use a bad word, don't say that…You become a nobody [*wasaleyak*] not by birth, but by your actions.'" The inherent contradiction in the event and Amani's narration of it is worth noting. At the same time that that all parties affirm that the message conveyed by the simple statement, "You are from Kendapitiya," is gravely insulting, an acknowledgement of contemporary realities rendering it thus is summarily obscured by the sense "these things are not in keeping with the times."

[60] Notably, and although I cannot presently explain the discrepancy, while no one I ever met in Atwaedagama used the village's old name, this is not what Silva (2009) reports: "The community benefited from the Gam Udawa Programme implemented by the Government of Sri

persist in using the name Kendapitiya, but also, and with arguably very different interests, by those in the immediate vicinity. Because the names that were given to the two villages were so similar and might therefore lead some to suppose that those in Hisgoda did the same work or, put differently, were the *same people* as those who lived in neighboring Atwaedagama, residents of Hisgoda rejected the new name (Atagolla) assigned to their village. "[Technically], this is Atagolla, but we don't use that name," Devika explained, "because Atwaedagama and Atagolla sounds similar, so people don't like it." "We don't do *any* kind of work that Atwaedagama people do," she reaffirmed. To stress the seriousness of their opposition to the name change at the time, she noted with a hearty laugh, "We even uprooted the name board and threw it away!"

Devika's neighbors in Hisgoda were also frustrated by the similarity between the two new village names. An elderly man who moved to the area in the 1960s reported:

> Well, yes, they call this Atagolla, but it doesn't suit us [*apita hari yanne naeae*]. I said, 'Atwaedagama is different and Atagolla is different.'…'There aren't any artists [*kalaa kareya*] in this village. Nobody is doing *kalaa waeda.* We don't weave mats [*paeduru wiyanne naeae*] and we don't twist thread [*nul katine naeae*]. We don't do any of that [*ee mokut keranne naeae*].' We don't weave mats. And most of the people in this village are *our* people, people who don't do *that* kind of work. Only a few people—I think you saw over there [at the boundary between the two villages]—are doing that kind of work. Only in that area are there a few families. They're really close to the border. That is the area that was given to them. They aren't mixed in with us.

Some months after this encounter, I was walking home from Atwaedagama and passed the residence of an acquaintance who beckoned for me to come inside for a quick visit. I was carrying a brown envelope with copies of photographs I had taken in Atwaedagama the week

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Lanka (GOSL) in the 1980s whereby housing improvements were made particularly in socially depressed communities. As one of the steps for improving their social standings, the names of the communities too were changed in ways that removed any stigma associated with their former names. The name of the village was officially changed…but the new name did not get accepted with even the Kinnara people opting to use the former name" (45)

prior and, upon seeing this, my hostess asked if she might take a look. Noting with a gentle smile that she thought she recognized some of the faces, she handed the pictures to her mother. The latter, sharing that she indeed recognized the individuals and had passed them on the road many times, reclined on the settee beneath her and very softly but adamantly informed me, "They aren't our people (*apee kattiya naeae*)." When I asked what she meant, she explained, "I mean, they do *hana* work, right? They're *those* people (*ee kattiya minissu*). They make things like *paeduru* [mats], *chaamera* [fly-whisks/dusters]—those things. They aren't our people. We don't go there, and they don't come here."[61]

As I would come to learn, and as indicated by the admission of the man quoted above that "only a few people in Hisgoda…are doing that work," concerns over boundary work arose not only out of the perceived similarity between the names of the two villages, but out of an ambiguity regarding the location of the border running between them.[62] At the time of my fieldwork, a number of families for whom engagement in the *hana* industry was a significant if not primary source of income resided on land that was, according to their postal addresses, located within Hisgoda. Many such homes being located well beyond the few that Devika

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[61] Lucky De Silva, who, as noted in Chapter 2, collaborated with his classmates at the University of Peradeniya in the early 1960s to produce the film, *Niyanda Rata*, reported: "Across the road from [the village] is a high caste village. One of my fellow undergrads lived there. He invited us to his house for all meals throughout our stay. His parents however forbade him from walking into [Atwaedagama] to meet us." Of note here is not simply that the student's parents did not allow him to enter the village, but also the fact that de Silva and his collaborators did not *eat* in the village.

[62] The fear that the name "Atagolla" might register for those beyond the village as a place where mats are woven (which is to say, a Kinnara village), is, as I discovered during a casual chat about my research with a doctor in Kandy, not unfounded. Asked why I was living in Sri Lanka, I had briefly explained that I was learning about the lives of individuals engaged in the *hana* industry. The doctor noted earnestly, "we have to appreciate what they do, right?" She went on to explain that she knew the village where they carry out such work and considered it a lovely place. In fact, she explained, in organizing a medical conference, she had once commissioned a number of *hana* woven items from <u>*Atagolla*</u> to distribute as gifts to attendees.

identified in counting houses during our conversation, their occupants would at times confidently declare themselves residents of Hisgoda.[63] To gesture to the topic I take up in the second part of this chapter, however, it is worth noting here that it is not only those from the "without" of Atwaedagama who problematize such administrative borders in ways that reinforce the essential relationship between people, place and work. One afternoon, I was chatting with two weavers at one of their residences along the border to which the man quoted above referred (several houses beyond those enumerated by Devika). As one twisted bright green *hana* fibers into small bundles of thread and passed them to her partner to work into the mat that she was weaving, I explained that I had received somewhat contradictory information regarding the border between Atwaedagama and Hisgoda. The two were adamant that the area in which they resided was Hisgoda and that the boundary of Atwaedagama lay to the northwest of their homes. A younger woman, their neighbor across the lane and someone who, while not engaged in *hana* work herself, would regularly pass the hours in the weaving shed where we were gathered, appeared toward the end of our conversation. Realizing that our discussion had been prompted by my struggle to make sense of the conflicting information I had received as to the location of the boundary between Hisgoda and Atwaedagama, she was eager to offer clarification. While not contesting that we were in fact presently *in* Hisgoda, she pointed down at the mat stretched out upon the floor of her neighbor's weaving shed and explained quite simply, "Atwaedagama means doing *this*" [*Atwaedagama kiyanne mee keranawa*]. Her neighbors, who met the comment

[63] High caste residents in Hisgoda also commented on their annoyance that, when the Grama Sewaka compiled the voting list for the area in which they live, he "mistakenly" included Atwaedagama's old name. "Even now we scold him!" one man laughed.

with silence, returned to their work as the young woman elaborated, "we are *from* Atwaedagama but we are *in* Hisgoda."[64]

It is not unusual for those at greatest "risk of cross-category confusion," whether it be along racial, class, or caste lines, to be particularly concerned with and ardent about the reproduction of social boundaries (see Kwok 2012:34; see also Rudolph and Rudolph 1967:44). The instances of such reproduction considered here indicate why those who engage in activities typically regarded by Atwaedagama residents as constitutive of the *hana* industry but who do not consider themselves to be "from Atwaeadagama" take pains to qualify such work as different. Where a tri-partite association between place, people, and work is regularly re-inscribed by "close outsiders" (and even, significantly, as we see above, by some within Atwaedagama) to remind themselves and others of their essential social difference—where, in other words, the work at hand is also suggestive of one's social and geographical "place"— demarcating such engagement as different becomes an act of negative monopolization and thus of maintaining one's presumed superiority.

In concluding this section, I wish to note that the equivalence asserted here between place, people, and work is a contingent relationality. As Stirrat pointed out many years ago, variable understandings of the relationship between caste and occupation may be rather arbitrarily applied across groups of different caste status. Stirrat found, for instance, that

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[64] That, despite Premadasa's apparent intentions, the name changes did not result in unsettling the village's reputation as one populated by low caste individuals is reinforced for me when I reflect on a casual exchange I had soon after moving into a home up the road from Atwaedagama. Two relatives of the family I was living with inquired, "So, where *exactly* is it that you are working?" Myself unaware at the time of the significance of the name, I told them "Kendapitiya." Detecting that they had little idea of where that might be, I offered, "Atwaedagama?" "Ahhhh," they replied in unison, and after exchanging a knowing glance, the one leaned toward the other and whispered, "the *Kinnara* village."

Goyigama individuals residing beyond the village of Wellagoda, the Sinhalese Catholic fishing village where he carried out anthropological fieldwork in the 1970s, were "unwilling to accept the Wellagoda Goyigama as 'true' Goyigama because their [non-cultivator] occupation put their claim to Goyigama status in question" (Stirrat 1982:18). Such unwillingness evokes an early 20th century tendency for "Goyigama judicial interpreters, who would never refer to a Goyigama witness as a cultivator unless he was one by occupation…[to] frequently describe a Kerava, irrespective of his occupation, as a fisher" (Gilbert 1953:130). Like the Kerava, residents of (or "from") Atwaedagama do not risk surrendering the status they are believed to have inherited. Many not only do not weave *hana* mats but also increasingly rely upon alternative modes of employment as their primary source of income. Despite this, whereas the high caste individuals who take up activities associated with *hana* work are not reduced to those activities, their neighbors, irrespective of occupational engagement, remain (in some instances, by their own admission) "mat-weavers," their essential "Kinnara-ness" thus taken for granted as a core essence. As one female weaver in Atwaedagama, Liyoni, reported to me one afternoon, "[Even] if you leave the job and go to a different village, people from this village are people from this village." Relating that the meaning of "hiding hana mats" is precisely this—that "just because you hide that, it won't change that you are from this village [and] that you are from this kind of lineage [*paramparawe jatiya*]," Liyoni concluded matter-of-factly, "We have to accept that someday."

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In the remainder of this chapter and in the following one, I shift my attention to the ways in which those regarded as "from" Atwaedagama simultaneously trouble the boundaries by which they are commonly distinguished from "outsiders" and remind one another of their proper

social and geographical "place." Transitioning in this way from a consideration of "outsiders" to those "from Atwaedagama" risks reinscribing the very boundary whose actual constructedness and non-essentiality I aim to portray. My rationalization for doing so is that, beyond the convenience of such a distinction in arranging the material I present here, partitioning the chapter in this manner mirrors the forcefulness of the "insider"/"outsider" distinction as I encountered it. In fact, however, my purpose is to demonstrate that the distinction softens when we consider—as I do in the following pages—how assumptions about the implications of "forgetting one's place" cut across this boundary in unexpected and complex ways. To indicate this softening, I conclude this section with an anecdote that demonstrates not only one of the more antagonistic forms of hierarchical boundary work that Atwaedagama residents encounter, but also one of the many forms that residents' complicity in such work may take.

In September 2014, the National Craft Council (NCC) official assigned to Atwaedagama joined members of the village's artisan society, a secretary and a development officer from the local Divisional Secretariat office, and a representative from the Ministry of Traditional Industries and Small Enterprise Development to convene a meeting in the village training center. The primary order of business was to update residents on the progress of a 74 lakh rupee (roughly US $57,000) initiative to "protect this handicraft industry." The plan included a number of projects, including the erection of a new "showroom" by the main road (something planners hoped would level the competitive commercial playing field for artisans by presenting a single store in which they could all display/sell their products), the distribution of work huts to weavers, the construction of a new roof on the village training center, the installation of a fence around its perimeter, and the repair of two roads leading up to the building. About an hour into the meeting, two individuals in the audience raised separate and unrelated complaints regarding the how the

initiative had proceeded. One suggested that no matter how much money was spent on the project, he regarded it as a categorical failure given that it did not include an adequate plan for the allocation of land to plant *hana,* which he argued was the artisans' "primary need." The other, reiterating a grievance she had already submitted in a written petition to the Divisional Secretariat, complained that the work huts intended to support weavers in the village had been unfairly distributed.

I take up issues related to each of these complaints in the following pages. My immediate concern is with the dramatic turn in the tone of the conversation prompted by the second complaint. In an ensuing exchange between the NCC representative and those in attendance, the latter were reminded in subtle but forceful ways of their proper social place. It was not simply the key "outsider" involved in this exchange, the NCC representative, however, implicated in such reminding. To my surprise, he was joined in this effort by Chaminda, a man recognized as one of the most knowledgeable and established artisans in the village—the one, in fact, who leveled the initial complaint.

Expressing his dissatisfaction at hearing *any* objections pertaining to the initiative, the NCC official reminded his audience of the unusually generous and unprecedented sum of money allocated to Atwaedagama. "Now, you know, in the central province, and in this country," he began, "this is the [artisan] village that the government spends the most on. Even in the president's home area, they won't spend like this on a village. No one has ever spent this much on an artisan village [*shilpa gamaanaya*]." At this point, Chaminda commiserated aloud with the officer. Referring to land disputes and other evident hindrances to the progress of the project, he noted, "And this is also the village with the most problems!" "Yes!" the officer agreed. Conceding that he was disappointed to encounter such problems, but noting that it is not at all

atypical for such obstacles to hamper "development work," he re-directed the conversation from predictable hurdles to a problem that, in this moment, he found far more distressing. With more than a touch of sarcasm, he declared, "A lot of people are so good at writing petitions!"[65] Amidst the laughter with which those in attendance received the remark, an elderly man soberly replied, "Yes, well, sometimes we can't do without petitions." Discounting this response and the expression of political agency and citizen literacy it defended, the NCC officer continued:

> Well, I have been working with this village and with this training center for 8 or 9 years, and this is the *only* village that has ever sent a petition to me. No other village has ever sent a petition to me. They never blamed me. [Before now], not one artisan has sent a petition in written or non-written form. This only happened in this village!

He went on to explain how, when the present development initiative had first begun, he told one of his colleagues, a man from Atwaedagama, that he feared he would encounter problems like ones he had encountered in a nearby drum-making village—a village that, as all in attendance were aware, is populated by individuals said to belong to the only caste group generally considered to be inferior to the Kinnara, the Rodiya. The most common obstacle there, he explained, had to do with the recipients' misuse of funds intended to support the industry:

> He said to me, 'Don't see this village as another Kolagala.' That's what he said, as an artisan and as an officer. But Kolagala people would *never* go against my word. If I said something, they wouldn't say a word against it. They would accept it. But here it's not like that. Here, there are *so* many people who are so clever [*daksha*-capable/clever/skilled] when it comes to writing things [petitions]. [*Sarcastically*] We can say, 'clever people [*daksha aya*]'! We could employ them, in fact!

Indicating his sympathy for this eruption of frustration, Chaminda added mockingly, "Yes, people who went to campus!" "Yes," the officer agreed, "they can write *very* well, and they're so talented at it." After challenging such writers to just try to "win by writing petitions [*petsan*

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[65] The word for "petition," or *petsama*, is frequently used (as it is here) to refer to a formal written complaint.

galahama dinaagannako],” the officer adopted a more serious tone and informed his audience that such a “win” would amount to nothing being given at all. “Even things that are supposed to be given will not be given to them. That’s what I will do, because *why* are you doing this?!” A moment of silence followed this final outburst before the officer assured his audience that it is in fact a small number of people—“only one or two”—who “do these things.” Thus attempting to allay any fear that he might actually somehow bring a halt to the project already underway, in this move he also indirectly addressed the individual for whom his words were actually intended, the woman, Liyoni, who had submitted the recent petition complaining of the way in which work huts had been distributed.

Figure 13-The construction of a work hut in Atwaedagama

In an effort to temper the bitterness now hanging thick in the air, one of the representatives from the Divisional Secretariat began in a comparatively unruffled manner to clarify the *real* problem with petitions. Complaints are often sent directly to senior officials—including the president—she explained, rather than to relevant local officers, and the *grama sewaka* (government-appointed village officer) in particular. Since the letters are then largely passed back down, ultimately landing in the hands of the *grama sewaka* to whom, she stressed, they should have been sent in the first place, the result is that “a lot of government officers will read unnecessary letters and waste time.” Beyond this, she stated, “if you write anonymously, then we can’t do anything about it. You need to have a backbone (*konda*) and write your name on it.”

Taking this as a cue, Liyoni stood and addressed the officials before her, "Honorable Minister and Divisional Secretariat [Pradesheya Sabaha] and all of the officers, like you said, I have not submitted any letters anonymously. I am from this village and I have a good backbone and I'm speaking with it." Addressing the NCC officer directly, the woman reiterated the complaint contained in her petition—that, despite by her own estimation satisfying all the eligibility requirements to receive a work hut, she had not received one, while others, who she believed did not satisfy the requirements, had. After learning that she had been deemed ineligible, Liyoni reported to her audience, she attempted to speak with the NCC officer in person before resorting to writing the petition now at issue:

> Honorable Minister, I wanted to talk to him. I tried to contact him by phone, and I went to his office, but I didn't have an opportunity to speak with him properly. He just said, 'if you come like this, I won't give you anything.' I said, 'I'm talking in a fair way. I'm not talking in an unjust way.'…My husband is a bus conductor and I have been doing this industry for seventeen years. I have all of the qualifications...I'm saying it fearlessly. I can show all of the things that I have given to Laksala, to Lakpahana. How can they say that I don't have qualifications? What more do you expect from me? That's what I'm asking from you.

"The *main* problem," the NCC officer replied sharply, "is your mouth" (*oyaage kata tamayi pradhaana prashneya*). After he assured all that the allocation of the workshops was entirely fair, Liyoni replied,

> Well, it's okay if I don't get a workshop. I'm not afraid. I have a good backbone, and my mouth is not too much…I have the same mouth as everyone else, but I won't keep my mouth shut when an injustice has happened to me…I am a woman from this village and I am a citizen of this country, and I'm asking you to not let this happen again in the future. That's all I have to say. Thank you very much.

As Uyangoda argues, any "local public space" may become "a contested domain in which caste, class and gender inequalities play out overtly as well as covertly" (2012:27-28). There are two aspects of the unsettlingly hostile exchange between Liyoni and the NCC officer that

transformed this meeting into just such a domain. Both indicate how, against the locally resonant ideal of a modern, liberal democracy and the form of political subjectivity it is believed to entail, residents of Atwaedagama are reminded by others and, more importantly, remind one another, of their essential social inferiority.

The first aspect of the exchange is animated by narratives of a historically rooted contestation between individuals identified as Kinnara and those identified as Rodiya or Rodi. Both said to be "nearer to the bottom than any other caste" (Gunasinghe 2007:114), the Kinnara and the Rodiya are generally mentioned in reference to one another. In the *Report of the Kandyan Peasantry Commission of 1951*, for instance, the Rodiya and the Kinnara were listed as the only exceptions to the Commission's observation that "caste has ceased to impose any appreciable handicaps." They were therefore regarded as the only castes for whom "state intervention" was regarded as necessary (Uyangoda 2000:23). Both are alternately described as "depressed castes" (Matthews 2004:87) and "naraka minissu" (lit. "bad people")(Yalman 1967:60). There is historical ambiguity, however, as to which group is superior, as suggested by the title of a 1905 *Supplement to the The Tropical Agriculturalist, "*The Rodiya Commission and Its Work-Who are Lower in Race: The Kinnaraya or Rodiya?" The Kinnara are more commonly regarded as superior to the Rodiya, though there are instances not only in which the opposite is said to be the case (see Yalman 1967:90), but also in which they have been reported as being one and the same.[66] The close association between them is further suggested by the proverb, "Like the Rodiya meeting the Kinnara" (*Rodiyaawa Kinnara hamba una wage)*, a reference to the tale of how the Kinnara came to be regarded as the "hereditary enemy" of the Rodiya (Senaveratna

[66] In "A Prince and a Kinnara Woman," included in his *Village Folk-Tales of Ceylon*, Henry Parker reports that the narrator from whom he collected the story "thought that Rodiyas are Kinnaras" (Parker 1910:307).

2005:51).[67] The story, reportedly originally documented by Hugh Nevill, centers on the degradation of a princess who, after being discovered to have developed a gustatory penchant for human flesh, is cast out by her father, the king, and forced to marry a Rodiya "scavenger." Indicating the disgrace into which she has fallen, the princess and the Rodiya man are "angrily repulsed" when, "as night came on," they sought "shelter from a Kinnara" (Denham 1911:214-215).

If the lowliness of the Kinnara serves the contrastive purpose of conveying the absolute degradation of the princess in this story, the NCC officer relied upon a similar strategy in shaming his audience for forgetting their place. Deploying the same discourse of help used by "outsiders" to convey their superiority to and distance themselves from their neighbors in Atwaedagama, about mid-way through the meeting described above, he scolded himself aloud for permitting his "pity" for artisans in both Atwaedagama and Kolagala to influence his work as a development officer: "My big fault is pitying you all. I have the same problem in Kolagala**,** as well. [The Divisional Secretariat] said, 'don't ever give the artisans anything out of pity.'" Invoking Kolagala, an area widely known among locals and particularly those in Atwaeadagama to be populated by individuals identified as Rodiya, has a certain force in this context. The officer would take the comparison a step further just moments later when, as we see in the above excerpt, he declared angrily that, unlike the residents of Atwaedagama, the residents of Kolagala would never question his authority. ("Kolagala people would never go against my word," but "here, it's not like that.") By drawing on the historical ambiguity or contestation around the relative status of the Rodiya and the Kinnara, the NCC officer's comparison was a reprimand,

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[67] In Senaviratna's *Dictionary of Proverbs of the Sinhalese* (1936), "Like the Rodiya meeting the Kinnará" falls alongside "A struggle on a rock is no friendly encounter" and "Like the cobra meeting the 'polonga'" under the entry "Fighting."

"They are better at being low than you are" and therefore, "Unlike you, they have not forgotten their place."

The significance of the second aspect of the exchange that I wish to highlight here, the NCC officer's comment about 'clever people' [*daksha aya*], becomes evident when we consider the remark in light of broader expectations regarding educational achievement among Sinhalese identified as low caste, and among those identified as Kinnara in particular. A 2005 study suggests that the contemporary secondary school dropout rate among such populations is "substantially higher" than the national average (Jabbar 2005:18). Others have documented the relatively poor educational achievement among adult residents of Atwaedagama (GCE OL of 5.3%, compared to the national average of 18%)(Silva 2009:44; Jabbar 2005:18). (Notably, however, Atwaedagama's adult literacy rate of 89.9% approximates the national rate of 91.2% (UNICEF 2013)[68,69]). Kalinga Tudor Silva and Paramsothy Thanges (2009) report that Rodiya and Kinnara children were "traditionally" not "welcome in local schools," and that "if they managed to enter these schools with some effort or through mediation of some sympathizers, they experienced discrimination from teachers as well as classmates of higher castes" (24). Anecdotal evidence compiled during a 2005 study conducted by the Colombo-based Centre for Poverty Analysis also indicates that such discrimination is by no means a phenomenon limited to Sri Lanka's past (Jabbar 2005:19). In explaining their anger toward scholars and journalists who write about the lowly status of those in the village (the focus of Chapter 3), some in

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[68] https://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/sri_lanka_statistics.html. Accessed February 6, 2017.
[69] For the purpose of the study, the "lower castes" were identified as those generally perceived as inferior to the Vahumpura/Hakuru, or (in the order given by the authors) the Kumbal/Badhala, Bathgama/Padu, Panna/Bodhi, Nakati/Berawa, Kinnara, and Rodi. (Jabbar 2005:4)

Atwaedagama reported that their primary concern was that their children would be teased at school because of such writings and, as a result, would refuse to attend.

In this context, the NCC officer's noting of those who have written petitions, "We can say, 'clever people' [*daksha aya*],'" carries a particular salience. Delivered with unmistakable irony alongside the comment, "we could employ them, in fact," his words go beyond reinforcing the general sense among many I encountered in Atwaedagama that the NCC's employment of his colleague, a man from the village, is exceptional. What is more important given my focus in the second half of this chapter is that his momentary ally in sanctioning Liyoni, Chaminda, is himself a resident of Atwaedagama. The supposed laughability of the notion that the individuals to whom they refer would have attended university and thus qualify for government employment extends directly from the abovementioned caste-based disparities (both historical and contemporary) in educational achievement. Publicly reinforcing the absurdity of the idea that the individuals being discussed would be university-educated, or "people who went to campus," Chaminda's mockery of Liyoni went beyond indicating a compliant awareness of such disparities. It also conveyed the message that the latter was putting on airs. While Liyoni's act may be justifiably read as an actualization of the modern ideal of democratic citizenship so often counterposed to "the old caste hierarchy" in Sri Lanka, his response is more consistent with the maintenance of the latter. To invoke the terminology with which I have framed this chapter, far from viewing the writing and submission of the petition as an instantiation of modern political agency rooted in citizen literacy or a notion of shared humanity, he suggests that she has forgotten her place.

In the days following this contentious exchange between Liyoni and the NCC officer, residents of Atwaedagama would comment regretfully over what they regarded as Liyoni's

brazen and disrespectful outburst. And yet, as far as Liyoni was concerned, her side of the altercation was marked by a certain restraint.

When I went to visit her to ask her about the confrontation, I found Liyoni sitting in the doorway to her home and cutting small circles out of a large sheet of cardboard. As if anticipating my unannounced visit, she smiled widely and, standing up, dropped her work and gestured enthusiastically for me to follow her inside. Brushing the white clippings off of her skirt and onto the pink tile flooring of her living room, she invited me to find a comfortable spot on a plush sofa as she switched on a nearby fan. The quality of Liyoni's home attested to the three years she spent working as a housemaid in Cyprus to build it. Two tall brass vases bearing yellow, red and white silk flowers flanked a sizable entertainment center. Behind them, a framed wedding photograph of Liyoni and her husband was displayed alongside a series of other family photographs upon an elegant china cabinet.

In a conversation ranging from her time overseas to her daughter's education, we at last came to the topic of the recent meeting. Liyoni recounted in detail how she had made the decision to submit a complaint about the distribution of work huts in the first place. Liyoni was confident in her justification for the complaint and proud of the self-assurance with which she had publicly confronted the man who had taken issue with it. At the same time, however, she noted that in the end she "kept quiet," or decided not to press the issue as far as she might have, out of a fear that doing so would draw attention to a subject that is purposefully avoided. Reflecting on the NCC officer's public condemnation of her filing a complaint against him, she explained:

> Do you remember that Mahathaya said that even if *he* speaks in a bigger voice [*hayen 'hayi' kiuwot*] to villagers in Kolagala, nobody would say anything? That everyone would comply? You know, we spoke about this matter before? That subject

> [*mathrukaawa*] we were talking about, about these villagers and such? That is the policy that he has. He doesn't like people talking above him. That's what he meant then. That he doesn't like people talking like that. So, I just covered it up and said nothing [*wahaagana hitiya*]. That's why I kept quiet.

Liyoni offered her own paraphrasing of the NCC officer's remarks—"'If I say something in a louder voice, people in this [other] village wouldn't say anything above that.'" Echoing the same discomfort with "things from the past" that underlies the sense of humiliation Atwaedagama residents feel with respect to writings about the village, she elaborated:

> I think he might have this attitude that comes from the past [*issera indan ena kalpa*]—that people shouldn't talk like that. I think he must think it's a kind of disrespect [*awanambuwa*]. I think he might have thought that and that's why he said what he said. I would have questioned him further, but if I stir things up [*awisuwot*], people will get angry because then the things from the past [*issera eewa*] and all of that will be drawn out [*aedenawa*] and people will become restless [*kalabala enawa*].

When I asked Liyoni what she thought of the "attitude" (a concern with caste) to which she referred, she laughed and replied, "I don't have anything to say—what I think is that, as a citizen of this country, everyone has rights [*mee rate purawaesiyek haetiyata onekenekuta tamange ayitiya tiyanawa*]. People have the right to speak whenever they want to in order to get something. That's what I did. I don't care what other people's notions [*mateya*] are."

In this instance, the rationalization that Liyoni offers for her reported self-censorship accords with the moral evaluation to which her neighbors subjected her following the meeting. Like the latter's condemnation of her outburst, it serves in the maintenance of a status quo with respect to grievances around what are felt to be caste-based slights and injustices. Put simply, the conviction that Liyoni had acted disrespectfully by voicing her complaint is compounded by the threat of what might transpire if one causes a fuss or "stirs things up." As we saw in the preceding chapter, the threat—that by publicly suggesting that caste-based concerns play a role

in contemporary instances of marginalization, one merely draws attention to one's own preoccupation with a "thing from the past"—is real enough. "Even raising the question of intercaste equality in the public domain," as Uyangoda writes, "is stigmatized in the belief that Sri Lankan society is adequately egalitarian not to make caste-centric demands public" (Uyangoda 2012:88).[70] Indeed, in a conversation about the reluctance of village residents to complain to any authority figures about their public humiliation by those who write about them, the Atwaedagama gentleman employed by the NCC explained to me:

> People are reluctant to talk about ['things like that' (*ara wage dewal*)] with big organizations. Like, they don't want to say it out loud. So, see, when they talk about something like that and try to solve problems [related to it], it goes up [*udaTa yanawa*] and ends up becoming even more publicized [*pracharaya*]…They fear that it would become even more publicized than it is now. So, because of that…if we start writing about this to the president…like, about these things, 'mmm, mmm, mmm,' then it would be more publicized than it is now. So, that's why they have stopped.

In keeping with this felt imperative to remain silent, Liyoni ultimately weighed the risk of "stirring things up" against her own desire to "have questioned him further," and resolved to remain quiet. Insofar as it demonstrates an inadvertent endorsement of one's own marginalization, then, the exchange is among the less overt ways in which residents of Atwaedagama fortify notions of their own caste-based difference. It is to such fortifying practices that I turn in the following chapter.

Conclusion

Through a discussion centered on the characterizations of *hana* work and of the people who engage in such work, in this chapter I have drawn attention both to the ways in which

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70 The emergence of an "ethno-nationalist conceptualization of 'a deep horizontal comradeship' among the Sinhala," Kalinga Tudor Silva likewise argues, has resulted in an "increased tendency to conceal caste identities and to look down upon any open expression of caste distinctions" (Silva 1999:212).

Atwaedagama's close outsiders—neighbors and government officials, in particular—re-insribe the boundary around the village and the people who live there, as well as to the contradictions that arise in moments of this re-inscription. I have examined, in other words, some of the ways in which these boundary-making practices illuminate the tensions that arise out of simultaneous commitments to neoliberalism, caste, and democratic egalitarianism in present-day Sri Lanka. In the final section, I also demonstrated a complicity on the part of Atwaedagama residents in the reproduction not only of the notion of their social difference, but also of the silence around caste-based identification. I expand upon this complicity in the following chapter by examining how the area's residents themselves reinforce the parameters of caste-based difference according to which the social and geographical boundaries defining Atwaedagama are continually redrawn. As we will see, in negotiating local expectations and criteria of moral evaluation like the ones by which Liyoni's actions are judged in the ethnographic vignette offered above, individuals in Atwaedagama are at times impelled toward collusion in their own social and economic marginalization.

Chapter 5
Reminders from 'Within'

In the previous chapter, I examined some of the ways in which individuals in proximity to Atwaedagama and the industry with which the area is associated invoke the limits of "money power" (*salli balaya*) to militate against the collapse of social distance between themselves and their low caste neighbors in the village. To make sense of the moves of Atwaedagama "insiders" like Chaminda (the weaver encountered in Chapter 4) to affirm such distance, we must also consider the ways in which those regarded as "from" the village similarly reinforce the limits of "naked money," or the "pretensions of purely economic acquisition," in their evaluations of themselves and others (Weber 1998:180;192). Turning to this latter goal in the present chapter, I begin by more explicitly establishing a link between the reproduction of caste-based identification on the part of those within Atwaedagama, and broader, morally-inflected evaluations of the perceived disordering that economic development is supposed to have ushered in. Put otherwise, I establish a link between, on the one hand, the ways in which Atwaedagama's residents remind themselves and one another of their proper "place," and, on the other, indications of a moral economy in which upward mobility is rendered a potentially hazardous achievement.

The focus here, then, is in part on the "movement[s] of reprisal" (Hardgrave 1969) through which the status aspirations associated with "new" wealth are rejected as the presumptions of "greedy" upstarts. As we will see, these "movements" bear a strikingly similarity to the ways in which those in Atwaedagama evaluate and respond to individuals who they believe have distanced themselves from *hana* work in an effort to conceal who they "truly" are as "*mee game minissu"* ("people in/of this village"). These movements, which often take the

form of gossip, are akin to the disputes that, in his 1968 analysis of low-status Guyanese plantation laborers, Chandra Jayawardena found to result from an incongruity between the prevalence of an egalitarian ideology and the realities of uneven mobility. The egalitarian ideology and sense of shared deprivation that Jayawardena identified in Guyana echoes in the assertions of shared humanity, articulations of local commonality, and kinds of collective action—albeit, in this case, passive action—that we find in Atwaedagama. Like the Guyanese workers whom he studied, the residents of Atwaedagama, though not qualifying as what Jayawardena would have called a "closed" sub-community, have long been set apart both physically and socially. Historically held in low regard, "the Kinnara" have been segregated in mono-caste settlements. (In 1953, Ryan observed that, "Except for groups like the Rodī, and to some extent the Kinnara and Palī, intercaste residential proximity is not viewed with shame, horror, or fear" (203). Atwaedagama's present-day maintenance of a separate cemetery and separate children's and sports societies are just some of the indicators of the continuance of this segregation.) The unplanned and leaderless action of Guyanese laborers against plantation management as a "generalized protest against the injustice of the social order" (Bern 1987: 214), has a certain parallel in the deliberate but largely uncoordinated collective silence with which, as we saw in Chapter 3, residents of the village have protested against the journalists and others whose writings they believe have humiliated them by indicating their historical social and economic degradation.

While in Atwaedagama we do not encounter an equivalent for the Guyanese laborers' concept of "*mati*" ("associate, fellow being, or equal" (Jayawardena 1968: 417)), then, we do find a sense of commonality and shared experience that arises out of a history of social and economic marginalization associated with the caste-based industry for which the village is

known. Most importantly, just as Jayawardena found disputes to occur when the "achievements [of individual laborers] became the basis for claiming greater prestige…or when there was a suspicion that this was so" (425), so we find that the successes of upwardly mobile residents of Atwaedagama who appear to have deliberately abandoned the *hana* industry risk interpretation as "reprehensible exhibitions of unjustified superiority" (424). In the face of such displays, as we will see, Atwaedagama's residents remind one another of the form and parameters of acceptable social mobility in the context of neoliberal promises of (economic) freedom. In doing so, they not only demonstrate that there is a solidarity in "*hana* work" that is at odds with the individualization entailed in the neoliberal operations in which they are also caught up; they also reinforce the ideological bases underlying notions of their own caste-based inferiority.

(Un)Virtuous Gains

As noted in Chapter 1, the intensification of local road and housing construction in the region surrounding Atwaedagama has resulted in a relative scarcity of *hana,* the raw plant material that village residents have long relied upon for the manufacture of the decorative mats, fly whisks, change purses, and other items ultimately sold on the street and in shops throughout the country. As we have seen, this scarcity has driven those who would use the plant's fibers to either venture further away from Atwaedagama to secure it or, as is increasingly the case, turn to alternative and more readily available materials.

In addition to the inconvenience of having to travel often considerable distances to collect *hana*, many in the village report that, while they were once given free access to the plant wherever they happened upon it, since around 2013 they increasingly find themselves having to pay those from whose land they harvest it. Generally speaking, *hana'*s sudden acquisition of exchange value was met with discontent. Many of my interlocutors in Atwaedagama complained

about being refused outright or being asked to pay (reportedly, on average, Rs. 2/leaf) for a plant that not only had once been given freely to them, but also that, as far as they knew, was of no use to those on whose land it grows.[71] Remarking on the phenomenon, some would refer to an aphorism retold in a popular children's song about a selfish dog that, though not interested in eating the hay leftover from the harvest, jealously prevents a hungry bull from eating it. As one man put it to me, "Some have *hana*, but it's of no use them. Still, even though it's not use to them, they won't give it to people to whom it *is* useful. They don't use it, but they also won't give it away. The dog doesn't eat the hay leftover from the harvest, but he won't give it to the bull to eat!" [*Kawuhari wattaka hana tiyenawa, namuth eyaalata preyoojena naeae. Namuth, eyaalaTa preyojena naeti wunath, preyojena kerana ayaTa denne naeae. Pawicci keranne naeae, namuth dennet naeae. Balla piduru kannet naeae. Kanna gonaaTa denneTa naeae.*] While most commented on the situation with at least some resentment, there was at least one person, Renuka, a woman who became my friend and de facto weaving instructor soon after I arrived in Atwaedagama, who almost welcomed it. In a conversation about the rising difficulty of securing the plant and about being charged for something once given freely, Renuka smiled as she discussed the change. She indicated, to my surprise, that the inconvenience of having to pay for *hana* serves as welcome confirmation of "outsiders'" recognition of the upward economic mobility of those who have historically used the plant. In her estimation, the actual price of such recognition was, if bothersome, worth every rupee for indicating others' acknowledgement of

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[71] Some in Sri Lanka plant *hana* as a decorative plant in their gardens or to create a perimeter around their property. A thirty-year-old man from Atwaedagama related how, when he and his brother went to cut such a plant on a small estate, "this woman came after us with a *wak pihiya* [curved knife]! We didn't know what to do, so we crept into a small shop and that was that."

their “equal footing” in the transaction at hand. Still, as we are about to see, Renuka is not one to *volunteer* such payment.

The increasing difficulties in securing *hana* notwithstanding, in the months following my arrival in the area I saw dozens of bundles of broad *hana* leaves brought back to Atwaedagama, hundreds of leaves pressed, and thousands of shiny wax-like fibers extracted, dyed, dried, oiled, brushed, spun, and woven. Wanting to see what the beginning of the process—that is, the actual harvesting of *hana*—looked like, I regularly expressed my wish to join others when they ventured out to collect it. To my disappointment, however, the threats of the forest multiplied each time I implored someone to take me with them on their next trip: “There are little bugs! You wouldn’t like it.” “Little *bugs*?!” I would reply in exacerbation, “*please*, don’t let little *bugs* stop you from taking me!” Next, it was snakes: “Even *I’m* afraid to go,” a man in his mid-60’s confided, “They coil around the base of the plant and you might not even see one before it bites you!” When the threat of snakes did not put me off, it was boars. “They are *very* dangerous,” I was warned. I began to relent and, months after the first of my many requests, when we at last got to thieves—thieves lurking in the darkness of the jungle, waiting to pounce on my Pentax camera—I gave up. By this time, the inter-monsoon had overtaken the region. As *hana* collecting expeditions ground to a halt with the onset of heavy rains and suddenly treacherous conditions, I decided to set the issue aside.

It was to my pleasant surprise, therefore, that one December afternoon as the rainy period was drawing to a close, I got my chance. As we finished threading the loom on the dung floor of her porch-cum-workshop, a backbreaking task that had taken us several hours, Renuka excitedly and quite unexpectedly whispered, “Let’s go cut *hana* tomorrow.” Hoping to be the first to seize on the break in rains and begin harvesting what little *hana* she suspected we might find in a

nearby forest, Renuka shushed my instinctive cry of gratitude and swore me to secrecy lest others learn of her plan. Delighted by the offer, I eagerly abided and, the next morning, Renuka, her aunt, Eromi, and I set off early as I followed their lead along a narrow dirt footpath abutting a manioc field between Atwaedagama and a still partially forested area to the east. Each armed with a sharp, curved blade, and Renuka with an old, folded sarong to place atop her head under the *hana* bundle she hoped to have with her on our return, the two ladies moved in swift silence ahead of me. As we proceeded, our path became a mud-filled gully before turning us abruptly onto a blindingly verdant paddy field. Under the rapidly intensifying blaze of the mid-morning sun, we scurried along the narrow bunds, I struggling to keep my balance, and then proceeded across a grassy meadow before diving into the cool shadows of the forest and beginning our gradual ascent up a wooded hill. I followed them along an intolerably labyrinthine route and, even when we arrived at the defined village lanes that would lead us to our destination, swore aloud that I'd be lost for good were they to leave me there.

Eventually, we turned onto a dirt roadway cutting through an area that seemed to have been built up overnight, partially constructed houses scattered sparsely across a forested landscape. As I paused to catch my breath and absorb the scenery, Renuka and Eromi carried on, their eyes darting here and there in hopes of spotting the prize of our journey. At last, they wrenched me from my daze and gestured their intention to approach a woman sweeping the front garden of a newly constructed brick house just up the lane. They had spotted *hana* on her property, they signaled. Standing beside a steep pile of shiny gravel in front of her home and resting her arm momentarily on the handle of her broom, the woman heard my friends' request to cut the *hana* growing behind her house before replying without a moment's hesitation, "Go along further up the road. My husband told me just last night not to let anyone come onto the

property to cut it." A recent theft in the area had reportedly left residents wary of strangers, Eromi quietly explained to me. After appealing once again to no avail, my companions urged me to ask again on their behalf, evidently figuring that my being a foreigner might assuage the woman's anxiety and, inducing that fabled Sri Lankan hospitality, oblige her to let us cut the *hana.* "Can't," she repeated firmly.

Standing under the now raging sun, a sign that the wet season that had kept these women away from collecting *hana* for more than two months was truly abating, I noted the contrast between the calm repose with which Eromi and Renuka accepted the woman's refusal and my own restless disgruntlement at the reply. While the two appeared almost to have anticipated the response, the woman's hard rejection left me with a sense of mild resentment and reminded me of something an older man in the village had told me some months earlier: "If we go to those areas and people are reluctant to let us cut hana," he reported, "eventually we'll beg from them." However, younger people, he explained, in their rising preference for alternative modes of employment—sewing in garment factories, driving three-wheelers, working as domestic servants overseas—do not like to "beg" or "worship" others to get *hana.* Standing before this woman, whose simple act of refusal weakened my resolve even before we had truly begun, I suddenly had an acute awareness of what he had meant.

The sour taste of rejection in my mouth, I followed Eromi and Renuka as they moved further up the road, my own spirits fading as I watched them excitedly begin to advance on spots only to find that the plants that had drawn their attention were either too immature to harvest or had already been cut. Whether or not Renuka's secret plan to visit the area had gotten out, someone had evidently beaten us to it. Starting to accept the failure of our outing, we began to turn back when, after a short distance, Renuka caught sight of a plant some distance from the dirt

road. Without delay, she and Eromi drew their knives and began slicing methodically through the undergrowth barring our path, casting small stones ahead of us to drive off any wild pigs that might be in the vicinity. Emerging eventually from the dense thicket, we proceeded up a rocky incline—my counterparts moving barefoot with the ease and skill of seasoned hikers, I clumsily trailing behind—coming upon one large *hana* plant, then another, then another. Just above the tree line at the top of our ascent, on an expansive boulder extending what seemed to be hundreds of feet to our right, we discovered a plenitude of mature, uncut plants. I noticed the deliberate silence of my otherwise talkative friends just in time to muffle my squeak of delight at the scene. The owner of this stretch of land had allowed them to cut *hana* in the past, they quietly assured me, but the threat of being scolded by his neighbors nonetheless demanded our stealth. Renuka and Eromi therefore commenced their work in utter silence, their blades whooshing through the air the only sound to rise above the constant hum of insects. Cutting each stiff, broad leaf at the base of the plant, they deftly chopped off the prickly tip before scoring the long margins with their thumbs and, tearing away the spiny edges, tossing what was left into a series of piles that would eventually dot the large boulder. Some hours later, sweat dripping down our backs and brows, our hands bloodied from handling the plants' spines, and Renuka's arms burning from the contact dermatitis often triggered by exposure to the *hana* plant's sap, we wearily gathered up these piles and descended back into the shade of the forest.

Reaching the base of the hill, we at last broke our silence as the women prepared their *hana* bundles for the trek home. Eromi, arranging the leaves she had collected on the cool forest floor, now readily expressed her displeasure with the encounter we'd had some hours earlier. Writing off the reference to thieves as a lie, she attributed the woman's refusal to allow them to cut *hana* on her property to jealousy (*irishyaawa*). Drawing her knife to a vine dangling from a

nearby tree, she paused before cutting the improvised binding and explained matter-of-factly, "It's like this: That woman used to live in a mud [waddle and daub] house, but now she's built that new [brick] house. That's how poor people are. They're jealous." Referring to the owners of the property where we had ended up, she added, "These people, they're big people from Kandy. They aren't like that."

The following day, during a break from planting paddy, Eromi elaborated upon this assessment in describing the encounter to several of her relatives. Resting beneath the shade of the tall manioc shrubs growing in an adjacent field and sipping my tea alongside her and four other women seated beside us, I nodded in agreement as Eromi voiced her frustration at the woman's refusal to allow us to cut *hana* on her property. Explaining that the latter had recently become wealthy and was therefore "*aadambarayi*" [proud], Eromi and Renuka commented on the sympathetic kindness of those with old wealth who, in addition to allowing them to cut *hana* on their land, would serve them tea and food and offer them soap to remove the sap from their arms after cutting the plant. At my request for clarification, Eromi explained such treatment by referring to such individuals' appreciation for the fact that she and others seeking *hana* "need to eat in order to live." Echoing the NCC officer who vocally admonished himself for feeling sorry for Atwaedagama's residents, Eromi noted with approval that they feel a sorrowful pity for those hoping to harvest the plant on their land.

Figure 14-Newly dyed *hana* dries alongside clothing along a lane in Atwaedagama

In refusing her request to cut *hana* on her property, the woman we encountered violated Eromi's sense of the obligations that one of greater economic means has toward one of lesser means, or her expectation that she ought to be treated as one deserving of the woman's assistance. Explaining this refusal, Eromi denounced the woman as driven by a jealousy deriving from her newfound wealth, a reasoning consistent with a more broadly prevalent (and indeed not at all Sri Lanka-specific) assessment of upwardly mobile individuals as possessed of an avarice lacking in those whose socioeconomic superiority is firmly established. To illuminate how this event and its subsequent interpretation by the women involved might inform our understanding of the kind of collective policing of boundaries I consider more generally in this chapter, I wish to make an important point about such evaluations: it is not atypical for the notion that "greedy upstarts" pose a threat to an established socioeconomic hierarchical ordering to intersect directly with understandings of explicitly caste-based virtues. As Gamini, an elderly gentleman in the village bordering Atwaedagama, explained:

> You know, child, it's like this: There is a group of people who would be satisfied with what is given. If someone in this group is given something, he is satisfied with that. That's one group. Then there is another group who, even when something is given, will not be satisfied. And even if you give them more, even then they will not be satisfied. There is a group like that, right? There is a group who is happy with what is given. They are higher up *[ihalin inne*]. What I mean is, they accept what is given, but they don't like to take things given freely [*nikan dee gannda kaemeti naeae*]. They don't like it. That is, they are high people [*ihalin ina aya*]. Then there is the one who is low [*pahalin ina kenna*], who accepts what is given but is not satisfied [*saehimakaTa pathwenne naeae*].

By contrast to those who are "low" and perpetually unfulfilled, the man explained, one who is high caste is "happy with what she has and gives things away—meaning that they don't want to grab [*udura ganda*] things from somebody else." A friend nearer to Kandy echoed this assessment. Remarking on what she saw as an unwarranted and dramatic recent increase in the

rates that low caste (Berava) ceremonial drummers charge for their performances in and beyond temples, she explained simply, “Poor, high caste people are very honest, but rich, low caste people are corrupted. They are all about earning money.”

The notion of materially indifferent generosity as a virtue of those who are high caste, on the one hand, and limitless avarice extending from the “corruption” (or upward mobility) of economically disenfranchised low caste individuals, on the other, lends salience to the association that Eromi draws between the long-established economic superiority of those on whose land they have harvested *hana* and the implicitly commendable compassion such individuals have for her and others similarly positioned. I do not know the caste status of the woman we encountered on this outing, though I am certain she would have been identified as of a higher status than Eromi. Eromi’s scornful evaluation of the woman as plagued by a jealousy motivated by her newfound wealth nonetheless signals a commitment to a socioeconomic and often caste-based ordering with respect to which her own treatment as deserving of the pitying benevolence of others seems not merely sensible, but also desirable. Eromi’s appraisal of what she perceived as the woman’s bad behavior is rooted in the sense that the latter, suffering the corruption brought on by her own recent prosperity, has forgotten her place.

Signaling the moral economy at work here, Gamini and Eromi articulate quintessential “movements of reprisal” (Hardgrave 1969), or instances in which the status aspirations associated with “new” wealth are rejected as the presumptions of “greedy” upstarts. As we will see, the logic undergirding these movements—a logic centered on a notion of the corrupting potential of money—intersects with and bolsters Atwaedagama’s residents’ evaluations of individuals who they believe have sought to distance themselves from *hana* work in an effort to conceal who they “truly” are as “*mee game minissu”* (“people in/of this village”).

Hiding the Mat

In and around Atwaedagama, as we have seen, money is at times conceptualized as having an essentially dangerous and disruptive capacity to permit those who have recently acquired it to forget where they come from and who they "truly" are. This notion intersects with pointed moral evaluations of individuals seen as endeavoring with varying degrees of success to set themselves apart from either their neighbors in the village or from the industry for which the village is known. In the meeting detailed earlier in this chapter, Chaminda articulated the essence of such evaluations in an especially unvarnished manner. Remarking on his neighbor's complaint regarding the National Craft Council's distribution of workshops to weavers in Atwaedagama, he declared:

> I want you to know that I am not against anyone who is receiving these workshops, and in fact I'd be happy if a lot of people could get it, but the people who are involved in this industry did not come forward fearlessly. They do this industry in secret [*mee karmante horen keranne*]. They hide what they are doing when the son in-law comes to the house…like, some people don't even want others to know that they do this industry. When the son in-law comes, they hide their mats. They act fake [*viyaaja lesa haesirenawa*]. Some people do this industry but tell others that they don't do it. More than outsiders, the people in *this* village are the ones who spit on themselves [*pita minissuTa wadaa mee game minissu tamayi udabalaagena kela gahaganne*]. Now, if you spit while looking up, it's going to fall on your own face. So, that's the situation as well. To tell you the truth, I'm not a person who is ashamed [*laejawenne naeae*] of my—I'll tell *anyone* that I do this industry and that I live in this village. *This* is my address and *these* are my parents. I will tell that to anyone, because that's the truth. Man's behavior doesn't come from birth [*Manusayage haeseriim rataawa uthpatthyen enne naeae nee*].

Chaminda's final assertion that "man's behavior doesn't come from birth" evokes the egalitarianism theorized by Jayawardena (1968), or one rooted in a notion of essential human equality. In it, he appears to substantiate an "apparent popularization of an egalitarian ethos" among the Sinhalese (Silva 1999:212). At the same time, however, his public condemnation of those who "hide their mats," or pretend that they do not weave, also reinforces the tripartite

association of people, place and work detailed above. While indicating a belief that one's behavior is not defined by birth, in other words, Chaminda also suggests that the deliberate concealment of one's engagement in the *hana* industry, which he equates with concealing who one's parents are and where one lives, is tantamount to denying who one is *by birth*. In this regard, Chaminda's diatribe against those who "act fake" is an example of the kind of "dispute" (where the meaning of "dispute" may range "from gossip, slander and abuse to physical violence" (Jayawardena 1968:425)) that may arise when, as Jayawardena observed of plantation laborers in Guyana, "norms derived from the [dominant egalitarian] ideology conflict with a degree of differentiation that actually exists" (Jayawardena 1968:425)).

The sentiment that Chaminda articulates is elaborated in the morally-laden evaluations to which certain residents of Atwaedagama subject neighbors who, as far as they see it, have deliberately sought to distance themselves from the *hana* industry. Notably, such evaluations tend to extend only to individuals who have achieved considerable economic success (most often indicated by the size and state of their homes) in domains *beyond* the *hana* industry. With an important exception discussed below, these evaluations do not, for instance, extend to the very small number of families who have accumulated wealth through their engagement in the *hana* industry. As with Jayawardena's Guyanese plantation laborers, here we find that "success and achievement [do] not, in themselves, go counter to the norms of the group" (Jayawardena 1968:424). Jayawardena found that claims to "a higher status while still a member of the local laboring community…led sooner or later to disputes" (Jayawardena 1968:424). Here, however, one's membership in (or intentions to remain a member of) the community in Atwaedagama is implied as long as one does "*hana* work" (*hana waeda*), no matter how successful he or she may be.

To illustrate the sort of scenario in which an individual's economic achievement may generate just such a dispute, one afternoon I was chatting with two women, Nirmala and Dilhani, when they volunteered an assessment of another woman, Piyumi, whose apparent effort to remove herself from the industry (and whose consequent economic achievement) had incited the derision of her neighbors. As the three of us stood at the side of a lane cutting across Atwaedagama, Nirmala nodded in the direction of Piyumi's home and, referring to the latter's regular departures to and returns from Singapore, where she had been working as a domestic laborer for many years, explained scornfully, "She's always coming and going." Nirmala related that she herself had worked overseas for about twenty years. When her husband passed away, however, she explained, she returned to Atwaedagama, taking a job first in a nearby garment factory and then as a custodian at a hospital in Kandy, a position she had held for around eight months at the time of our meeting. While Nirmala reported being satisfied with her current employment situation, she and Dilhani also stressed the many advantages of engagement in the *hana* industry and dwelled in particular upon the value of same-day earnings by comparison to the regular but not immediate payment schedule of formal employment. They reminded me that the intensiveness of the labor entailed in the work—of, for instance, collecting and cleaning *hana*, obtaining supplies like glue and dye, preparing the thread for weaving, and setting up the loom—often requires the collaboration of a husband and wife. Both women emphasized that it was therefore only because their husbands were no longer alive that they were not currently involved in the industry. In fact, Nirmala noted, after her husband passed away, she had tried for some time to carry on with weaving before realizing the absolute impossibility of doing so. Stopping was hardly a voluntary decision, she stressed, and certainly not one motivated by any dislike for the work. The same, she indicated, could not be said of Piyumi: "Now, that lady on

the other side of the village there says bad things about this industry, but she's in my family! She's in the same family! And she even used to do it herself! She worked in the training center, and her mother and father also did it. But now she's been going overseas and has money…" Echoing Chaminda's denunciation of those who "hide their mats," Nirmala condemned her neighbor and relative Piyumi's rumored expressions of distaste for the *hana* industry. To Dilhani and Nirmala, such distaste was hypocritical given not only that Piyumi's parents once performed *hana* work, but also that she herself was once so engaged.

While presenting herself as someone forced by circumstance to give up weaving for good, or as someone with positive regard for the industry in which so many of her relatives engage, Nirmala's negative evaluation of Piyumi centers on the moral questionability of the latter's deliberate shunning of the industry upon which she too once relied. To her and other industry participants in the village, Piyumi's decision to work and accumulate wealth abroad and to forsake *hana* work entirely stripped her of the ability (and right) to speak of *hana* work in the first place. Noting that she was constantly "coming and going," a critical euphemism for both the amount of time that she spent away from her home as well as her thereby becoming a "big" (wealthy) person, they believed she no longer had the knowledge or authority to speak critically or otherwise of the industry. As far as they were concerned, there was a strong link between the upward mobility that individuals like Piyumi have been able to achieve as a result of overseas employment and what is perceived as their failure to properly acknowledge or remember that they too once relied upon the *hana* industry.

Speaking of Piyumi and others who, after accruing substantial earnings overseas, seem to their neighbors in Atwaedagama to eschew or express disdain for the *hana* industry, one weaver in the village drew on the dense symbolism of the jackfruit to convey the condemnability of

those who have willfully distanced themselves from their place of origin. Holding out a freshly sliced chunk of the ubiquitous substance, he remarked to me with a sneer, "[such people] don't even recognize this jackfruit!" As elsewhere in South and Southeast Asia, the significance of jackfruit in Sri Lanka extends beyond its value as a nutritionally rich ingredient of people's diets. A semantically dense symbol of "fertility and prosperity" (Holt 1991:191), the ubiquitous jak tree bearing the fruit is often "cultically addressed and venerated" prior to being felled for either ritual use or to make way for construction (Holt 1991:171). The value of the tree and its fruit is indicated by the legal strictures concerning the tree's felling. Before removing such a tree from one's property, for instance, one is typically required to obtain a permit signed by an agricultural officer attesting either to the danger that the tree poses to those living near it or to its no longer bearing fruit.[72] To say, then, that one doesn't "even recognize this jackfruit" is to suggest that one does not recognize Sri Lanka—that, in other words, one has forgotten where one comes from.

Avoiding the impression that she herself might have strayed from *hana* work as a result of working abroad and forgetting where she comes from, in her own self-presentation Nirmala stressed that, after returning home following her husband's death, she tried to resume the work in which she and her husband once collaborated. Her ultimate departure from the industry, unlike Piyumi's, she suggested, was neither motivated by a sense that she is "above" the work in which many of her other relatives engage nor the result of forgetting that she and her husband once relied upon the industry for their own income. Rather, she stressed, it was a consequence, and an unwelcome one at that, of circumstances beyond her control.

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[72] SL Ministry of Agriculture- http://www.agr imin.gov.lk/web/index.php/en/our-services/89-implementation-of-oredr-under-falling

In my own meetings with Piyumi, I did not encounter the unbridled disregard for her family's involvement in the *hana* industry that I might have expected given my conversations with Nirmala and others. In fact, Piyumi's deep ambivalence with regard to the industry and her family's role in it was one of the first things that I came to notice in her. Piyumi, born in 1957, is one of eight siblings, almost all of whom either live in Atwaedagama or are abroad. She had married a man of much higher caste status in the 1970s (a fact of which she often reminded me) and, upon his early death, took a job as a domestic worker in Singapore.

By the time of our meeting, Piyumi had spent approximately 25 years working for different families overseas, most of them European or American. In our initial meetings, she happily shared pictures of these employers, referring to many of them as "like family," and stressed in general how proud she was of the life she had built for herself abroad.[73] The fact that Piyumi maintained an entirely separate life outside of Sri Lanka did not translate in our conversations into an expression of apathy toward or disregard for the goings-on in Atwaedagama. While dwelling at length upon the sense of injury that she believes her relatives and other neighbors in Atwaedagama have felt as a consequence of their caste status being published by scholars and others, it was to my surprise her own sense of affront that came through most powerfully when we spoke. During an early meeting in her home, Piyumi turned to me and, with an expression of sincere concern bordering on suspicion, asked me what I was writing and what I was doing in Atwaedagama. When I explained that my goal was to learn about people's lives and about the *hana* industry, she stated very matter-of-factly but with much apology that, while she wasn't referring to "Madam" (me), there were people who had come to

[73] Notably, Piyumi stressed that she did not wish for the same future for her children, who she hoped would be able to stay in Sri Lanka and not risk the toll that overseas employment can have on families.

the village and had written unsavory things about its residents in the past. When I pressed her as to what she meant, she said that they had written about their caste. When Piyumi had recently learned that there were students (other than myself) coming to the village, she explained, she had therefore told some of the weavers who lived in her vicinity not to provide them with any information. "If they want to buy something, that's fine," she noted, "but they don't need to know anything else." While stating repeatedly that she did not question my intentions, Piyumi stressed that, although I may "come and go and forget about these people," if I publish a "thousand" copies of a book in which I write, "these people are low caste, they only marry each other, they're poor, they do this job," they will suffer. In the end, Piyumi suggested that I read what had been written about the village and write a counter-narrative.

In these respects, Piyumi assumed a representative position on behalf of her neighbors in Atwaedagama at the same time that she conveyed her own sense of affront at what had been published about the village. On the other hand, she was also eager to differentiate herself from her neighbors. Without elaborating on the reason but in keeping with a general effort to set herself apart from her neighbors in Atwaeadagama, she reported that, today, she deliberately minimizes contact with others in the village. When she is in Sri Lanka, she noted, she visits only her closest relatives and otherwise keeps to herself.[74]

Piyumi demonstrated similar ambivalence with respect to the *hana* industry. She recounted with considerable satisfaction how her father, an individual she described as a highly regarded and very clever prize-winning weaver, had created or managed the design of many of

[74] Another woman in the village who had also spent considerable time abroad similarly reported that she does not casually visit the homes of her neighbors. When I asked her why, she explained, "That's not how we do things overseas." It is possible that this behavior among those who have lived overseas for extended lengths of time is due in part to a decision to emulate what they see abroad. Of course, being abroad for extended periods can also mean that the regular cultivation of relationships within the village is suspended.

the decorative woven wall-hangings that American potter Mel Someroski had commissioned in the 1960s (See Chapter 3). Pointing to her father's burial place on her small property, however, she stated explicitly that while she did not wish to "forget" where she comes from, she also desires a very different future for her own children—one not preordained by an identification as low caste. Piyumi seemed acutely aware of and sensitive to the ways in which this status might impinge upon her own life and the lives of her children.

Piyumi's orientation to her own family—their historical identification as low caste and their involvement in the *hana* indsutry—was not, in other words, defined by outright denial. Rather, she oscillated between prideful reminiscence of her father's accomplishment as a weaver and a reluctant acknowledgement of the caste-based status accompanying such accomplishment. In this, Piyumi frustrates the unforgiving criteria of moral evaluation articulated by Nirmala, Chaminda and others. While loath to ignore the legacy of her father, she nonetheless feels that this legacy—and his identifiably low caste name in particular[75]—casts a shadow over the aspirations she has for herself and her children.

On the one hand, Piyumi was adamant about the irrelevance of caste distinctions and presented herself as strongly invested in the notion of human equality also articulated by Chaminda. On one occasion, corroborating the observation that a notion of "intrinsic or human equality seems to prevail in inverse relation to the prevalence of social equality" (Jayawardena 1968:414), she expressed her frustration with what she sees as "outsiders'" preoccupations with their (caste) status. Pinching the flesh on her forearm, she looked at me intently and said, "Excuse me for saying, madam, but if you cut your skin, you bleed the same—If I cut my skin, I

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[75] When I first met Piyumi and began to enter her contact details into my mobile phone, she gently placed her hand upon my wrist and, referring to the surname by which I knew her, asked firmly, "No need to put my father's name, no?"

bleed the same. Different color, but same blood." On the other hand, Piyumi also reinforced the legitimacy of several conventional and historically salient parameters of caste-based hierarchical distinction. First, reproducing a notion that, as I discuss in relation to Gamini (a neighboring "outsider"), lends itself to the fortification of caste-based hierarchical difference, she portrayed money as essentially corrupting. Second, while railing against concerns with caste as a provincial phenomenon absent from the cosmopolitan social life she has enjoyed working abroad, she readily invoked several historically caste-based markers of difference in conveying a unique image of her own self-regard.

Despite or perhaps owing to her economic accomplishment, Piyumi stressed the corrosive impact that money has upon people's appreciation of where they come from. More specifically, Piyumi eagerly recounted tales of the ways in which money—especially money earned overseas—could loosen the social ties binding families together. During one of our meetings at her home, Piyumi thumbed through the pages of a weekly newspaper covering especially sensational court cases in the country. Stopping suddenly and tapping her finger on a page, she took a seat beside me on her living room couch and eagerly dew my attention to one particular story. The account centered on the case of a man who hanged himself after murdering his wife, a woman who had recently returned from working overseas. "You see," Piyumi explained, "it's because she had gone abroad and had earned lots of money and then came back and was probably saying things like, 'See how pretty I am? See how much money I have?" To Piyumi, the man's actions stemmed from the sense of inadequacy that his own wife had carelessly fomented in him by boasting of her newfound economic success. Stopping short of the suggestion that his actions were reasonable, Piyumi nonetheless saw them as making sense.

When it came to discussing her own experience overseas and the many perks it had afforded her, Piyumi did not refer directly to the danger of lording one's new wealth over others. However, while excitedly discussing the ways in which the families that had employed her over the years in Singapore had lavished gifts on her—she once proudly furnished for me a large Brazilian amethyst that one woman had given her and, on another occasion, presented a still carefully wrapped purple stone bracelet she had received from another—she would stress that she neither displayed nor wore such items because she is "just a normal person," or someone who is satisfied with what she has. Piyumi did not remark on and was perhaps not even aware of rumors that the wealth she had amassed overseas—wealth that, marking her as anything *but* "normal" (average), was primarily displayed in the comparatively large and nicely applianced home she had built for herself—was related to the distance she had evidently put between herself and the *hana* industry and, by extension, the community (and her family, in particular) into which she was born. Emphasizing that she is not someone who is given to pretensions or seeks more than her "lot," Piyumi thus not only reinforced a criterion of moral evaluation to which her neighbors in Atwaedagama critically subject her, but also reproduced a virtue that, as we saw above, is more generally understood to vary inversely with caste status: those who are high caste are satisfied, while those "at the bottom" can't get enough.

To address the second point raised above, Piyumi was as vocal as anyone in Atwaedagama about the unsavoriness of scholarly and popular accounts that dwell upon and reinforce the lowly status of the area's residents. At the same time, however, she would stress that her concern was not for her own feeling of having been insulted (something that her own behavior seemed to contradict), but rather for her *neighbors'* and *relatives'* feelings of humiliation. Implying that she herself was successful enough and removed enough from the

community to not be offended, Piyumi railed against what she considered a narrow-minded preoccupation with caste in Atwaedagama's immediate vicinity. She viewed such preoccupation as alien to what she described as the "real people" for whom she had worked over the years in Singapore. Referring to the latter, she exclaimed (quite rightly) to me on one occasion, "*They* don't care about caste!" Suggesting that I write a counter-narrative to those with which so many in Atwaedagama have taken issue, she gave a hearty laugh and advised me, "The next time someone asks you why you're coming to Atwaedagama, you just tell them you're looking for a husband!"

The sense of affront motivating Piyumi's opposition to the writings of outsiders was bolstered by the conviction that "real people, *foreigners*," don't "care about caste." And, it must be noted, she's right. Many of the Euro-American families for whom she has worked over the years very likely have little idea of what caste is. As for me, this is a category of identification that, while on closer examination bears striking similarity to the racial hierarchical ordering with which many of us in the U.S. are familiar, has zero traction in their worlds. Apparently eager to likewise embody this indifference, Piyumi explicitly disregarded caste as an ultimately irrelevant and provincial phenomenon fully at odds with the more "real" cosmopolitanism with which she had become acquainted in working overseas. And yet it was Piyumi's efforts to mirror this indifference that, as did so many other comparable examples, captured my own imagination as one of the "real people" to whom she referred by indicating that there was in fact another layer of complexity behind her outspoken disavowal of caste. In important respects, Piyumi betrayed the significance of caste-based concern in her impassioned declarations *of* caste's irrelevance. In urging me to tell high-caste residents near Atwaedagama that I was seeking a husband in the village, Piyumi was not just urging me to model the behavior of the "real people" she had come

to know living overseas—she was also playing on a hierarchy that, as she is fully aware, is very much intact. More significant is the fact that Piyumi drew heavily upon historically salient criteria of caste-based hierarchical distinction—namely, the quality of one's dwelling, the directionality of aid, and general cleanliness[76]—in endeavoring to translate the wealth that she had acquired overseas into a locally legible status transformation. Piyumi pours much of the wealth she has accrued overseas into constructing a house with a fully enclosed and tiled kitchen replete with electric appliances, including a refrigerator and large rice cooker, tiled flooring throughout, several bedrooms, and new, wood furnishings. As with the few other comparably stately homes in Atwaedagama, a shoulder-height fence—part of it a solid brick wall—lined the perimeter of the property, clearly demarcating her land from that of her neighbors. She reported with satisfaction that, in continuing to modify the freshly painted home, she had sought the advice of a professional architect, the daughter of one of her European employers in Singapore. A stairway leading all the way up to the ceiling of the central living area—a common feature of lower-middle-class and middle-class homes whose occupants plan to construct a second floor—denoted the hopefulness underlying her ultimate aspirations for the structure.

In addition to constructing a home of which she could be proud, one of Piyumi's expressed concerns was that the floors and surfaces throughout it also remain pristine. In my casual visits to speak with her, I found that I often interrupted her efforts in this regard, and over

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[76] There is some scholarly disagreement as to whether notions of purity or cleanliness figure as powerfully in conceptualizations or talk of caste difference in Sri Lanka as they do in India, if they figure at all. For instance, Dennis McGilvray argues that, "despite [Nur] Yalman's claims, it is very difficult in Sinhalese Sri Lanka to bring together notions concerning personal pollution and notions concerning caste" (McGilvray 1982: 12). McGilvray notes that the term most commonly used to refer to such "personal pollution," *killa*, is generally not invoked in regard to caste among the Sinhalese. He also reports that he did not encounter the related term *pirisidu* (which he translates as "clean, pure or chaste") in regard to caste in the low-country village upon which his remarks on the topic are based. Although infrequent, my interlocutors around Atwaedagama did invoke the term "pirisidu" in discussions of caste.

the course of our conversations came to appreciate the somewhat idiosyncratic value that she placed on the cleanliness of her surroundings. Deriding what she saw as other returnee migrant workers' wasteful expenditures on clothing and other "unnecessary" goods, Piyumi noted that, save the occasional household appliance that she will resell at a profit, the only items she brings home are high-quality cleaning products not available in Sri Lanka. Once, some weeks after her return from a several-month stint in Singapore, she excitedly sat me down upon the couch in her living room and enthusiastically presented an assortment of such products—Pine Sol, a Chinese floor cleaner, a Japanese laundry detergent, and concentrated liquid soap—that she had brought back with her. Her preoccupation with cleanliness became evident on another occasion when she complained of the difficulty of securing affordable housing during her brief stays in Singapore. On a recent visit, she related, she had been kicked out of the small apartment she had been sharing with six others when the building's manager discovered their violation of the occupancy regulation. Piyumi didn't mind having to move to a hostel as a consequence, she explained—it was the fact that the cleanliness of the hostel was beyond her control that she found distressing. Finding herself shivering under the frigid air blown out by the A/C unit in the room where she ended up having to stay, she refused to use the blanket provided: "Just think of how many people have used that blanket!" she exclaimed as she recounted the unfortunate sequence of events.

To Piyumi, her own prioritization of cleanliness and the construction of a quality home contrasts sharply with the concerns of the higher caste residents of Hisgoda. In fact, she explained, there is a striking contradiction between the latter's preoccupation with their own caste-based superiority and their actual performance along these lines. "They go to temple every day with flower offerings, but in their hearts they are devoted to caste," she asserted, but it was they, in fact, who qualified as "the *real* low caste." "You look and see their houses and compare

them to the houses in Atwaedagama," she urged me, pointing out that "The houses in Atwaedagama are nice, now." To Piyumi, Hisgoda's residents' lack of cleanliness was evident not only in the sanitation of their houses (remarking in particular on the filthiness of their bathrooms, she encouraged me to take note of the cleanliness of her own home), but also in their bodily hygiene: drawing her hand up as if to pinch her nose shut, she noted that they "smell" so bad that one cannot even drink one's tea in their presence.

While Piyumi disregarded concerns with caste as demonstrations of her high caste neighbors' social insularity, or indications of their failure to be "*real* people," it is ironically only in reference to historical practices and local conceptualizations of caste-based distinction that her assertions of her own relative superiority are fully intelligible. That she ties the "*real* low caste" status Hisgoda's residents to her comparative superiority in terms of the home she has built and the cleanliness that she prizes is consistent with criteria underlying the caste-based hierarchical distinction that she is otherwise eager to disavow. With respect to her emphasis on housing, for instance, as we saw in Chapter 3, there was a time at which, per the dictates of a "caste-defined rural architecture," those identified as Kinnara were "not supposed to build houses with permanent or semipermanent features such as mud or brick walls, or even roofs covered by coconut leaves" (Uyangoda 2012:39; see also Gilbert 1953:300). To make sense of Piyumi's unusual emphasis on cleanliness, it is important to note that the idea of cleanliness/uncleanliness, although found in other parts of Sri Lanka to be inconsequential in conceptualizations of caste difference among the Sinhalese (see McGilvray 1982:13), is central to the ways in which at least some of the higher-caste resident of Hisgoda conceive of Piyumi's and other Atwaedagama

residents' historical inferiority.[77] As one man in Hisgoda explained to me during a conversation about the danger of attending the weddings of Atwaedagama residents:

> For things like that, our people…don't get involved no matter what. Why? Because of the caste differences [*kula bedeya*]. I must tell you the truth. Because of this caste issue, they wouldn't go [to weddings]…If we were to go, then they would give us food and water. But, compared to before, now they are a little cleaner [*pirisiddu*]. Before, they didn't have *any* kind of cleanliness [*pirisiddu kama*]…In those days, you couldn't go in that direction [toward the village]—the hana smelled and, along with that, they were also unclean.

Beyond pointing to the development of housing infrastructure in Atwaedagama and stressing her own prioritization of cleanliness, a third phenomenon that Piyumi invoked as indicating the "*real* low caste" of her neighbors recalls the issue of helping discussed earlier in this chapter. Noting that some high caste children from Hisgoda have come to her in the past begging for food, Piyumi explained that, by contrast, she is an "independent" person fully capable of providing well for her own children and, as such, does not rely upon the assistance of others to get by.

The orientation that Piyumi seeks to convey with respect to both Atwaedagama in general and the *hana* industry in particular is therefore marked by ambivalence. Piyumi simultaneously resists and reinforces the morally coded criteria ("low caste people are greedy, high caste people are satisfied") by which she herself is negatively evaluated by Nirmala and others as a marginal character (one whose present distance from the village is communicated by the phrase "coming and going") in Atwaedagama. In a similar vein, in articulating the deservedness and recognizability of her own position of superiority vis-à-vis higher-caste individuals in Hisgoda, Piyumi disavows caste as a provincial concern fully at odds with the concerns of the "real people" she came to know in her work abroad. At the same time, however, in both her self-

[77] This is also consistent with Uyangoda's findings regarding a mono-caste Kinnara village in the district of Kurunegala in Sri Lanka's North-Western Province. In justifying the decision by monks at a local temple to refuse food prepared by residents of the village, upper caste temple patrons noted that the houses of those who lived there "were unclean (*kilutu*) and unhygienic (*apirisidu*)" (Uyangoda 2013:288).

presentation and in her narrative handling of money's corrupting potential, she re-inscribes locally and historically salient indicators of caste-based hierarchical distinction according to which those in Atwaedagama have been deemed "low"—namely, cleanliness, the directionality of aid, housing quality, and a relationship between "greed" and caste status.

Mohan, now a successful weaver and designer, is another individual whose apparent efforts to distance himself from the *hana* industry are regarded with a degree of reservation by his fellow Atwaedagama residents. Mohan is unlike Piyumi in that he ultimately embraced the *hana* industry in which his father also once engaged. Like her, however, he was keen in my conversations with him to distinguish himself from his neighbors. Mohan articulated the origins of and motivations for his involvement in the *hana* industry in ways deliberately intended to sever any ties to its caste association. At the same time, in his endeavor to step outside of and thereby challenge certain parameters of caste-based identification—namely, in his self-presentation as an exceptional figure—he inadvertently reinforced a notion of the essential social difference of those in his own village.

The first time that I heard of Mohan, it was in the context of a discussion in which I had explicitly asked Sajith, another weaver in the village, about Chaminda's comments about "hiding the mat." Summarizing the message as meaning that some "do it, but they don't like it," Sajith offered Mohan as an example: "[H]e said to us, 'this job is useless, so don't do it.' He was [doing an unrelated job at the time], but now he's doing this job using *hana*…So, what Chaminda Mahathaya said was the absolute truth—people disrespect the industry, but they still do it [*karmaanteyaTa agawurwa keranawa, eeth keranawa]*." Elaborating upon Mohan's particular story, he noted, "he opened a small store and thought that he could develop through that and that

he didn't have to do the industry, but then he went bankrupt and there wasn't any other way for him to survive, so he started doing this job again."

Mohan did not attend the village meetings attended by other *hana* industry participants, and he was often away from Atwaedagama managing the relatively sizeable orders that he regularly secured for the woven *hana* items that he designed. It was only by chance, then, that I met him—and not even in Atwaedagama—several months before he would actually have the time and be willing to speak with me. It was in retrospect that I came to fully appreciate Mohan's careful handling of this initial encounter, a somewhat difficult exchange that unfolded at the Department of Industrial Development and Enterprise Promotion in Kandy. My research assistant and I had gone to the Department to learn about its support of artisans in Atwaedagama and, upon entering, were happily surprised to find an impressive array of colorful and expertly woven *hana* items—boxes, cushion covers, wall-hangings and the like—stacked neatly on a landing near the building's main entrance. Curious, I asked an administrator standing nearby where they had come from. Relating that the products had been on display in an exhibition that the department had recently sponsored, she shared that the individual who had designed them was in fact in the building to collect them and offered to locate him for us. Moments later, a gentleman in black slacks and a crisp, white, button-down shirt ascended the stairs. Noting a look of guarded expectation upon his face, I asked him if he was from Atwaedagama. With a hint of reservation and a stern look, Mohan acknowledged that he was. As I began to explain that I had been speaking with those engaged in the *hana* industry to learn more about it, Mohan, indicating his reluctance, interjected that he had "only started doing this three years ago," having only done *hana* work as a "hobby" (*winodanshaya*) before that, and would therefore likely not have much

to say that would be of interest to me. Upon my explaining that I'd nonetheless like to speak with him, he handed me a glossy business card before replying curtly, "*balamu*" ("We'll see").

Over the months following this encounter, I would reach out to Mohan on several occasions in an effort to schedule a meeting with him. When he at last agreed, he explained matter-of-factly that, as I could likely tell from the difficulty of meeting him, he is not someone who would be "chasing after" me. Unlike others I may have encountered in carrying out my research in Atwaedagama, he explained, he would not be begging to give me his time. Ultimately, Mohan was very generous with his time and thoughts. As I would come to learn, however, the tenor of our initial meeting, and this relative coolness in particular, was indicative of his presentation as a self-made entrepreneur. It was consistent not only with how he understood and articulated the origins of his involvement in the industry in which he was now thriving, but also with his rejection of the hierarchy implied in "begging" and accepting the help or handouts of others.

According to others in Atwaedagama, Mohan's father was one of the most accomplished weavers in the village when Mohan was a child. That his own involvement in the *hana* industry might in some way derive from the lineage-basis of knowledge transmission associated with the industry was not, however, a possibility that Mohan himself entertained. Articulating a firmly neoliberal subjectivity, he grounded his expertise as a weaver and designer—expertise he claimed to have acquired only as an adult—in reference not to a lineage-based inheritance of traditional knowledge, but to a broader and distinctly personal life trajectory defined by a dedication to self-improvement, self-help, and self-teaching. He attributed his present success—the orders he regularly receives for the products he designs are so large that he consistently employs up to thirty-five people in the village to help him fill them—to his own individual

creative abilities and an internal drive instilled in him in his youth. Never mentioning his father to me, Mohan stressed, "I didn't have any guides or teachers to teach me," and explained that, as the eldest among his siblings, he "climbed up in society" by educating himself. On one occasion, Mohan pointed to an array of titles on his living room bookshelf—*Concepts of Success, How to Develop Your Personality,* and *Aims for Life*—and remarked proudly, "These are the kinds of books that I have."

In explaining how he had taken up the industry several years ago, Mohan did not emphasize the sense of desperation suggested by rumors of his having "failed" in developing the small shop he had attempted to run in Atwaedagama. Rather, he stressed the *choice* he made to prove to his neighbors that, even without years of experience, and by virtue of his own skill, he could develop a successful business in the *hana* industry. "Even if others may do well and win awards or certificates, if I enter something in a competition I always get an award even though I don't have twenty or twenty-five years of training." As Mohan narrated it, he had worked for some time in the government sector before deciding to open a small grocery in Atwaedagama. He explained, however, that many of his neighbors, jealous of the wealth he might thereby accrue, refused to patronize his business and, after struggling for a number of years, he was compelled to close its doors. "I got caught in that competition," he related, "and I realized that I couldn't do it. So, then, I thought, 'Okay, if you all won't help me with this…'—I wanted to show them that I could also do what they do. I made up my mind and, to tell you the truth, no one else can do these designs like I can…I didn't even know how to do it, but the thing is, I picked it up quickly and just started doing it."

In recounting the impetus behind his involvement in the *hana* industry in this way, Mohan resisted the sense that, at the end of the day, *hana* work is his only option. He also

sidestepped the notion that his choice to develop the business he now ran was rooted in anything like the pride to which Chaminda refers when he stated his own willingness to declare, "*this* is my address and *these* are my parents." To Mohan**,** who his parents were and what his address is are irrelevant when it comes to his occupation:

> [There's this idea that] we are low caste or high caste [*kula*] according to what we do [as a job][*api kuleyen pahat hari usas hari wenne api kerana dee*]. I don't believe that. We can go to different levels of society. We have options [*ida*], so we have to try. For me, there are no problems like that [caste is not a problem]. *Everyone* talks to me… because I interact with a lot of people in the society. So, there aren't any problems. Now, my daughter's wedding was there, in a hotel nearby. I'm not scared, so I invited 350 guests. *Everybody* came—people I knew. They *know* what I do, but they don't have any issues. Why do we need caste? Why do we have to make it a problem! [*Aeyi apita kula oone kiyanne. Eeka prashneak keraganna one naehae*]

A self-professed voracious reader and consumer of knowledge about "what's happening in the world," Mohan, like Piyumi, stressed the provinciality underlying concerns with caste status, or that to which one's parents and one's address are believed to point. Disregarding a preoccupation with one's *low* caste status, in particular, as an excuse to not succeed, he explained, "We need to be open in whatever we do. Now, for example, in countries like Japan, they bow to *anyone*. They don't have differences when it comes to their occupation. Like, even in Germany or Russia, whatever occupation one does, they don't have any problems. Whatever we do, we shouldn't be putting ourselves down [*awatakseeru*- underestimate]." Mohan stressed, "Skills aren't the only thing that you need [to succeed]." He explained that one must also have "a good educational status and good psychological development [*maanasika prevardhenaya*]." Evoking a neoliberal ethos grounded in personal responsibility, Mohan noted, "If people want to get up, nobody tries to help them. If we fall down, we need to try and pick ourselves up."

While downplaying caste as an issue with which one ought not concern oneself in pursuing a given occupational path, however, Mohan was also unusually adamant about stressing

not only his exceptionality among the residents of Atweadagama, but the fundamental difference of the kind and quality of work that he does. Urging me to confirm that I found him to be "different" from others I met in Atwaedagama, Mohan would stress not only his comparatively substantial "social experience" [*samaaje adekiima*] in distinguishing himself from those around him, but also his particular self-sufficiency with regard to developing his business. Signaling his refusal of the hierarchy implied in the directionality of help, Mohan related that he had refused the NCC's offer of a weaving workshop. He explained, "they came here to see [if I was eligible] and I told them, 'I don't want anything.' So…I don't like to follow after [beg from] people and be like that. I know what I need for my future, and I have prepared for it. I can do this at a high quality. I can earn a lot with the orders." During one conversation in his office, a room in the building that he had originally constructed for his grocery, Mohan withdrew a multi-page contract for a large order for his products from his files and, handing it to me to review for myself, noted proudly, "I had to make a report, including everything. So, I made it on my own. I didn't get help from anyone."

Beyond stressing his independence as a businessman, Mohan also grounded his difference from others in Atwaedagama in his flexible and creative vision and in the quality of his products. Suggesting the operation of a "spiritual economy," or a "convergence of religious ethics and business management knowledge" (Rudnyckyj 2009:132), Mohan remarked:

> We need to know how to market ourselves. Now, I'm a Buddhist, and I know what Buddha has told us: He has told us, 'even from a dead rat, if a person can live off of it, you should use it.' Now, see, I don't use just *hana*, I also use grass to do this industry!...No one else uses it.

His work, Mohan concluded with pride, "is precise all the way down to the thread and the exact angle."

In keeping with his emphasis on never following after or begging others for (in my case) time or (in the case of the NCC) resources, Mohan also stressed his careful selectivity when it comes to deciding which shops to work with. Pointing to an item on his desk, he related on one occasion:

> See this table set? It has very good demand. [I give it to] Laksala, Lak Pahana, Lak Medura, but I don't sell these things through 'pavement shops'…It has a high quality [*usas tatweya*] and if we sell this at the pavement level, that will be lost…So, if a normal shop comes and asks for an order, I won't give to them. I go to the shop and I see whether or not it has a 'quality,' because if I put my things in that shop—now, miss, if you see this bag hanging in a shop in the Kandy town, then it doesn't have any worth [watinaakamak]. So I don't put my things there. …To tell you the truth, I produce these items not for people who are poor or for the middle class...I make my items for people who have money.

In refusing caste as a relevant category of identification when it comes to his own life, Mohan thus points to his self-sufficiency as a businessman, the unparalleled quality of his products, his unique ability to select rather than "chase after" buyers, and, perhaps most importantly, his coming to the *hana* industry as a result of self-motivated choice rather than lineage-based path dependence. In this regard, he effectively sidesteps the sense among some of his fellow artisans in Atwaedagama that his ultimate pursuit of the business after attempting to flee it amounts to "hiding the mat." To others, his reportedly *forced* "return" to the industry may be evaluated as a moral failing, or an ultimately botched attempt to "make it" in an enterprise other than that into which one is believed to be born and, thus, ought to give one pride. Yet Mohan's own narration of the self-determined way he came to build a business around *hana* work not only suggests an effort to sidestep the question of shame, but is also directly counterposed to the moral economy according to which his neighbors evaluate his life trajectory. The satisfaction that he demonstrates with regard to his own involvement and success in the *hana* industry bears little relation to a fearlessness of admitting, in Chaminda's terms, who his parents were or what his

address is. While not exactly "hiding the mat," Mohan asserts his own exceptionality in a manner that breaches the collectively sustained moral economy by which the implications of doing so are determined in the first place. In his explicit embrace of "money power" (*salli balaya*) and, for instance, his pointed (though specious) invocation of Japan as a place where one's occupation is unconnected with one's social status, Mohan comes closer than any of the other individuals I encountered in Atwaedagama to exhibiting that "blunting of discrimination" characteristic of what Simmel calls a "faithful subjective reflection of the internalized money economy" (Simmel 1969:52).

Mohan frames his involvement and success in the *hana* industry strictly in terms of a market economy. His proud display of the titles upon his bookshelf exhibits an espousal of marquee neoliberal virtues, stark individualism and self-promotion not least among them. At the same time, however, his energetic preoccupation with presenting as "different" from his neighbors suggests an orientation of more subtle complexity than a mere "faithful subjective reflection of the internalized money economy" (Simmel 1969:52). Mohan's conscious struggle against the moral economy by which his actions are evaluated by others exemplifies what Sahlins has cheekily termed the "cunning of culture," or those processes whereby the principles of a market economy are in their very instantiation structured by locally meaningful forms (Sahlins 1992:13). Regarding himself as unique or, in his terms, "'one man' in Sri Lanka" (*mama Lankaawe* '*one man'*), Mohan's deliberate self-marginalization from his neighbors presents as an exception that proves the rule. He embraces the market economy by which he evaluates his own struggle and success at the same time that, through the very act of juxtaposition, he revitalizes elements of the moral economy he so earnestly wishes to escape.

Conclusion

In the articulation of market-oriented subjectivities, the moral evaluation of selves and others, and the interpersonal dynamics in which individuals in and around Atwaedagama are reminded of their proper social and geographical "place," we find resistance to what some describe as the "intense proliferation of exchange-value as the sole value metric" (Peacock 2015:9). Indeed, as I have aimed to show in this and the two preceding chapters, the myriad and at times conflictual practices through which the boundaries of Atwaedagama are contested and redrawn thwart the ascendency of any one value metric. Here, the often mundane renewal of understandings of money's selectively corrupting potential, of notions of cleanliness as a virtue of the socially superior, and of expectations regarding the proper directionality of "help" re-energizes the ideological and practical underpinnings of the caste-based boundary making that so many regard as out of step in a modern, democratic Sri Lanka. As we have seen in this and the previous chapter, there are striking commonalities underlying the kinds of practices to which those in Atwaedagama's close vicinity turn in maintaining an elevated social distance from their neighbors and the often morally inflected ways in which those identified as "from" Atwaedagama evaluate one another. These commonalities help us to make sense of fact that, at the very historical juncture at which scholarly and popular claims of caste's inexorable demise abound, practices of caste-based boundary making find steady ground in the unique interplay between moral and financial economies according to which individuals struggle to evaluate themselves and one another. Acknowledging such commonalities not only facilitates an appreciation for the fundamentally local character of the phenomenon, but also draws our attention once again to the points of (uneasy) articulation between investments in caste, promises of democratic egalitarianism, and the supposed leveling influences of a market economy. In the following chapter, a comparable scene of such articulation unfolds in a place where, unlike in

Atwaedagama, the industry at hand is the object of explicit contestation. There, we'll see, men and women on each side of this struggle draw variously on a post-independence narrative of traditional craft, competitive individualism, and a market logic in which heritage for profit is the order of the day. Caste, we will see, does markedly different work for those involved, but, as in Atwaedagama, its reproduction is shared by individuals across the strata of gender, age, class, and caste.

Chapter 6
Broken Threads, Nefarious Designs:
Tradition, Caste, and Conflict Among Dumbara Rata Weavers

> Although the patrimony serves to unify each nation, the inequalities in its formation and appropriation require that it also be studied as a space of material and symbolic struggle between classes, ethnic groups, and other groups. (Canclini 1995:136)

> [T]oo much is asked of heritage. In the same breath, we commend national patrimony, regional and ethnic legacies and a global heritage shared and sheltered in common. We forget that these aims are usually incompatible. (David Lowenthal 1998:227)

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In the foregoing chapter, I demonstrated how the high caste men and women around Atwaedagama, finding themselves engaged in an industry historically associated with low caste status, qualify such engagement to maintain their elevated social distance from those popularly considered to be that industry's lineage-based heirs. They do so at a time when even many of those regarded as the lineage-based heirs to the *hana* industry are reluctant to admit their own engagement in *hana* work. While the engagement of high caste men and women complicates the presumed link between people of a certain caste status and the "special trades" over which they are deemed to have a monopolizing authority (Weber 1998:191), I showed that it has not undermined caste-based identification in any straightforward sense. At a moment when some Sri Lankan scholars insist that the irrelevance of caste permits "any person who chooses any handicraft as a living [to] do so without much resistance" (Masakorala 2002:75-76), in Atwaedagama we see instead an energization of the cultural labor by which caste-based hierarchical boundaries are redrawn at the same time that they are called into question. In Redigama, approximately 40 km to the west and the home of what is known locally as *Dumbara rata* (*Dumbara* designs) weaving, we find that, while the scene is quite different, a comparable

reproduction of caste boundaries prevails. In Redigama, the combination of a flagging local agricultural economy and a booming market for the village's regionally distinctive decorative cotton textiles has fueled contestation over entitlement to an industry that, despite its historical association with the low caste Berava, now sees high caste Goyigama men and women make up the majority of its weaving workforce. This contestation, as the ethnographic material presented here will show, is precisely the struggle to which Canclini refers in the above epigraph. Notably, however, my analysis goes a bit further than Canclini's observation of patrimony's capacity to both unify and divide. In focusing on the realm of patrimony, we see not only a struggle between groups. Of equal importance, we see the reproduction *of* those groups *through* such struggle.

Instantiating the articulation of caste with, on the one hand, strong market logics that have shaped Sri Lanka since the 1977 implementation of "open economy" reforms and, on the other, the ideological and practical entailments of liberal democratic governance and citizenship, the dispute unfolding in Redigama highlights the difficulty of resolving one of the core policy debates concerning the protection of traditional knowledge in Sri Lanka, or the question of the extent to which "the preservation of [such] knowledge must be limited to [its] traditional bearers" (Silva 2013). This question, one of central concern to legal scholars presently trying to "[strike] a balance between cultural preservation and access to knowledge" (Andanda 2012), is typically posed with reference to the disenfranchisement of local communities by "big business" seeking to gain from indigenous "technical know-how," musical and artistic productions, and genetic material.[78] At a moment when "liberal state-based regimes of protection of patrimony"

[78] World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). Traditional Knowledge and Intellectual Property, Background Brief.

seem to have given ground to "marketized relationships which position cultural heritage as a resource" (Coombe and Weiss 2015:43), however, it pertains not only to the interests of "big business." This question must also be considered in light of the fact that disputes over knowledge also play out within local communities, a fact that, it must be noted, undermines the visions of harmony and homogeneity projected by consumers, government officials, and others invested in the "development of craft" in South Asia.[79] In the struggle over *Dumbara rata* weaving examined in the following pages, caste-based identification figures centrally in the contested and, as we shall see, often contradictory, claims that individuals assert in their efforts to carve out socially and economically advantageous positions in relation to the industry in which they are engaged. Such identification fuels the tension to which David Lowenthal points in the above epigraph between local or communalist legacies and collectively shared and stewarded "global heritage." I argue that at a moment when the industry with which their (low) caste has historically been associated seems to be slipping from their grip, those in Redigama who invoke lineage-based proprietorship in resisting the efforts of "outsiders" to assume independent control over *Dumbara rata* weaving are condemned as narrow-minded, anti-democratic, and generally hostile to a common national goal of developing the country's heritage for global enjoyment and consumption.

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As Chapter 4 argues by illustration, the population of producers associated with certain of Sri Lanka's "traditional arts and crafts," though historically limited to individuals at the lowest

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http://www.wipo.int/export/sites/www/pressroom/en/briefs/pdf/brief_tk.pdf. Accessed January 2015.

[79] See, for instance, anthropologist Soumhya Venkatesan's work on the discursive construction of "craft community" and its obfuscation of the varied interests, capacities and projects of individual producers.

rungs of what is often described as a Sinhala caste hierarchy, has in recent decades expanded to include members of other and, notably, higher, castes. [80] The Berava, the caste to which those who have long dominated the decorative handloom textile industry in Redigama are said to belong, have been no exception in this regard (Reed 2009; Simpson 1997). Historically serving as the performers of propitiatory, healing ceremonies, the occupational and ritual practices of the Berava, once executed as a matter of obligation under *rajkariya* (duty to the king), have included mask making, dancing, drumming, and weaving. Over time, these activities have not only become dissociated from one another, but have also taken on new significance to the now varied populations who engage in and consume them. Masks are no longer only carved and painted by members of southern Sri Lanka's Berava community for ceremonial use, but are also produced in direct response to the high tourist demand for these colorful items.[81,82] Likewise, Berava men once performed the dances that make up the *kohomba kankariya* as a post-harvest propitiation ceremony in the Kandyan region. As anthropologist Susan Reed has documented, many now treasure these practices as the country's "National Dance."[83] Non-Berava and even non-Sri

[80] http://www.dailynews.lk/letters/citizens-mail-10-02-2014
[81] To offer an extreme example of this trend, during a 2012 interview with a designer who had collaborated with Laksala, Sri Lanka's government-owned marketing outlet for "crafts," conversation turned to the brightly painted wooden masks that, while once made exclusively by individuals identified as Berava to be used in the performance of such propitiatory healing ceremonies, are now sold as souvenirs in shops throughout the country. An arguably perverse instance of the global shift from "state-based regimes of protection of patrimony" to "marketized relationships which position cultural heritage as a resource" (Coombe and Weiss 2015:43), she reported that the outlet's director had suggested importing the masks from China to more profitably meet tourist demand.
[82] And not so colorful, it is worth noting. Masks held in museum collections around the world are notable for being painted in bright pinks, yellows, blues and other vibrant colors. Masks nowadays are painted in more muted "natural" colors in response to consumer notions of what constitutes the authentically "antiquated."
[83] In Chapter 2, we encountered a weaver, Lakshman, who invokes this phenomenon in particular to argue the irrelevance of caste in contemporary Sri Lanka and to therefore criticize

Lankans perform them in tourist, diplomatic, and entertainment venues around the world (Reed 2009; See also Simpson 1993 and 1997).

These transformations notwithstanding, the knowledge and practical skill required of many such historically caste-based areas of artistic production remain "possessed by respective caste groups which are typically at the bottom of the [Sinhala] caste hierarchy" (Silva 2013:1). And yet, as we have already seen with respect to the *hana* industry in Atwaedagama, instances of a relative decoupling of such performances and items from the particular caste groups with which they have historically been associated has complicated such possession. As I have demonstrated in the foregoing chapters and as I will further argue by demonstration below, this complication neither reflects nor precipitates of the disappearance of caste-based identification when it comes to those engaged in such "traditional arts."

With respect to the individuals whose family has historically dominated the weaving industry in Redigama, caste remains a salient category of identification in the lives of these "traditional craftsmen" in at least two important and closely related respects. First, it has emerged as indispensable to their claims of control over the knowledge and skills demanded in their work. Second, it figures centrally in the accounts of personal and communal struggle and achievement that they share in making sense of perceived threats to the industry in which they are engaged. The quiet but constant companion of "tradition," caste has in this way become a double-edged sword continually sharpened by the language of "heritage" and "identity," terminology not only characteristic of the popular narratives of craft production upon which these individuals draw in claiming exclusive title to *Dumbara rata* weaving, but also

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the preoccupation on the part of contemporary writers with the caste status of Atwaedagama's residents.

fundamentally incompatible with the notions of competitive individualism and liberal democratic development in which challengers to these claims ground their own entitlements to the industry. Facing state-sponsored efforts to more evenly distribute the economic benefits of textile production to their low-income, high caste neighbors—individuals to whom caste, as we shall see, is no less significant as a marker of difference—those who own Redigama's weaving workshops defend their claims to control over the local weaving industry by reference to "heritage" and "descent"; yet doing so necessarily entails a consolidation of their disadvantaged position within a caste hierarchy that, while no longer commanding their servitude, is regularly invoked in their own and others' explanations of practices that ensure their continued social marginalization.

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An example of the institutional silencing of caste discussed at length in the introduction to this dissertation, Sri Lanka long ago removed caste from the census schedule. Official documentation of Redigama's caste composition is therefore hard to come by. Demonstrating caste's reproduction irrespective of this fact, however, local officials and residents report that the vast majority of Redigama's approximately 400 Sinhala Buddhist residents identify as highest caste, while a small minority identify as low caste, and more specifically as Berava.[84] To reiterate, it is members of this latter group who have historically been associated with weaving in the region, and it is they who privately and publicly claim sole ownership of the local handloom textile industry today.

[84] Approximately three percent of Sri Lanka's Sinhalese population is identified as Berava (Silva, Sivapragasam, and Thanges 2009:32)

Coomaraswamy's early 20th century *Medieval Sinhalese Art* and oral history accounts from Redigama's current residents suggest that from the late 19th century until around the 1970s, the Berava of Redigama produced minimally decorated cotton cloth for local consumption while performing duties as ceremonial drummers and, like others in the area, engaging in paddy and chena cultivation. Though no longer supplying textiles to the Kandyan monarchy, some also sold articles of cloth to the Kandyan Art Association, an organization established in 1882 during an era when British residents' and administrators' attitudes toward "local crafts" began to shift from "disparaging to a more sympathetic and informed appreciation" (Jones 2008:392). By the early 1970s, however, a surge in government interest in actively promoting the "traditional arts" of the still newly independent country—where, to reiterate, "traditional arts" referred to *Kandyan* artistic productions—initiated a transformation in Redigama's weaving activities that would have significant consequences in terms of the Berava's economic welfare and the relationships they have with their highest-caste neighbors.

As discussed in Chapter 2, government attention to the "traditional arts" in the early years following Sri Lanka's independence from the British was closely linked to what some saw as the need to replace the "superficial bi-culturality of the upper and upper-middle classes" with the "native heritage" found in the "indigenous arts and crafts" (J.E. Jayasuriya 1956: 66;68).[85] Although a strong "cultural awakening" and distinctly "nationalistic sentiments" emerged alongside Westernization throughout late 19th century Ceylon (Roberts 1982:223), the mid to late 1950s in particular marked a period in which the flourishing of such cultural nationalism among rural, Sinhala Buddhists coincided with the triumph in certain quarters of what historian

[85] Sri Lanka, or what was called Ceylon until 1972, achieved independence from the British in 1948.

Kingsley M. De Silva has called a traditionalist "aesthetic ideology." To officials at the newly established Ministry of Cultural Affairs, for instance, "it became obvious [during these years] that westernization in the arts and literature, for all its attractions, could hardly hold its own against the powerful forces of traditionalism" (De Silva 1981: 517). Those convinced of the promise of "indigenous arts and crafts" called explicitly for government-led promotion of their "development." In the paper he presented at the 1956 UNESCO-sponsored "Conference on Traditional Cultures in Ceylon," for instance, historical sociologist Ralph Pieris deemed the contemporary moment one of "cultural malaise" and advocated explicitly for government intervention. He opined that the "state alone can furnish adequate assistance ['for the preservation and development of the country's cultural heritage'] at the national level" (Pieris 1956:10).

Pieris, who as we'll recall from Chapter 2 called explictly for dissociating craft from caste, was, like many of his contemporaries writing on the topic, interested in supporting the growth of a new population of "competent artists" comprised of Sinhalese from across social strata. An initiative he found especially promising was one proposed by the Director of Rural Development and Cottage Industries. The scheme involved paying "prominent artists and craftsmen a regular monthly allowance of Rs.150/- with the sole proviso that they should impart their skills to apprentices and maintain high standards" (Pieris 1956:11). As far as Pieris's colleague, J.E. Jayasuriya, was concerned, such formal training would draw "artist-craftsmen…from all sectors of society," irrespective of caste or class. By thus leading to a replacement of the "existing caste associated artisans-craftsmen," so the idea went, it would ultimately result in a "revival of the indigenous crafts on an enduring basis" (Jayasuriya 1956:70). It was precisely such a program that would come to Redigama by the early 1970s.

Alongside the growth of a largely tourism-driven market for *Dumbara rata* textiles, it set in motion a reconfiguration of local socioeconomic relations between the Berava and the highest-caste individuals residing there and, in this way, motivated the struggle over the local "traditional industry" in which Redigama's residents are presently engaged.

Before turning to the details of this struggle, I want to note that the terms I rely upon in the following pages to identify the two "groups" involved in this contestation are drawn primarily from the most common ways in which my interlocutors in Redigama assert this groupedness or, in other words, from the language they deploy in identifying themselves and one another. For instance, the individuals who dominate the textile industry in the village tend to refer to "our family" (*apee paula*) while others refer to them as either "that family" (*ee paula)* or "people in that family" (*ee paule minissu*). I therefore generally use the terms Berava and "family" interchangeably in reference to them. Their neighbors, by contrast, generally refer to themselves and are referred to by the members of the family as "highest-caste." I therefore use the term "highest-caste" to refer to the latter.

One could justifiably ask why I do not refer to those who are "highest-caste" by a specific caste name. To explain, these three highest-caste groups are reported to be Walawwo, Banda, and Goyigama, or "Cultivator." I have found no indication that the terms "Banda" and "Walawwo" have been used historically to specifically designate separate caste statuses in Sri Lanka. In his 1967 account of kinship and marriage in Ceylon, Nur Yalman documented that the former, Banda, meaning "Lord," was one among a number of "exclusively Cultivator names, and none of the low castes would appropriate them" (Yalman 1967:91). In other words, Banda indicated one's caste status as Goyigama. The term "Walawwo," or "Walawwa" in the singular form, generally refers to the pre-British Kandyan Kingdom "residence or residential complex of

a Sinhalese noble," or one belonging to a ruling aristocratic group known as Radala (Roberts 1982:xxiii; Silva 2009:21). At least during British colonial rule, however, "local landlords [also] used [the term 'Walawwa'] although they were not aristocratic by caste status" (Silva 1986:51). Today, Radala is considered by some scholars to be the uppermost among three Goyigama sub-castes (the lower two being Goyigama and Patti, respectively) (Silva 2009:32). (Although, it bears mention, Dewasiri recently noted that, historically speaking, the "inclusion of the upper echelon of society [i.e. Radala and other groups] in the Goyigama caste appears quite problematical" (Dewasiri 2008:193)). Some in Redigama differentiate between Walawwo, Banda, and Goyigama, identifying Walawwa as the highest stratum of the caste hierarchy, above both Banda and Goyigama. Here, however, I typically refer to all three as simply "highest-caste" because, at the moment in which I was conducting my fieldwork, and particularly in discussions pertaining to the struggle over *Dumbara rata*, almost all who identify has highest-caste used the phrase "our people" (*apee minissu*) to refer to them as one. Notably, given that caste considerations figure centrally in matrimonial matchmaking, had my research focused on marriage practices in the village, for example, I might have found that "our people" was a phrase used by those who identify as Walawwa to differentiate themselves from those regarded as Banda and Goviyama.

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To make sense of the present conflict in Redigama, it is essential to sketch the relatively recent evolution and formalization of the weaving industry in the village. In the 1970s, the government of Sri Lanka began funding training programs in and around Redigama in which highest-caste men and women learned to weave under the instruction of their Berava neighbors. From 1972 until 1980, for instance, the Department of Small Industries funded a weaving

training center in which every two years a group of ten students from the area learned to weave *Dumbara rata* textiles from, at least initially, one of the oldest members of the family that has historically dominated the industry. A late 1970s feud between two siblings within the Berava family over an order from a major buyer from Colombo had helped solidify an arrangement by which members of the family managed separate workshops, catering to and vying for the business of different government and private dealers in Kandy and Colombo. When private and government-owned shops in these two cities began to increase their orders for *Dumbara rata* items in the early 1980s, these newly trained highest-caste weavers were readily absorbed by the several family-owned workshops now struggling to keep up with demand.

The first and more predictable of two consequences of this industry arrangement is the competition it engendered within the extended family. When I visited the area for the first time in 2012, family members with whom I met were quick to point out that the separate ownership and management of *Dumbara rata* weaving workshops in the village had always fostered a considerable degree of competition among them. This business-oriented rivalry is reported to have become especially pronounced following the end of the country's nearly thirty-year war in 2009, when an influx of tourists and overall strengthening of the country's economy drove a rapid increase in demand for *Dumbara rata* textiles. Unfortunately, some family members reported, even the possibility of missing out on opportunities presented by this surge in demand was not enough to unify them. According to Himali, the only female workshop owner in the area, any possibility of true business expansion was barred by long-standing discord between family members and their refusal to "work under" anyone else. Charges of the surreptitious "theft" of designs by one from another substantiated her observation that "there is no harmony among us." Dilini, the wife of Himali's nephew, shared a story in which one workshop owner

hired a journalist to take photographs of his relative's textiles so that he could "steal" his designs. "When there are exhibitions," she added ruefully, "those who can't create new things look forward to copying from others."

Indications of the second major consequence of the industry's arrangement in Redigama—that is, of the family members' maintenance of separate workshops and the hiring of highest caste neighbors to weave in them—were brought to my attention when I returned to the village in 2013. Now, narratives of intra-family competition—at least those shared by family members themselves—were almost entirely eclipsed by tales featuring a new antagonist: non-related workshop employees and others demanding the right to weave *Dumbara rata* textiles independently of the family. In this context, intra-family rivalry emerged as a favored topic of conversation not among family members, but among their highest-caste neighbors, who, invoking a notion of money's corrupting potential, would describe the most hostile occurrences of this enmity as stemming from the greed, jealousy, and "inhumanity" to which the industry's success had driven the former. A popular rumor told of a family member who had reacted violently to the alleged "copying" of a textile produced in his workshop. Paying a mid-night, drunken visit to the home of the transgressor, his own sister, he reportedly slashed the threads on one of her looms in retaliation. Remarking on the incident, an elderly woman and former employee of one of the workshop owners noted disapprovingly, "they're so money-minded now."

This shift from talk of intra-family rivalry to that of tension between the Berava weavers and their highest-caste, non-relative neighbors marked high caste weavers' active pursuit of the possibility of using skills developed in government-sponsored training programs and as employees of the family members to weave independently or at least beyond the workshops of

the latter. For this, the received the backing and encouragement of government officials who view *Dumbara rata* weaving as a convenient vehicle for poverty alleviation among Redigama's neediest residents. In pursuing this agenda, Redigama's highest-caste weavers and their sympathizers faced considerable and not entirely unexpected resistance from members of the extended family that have always reaped the most substantial profits from the growth of the industry.

At first glance, the immediate origins of this dispute—that is, the steady growth of the *Dumbara rata* industry and the fact that highest-caste residents of Redigama are eager to independently carry out a historically caste-based activity—would seem consistent with the trend discussed in the introduction to this dissertation. It would seem consistent, that is, with a purported exchange of "the logic of [*ascribed*] caste identity" (Ciotti 2010:209) for practices of identification that foreground (economically and consumer-based) *achieved* social status (Friedman 2002:295-296). Not only *has* such growth allowed many of Redigama's Berava weavers to achieve economic well being comparable to and in some cases far exceeding that of their highest-caste neighbors, but some in the area do in fact interpret such financial accomplishment as both evincing and inducing a relative disintegration of what was once a firmly entrenched caste hierarchy. Further, there are both high and low-caste residents who view high caste individuals' employment in the workshops of their low caste neighbors as firm indication that caste is a concern to neither the Berava employers nor their Goyigama employees. As one highest-caste gentleman (and, notably, not a weaver) put it to me, "If one were to have such a problem, how could one go and weave in one of their houses?...People go and weave under them. [In those workshops, the high caste employees are] the servants, and when the masters tell them to do things, they listen to them, so I don't see [caste as] a big issue."

I argue that despite what might resemble a modernity-driven demise of caste, it is in fact particularly in this context of recent industry growth and explicit government support of "small industries" that caste-based claims of self- and other identification are readily made. What is of anthropological interest here is not merely the existence of such claims, however. Rather, as my ethnographic work demonstrates, it is that they arise with equal force and equal contradiction alongside two irreconcilable ideological spheres: a "discursive field of heritage" (Smith 2006:42) long-reinforced by non-state and state actors alike—including, importantly, Sri Lanka's National Craft Council (NCC)—and popular neoliberal ideals of economic freedom and competitive individualism. The industry's *de facto* owners, evoking something akin to the communalistic resonances of "heritage" identified by Lowenthal, have positioned themselves in this dispute as the sole lineage-based proprietors of an ancient and "family only" weaving tradition. By contrast, their highest-caste weaver neighbors have invoked not only the family's willingness to hire such individuals to meet a growing demand, but also the government's record of explicit support for imparting such weaving skills to individuals beyond the family in an effort to both preserve the knowledge entailed and, by the same stroke, alleviate the financial hardship that many in the area presently endure.

Government officials regularly refer to the economic vulnerability of Redigama and the surrounding region in justifying their recent efforts to "expand" the local *Dumbara rata* weaving industry through Divi Neguma. This large-scale development initiative was introduced by President Mahinda Rajapaksa in 2011 with the stated goal of alleviating rural poverty through the establishment of "one million domestic economic units," including individual household-based enterprises in gardening, dairy and poultry farming, and craft production (Ministry of Industry and Commerce n.d.; Gunasinghe 2013). Coordinated by the Ministry of Economic

Development, the official goal of Divi Neguma, a highly politicized program, is to "strengthen the village economy" by supporting rural household units to be "be self-sufficient, financially secure, and [to] rely less on the market for their daily food requirements" (Hirimuthugodage 2012). Alongside home gardening, fisheries, and animal husbandry, Divi Neguma's microfinance and infrastructure development programs have been oriented toward "cottage industries," household-based manufacturing including the domestic production of handloom textiles (Kurugala 2012). The Samurdhi Program, a government micro-finance scheme introduced in Sri Lanka in 1995 to eradicate rural poverty, has been reinvigorated as a result of its recent incorporation into Divi Neguma. It is in the Samurdhi Program that Redigama's highest caste weavers have found the most steady and explicit encouragement of their efforts to weave independently of the Berava family members who have historically dominated *Dumbara rata* weaving.

The (In?)Alienability of Skill

In November 2013, Redigama's Samurdhi Program officer convened an annual meeting to elect the program's local governing board members for the coming year. On this particular day, around thirty men and women, all qualifying as low income and therefore eligible for Samurdhi funds, had assembled to learn more about the resources that would be available to them in the coming year. [86] The emotionally charged exchange that followed, however, indicated that this government-sponsored initiative to develop such industries had also fueled the local dispute regarding control over *Dumbara rata* weaving.

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[86] At the time, individuals earning a monthly income of less than SLR 4,000 (approximately US$30) qualified as low income.

Gathered in a shaded area in front of the home in which the Samurdhi officer meets with residents during his weekly visits to Redigama, men and women calmly inquired about support for home gardens, the use of Samurdhi funds to defray the costs of hospital visits, and how to galvanize participation in the village's defunct "children's society." Twenty minutes into the meeting, however, a side conversation among a group of women abruptly escalated into a verbal scuffle between meeting attendees and a 45 year-old weaver named Rukshan. Rukshan, a father of two, belongs to the extended family locally recognized as the caste-based heirs of *Dumbara rata* weaving. The manager of his own small workshop with two occasional employees, Rukshan is recognized as a skilled weaver and, like his relatives, receives commissions by dealers and designers in Colombo. He has not met with the same fortune that his relatives have, however. Generally on friendlier terms with his non-Berava neighbors—Rukshan offered to loan looms that he had in his possession to a young high caste man attempting to start his own weaving business—he is regarded by many in the village as the "black sheep" of the family. Despite this status, Rukshan acts as the family's representative at meetings where he is the only Berava weaver in attendance. This occasion was no exception. Endeavoring to speak on behalf of his relatives, a suddenly nervous-looking Rukshan addressed the group of women sitting across from him: "If you all take loans to weave these textiles, then you all should demonstrate that you are doing them," he told them. A woman shot back, "Rukshan, people are not weaving alone! They are weaving for your family. You *know* that!" "Yes," agreed another, "we can get loans, Rukshan, but then we should have the right to weave alone. How can we pay back the loans when we are weaving for someone else?" After a moment, Rukshan declared with an air of uneasy confidence, "Everyone in the country knows that *Dumbara rata* is *only* done in Redigama and that it is our *own* family who is doing it. Everyone in the world knows that." To

this, an outspoken woman in the audience replied, "But Rukshan, now there are a lot of people who can actually *do Dumbara rata*. So, someone should go and say that there is no point in giving [government] funds because only one family is doing it! Why bother making proposals to develop the small industries?"

The brief argument that ensued focused on the question of whether Rukshan's family could rightfully prevent others from using Samurdhi loans to start their own weaving businesses and whether it was fair for the family members to take credit for textiles woven by the men and women they employed in their workshops. Importantly, the occasion served as an opportunity for Redigama's impoverished, highest caste residents to remark upon what they perceived as the fundamental injustice underlying Rukshan's extended family members' refusal to acknowledge the skill of the weavers they employed in their workshops and to allow them to weave independently. In doing so, they invoked a tale that many of them saw as epitomizing this injustice. The popular story circulating at the time centered on the experience of Danuka, a highest-caste resident of Redigama who had begun weaving in the workshop of a family member in 2000 when he was 20 years old. Some years after he had taken up weaving, Danuka had created a wall hanging that was subsequently displayed in the entrance hall of a local bank. What the highest-caste residents were often keen to point out was that it was the workshop owner, however, not Danuka, who had received credit (as well as a monetary award) for the piece. "We don't have any grudge with you, Rukshan," an elderly woman assured the only family member at the meeting, "but we are telling the truth. That's why a lot of people have dropped weaving, now….The token of appreciation went to [the workshop owner]. So, now what do you have to say about that? The award and the money goes to him!" Agreeing with his fellow attendee and extending the implications of the event to the matter at hand, another skilled, highest-caste

weaver in attendance added, “Now, if a man knows carpentry, does that mean that anyone who works under him can’t go and open up his own place to do carpentry?”

Importantly, interjecting and utilizing the indirect communicative force of a popular allegory, the Samurdhi officer leading the meeting sided himself firmly with those claiming their “rights” to the industry as rooted in individual effort and skill rather than privilege by birthright. Referring to a recent, failed government-sponsored initiative to establish a separate weaving workshop in Redigama, one that would have potentially been managed by a government-appointed resident unrelated to Rukshan’s extended family, he invoked a Sinhala proverb by which to obliquely criticize the family members for their refusal to relinquish control over the industry in the interest of poverty alleviation. “Since this issue was brought up,” he announced with a smile, “I have to say this: Having shown little sister, big sister is given. I won’t let that happen again next year.” In the popular allegory to which he referred, the parents of two unwedded girls “show” the younger of the two to an unsuspecting man who, having agreed to a marriage proposal based upon what he sees, finds himself duped on the day of the wedding when the elder sister is presented as his bride. Invoking the tale in this context, where it was received with laughs of approval from many in his audience, the Samurdhi officer exhibited his alliance with those seeking “the right to weave alone”: like the young woman who wins a reward then claimed by her older sister, he suggests, there is a certain injustice to be found in the fact that credit for weaving done by highest-caste workshop employees is ultimately taken by the family members who own Redigama’s weaving workshops.

Juxtaposed against Rukshan’s assertion that *Dumbara rata* weaving is done exclusively by his family, the Samurdhi officer’s intervention, and the exchange more generally, signals the articulation of two discourses to which weavers in Redigama currently appeal in their efforts to

capture the benefits of the industry's recent growth: that of lineage-based occupational exclusivity on the one hand, and that of individual skill and equal opportunity on the other. The following discussion examines how the tension between these discourses arises alongside a topic of central importance with respect to the present contestation over the local weaving industry: knowledge. As will become apparent, in the narratives of both family members and highest-caste village residents alike, caste-based identification of self and other emerges as both a significant means and a meaningful byproduct of efforts to establish the legitimacy of one's claims over *Dumbara rata* textile production and the knowledge it entails.

In Redigama, the conceptualization of authentic knowledge of weaving, including the way it is obtained, is perhaps *the* fundamental point of contention between weavers who belong to the family and those who do not. While individuals on these two sides of the present dispute in the village differ in how they view the source of such knowledge, however, they display a striking albeit unintentional similarity when it comes to articulating these incongruent viewpoints. That is, despite dissimilarity in the strategies through which family members and their unrelated employees position themselves in relation to the industry and the knowledge it involves—as inheritors either by descent or by training—both often end up reinforcing caste as a meaningful category of identification in present-day Sri Lanka.

There are two primary and, notably, somewhat contradictory, ways in which family members articulate the way they keep *Dumbara rata* weaving knowledge from "outsiders" such as their non-related, highest-caste employees and neighbors. The first entails claiming an inherited or inborn ability (*pihitanawa*) possessed exclusively by individuals related to the family. The second involves active strategizing to withhold information from non-relative

employees.[87] Both strategies involve a claim that the legitimacy of the relevant knowledge derives from its genealogical transmission, and that the industry is safeguarded by this knowledge resting only with members of the family. By contrast, and as indicated above, highest-caste individuals advocating for the right to weave independently of the various family-owned and managed workshops throughout Redigama stress individual talent, knowledge obtained through effort, and the importance of ensuring the perpetuation of that knowledge by sharing it with anyone who desires to learn.

Dilini, a 30 year-old mother of two, is one of the most outspoken defendants of the family's exclusive right over *Dumbara rata* weaving and one of the harshest critics of those who challenge this right. She began weaving in 2010, shortly after marrying the son of Bandula, a renowned weaver in Redigama and a prominent member of the extended family that controls the local industry. Two years later, when we met for the first time, Dilini recounted how she gradually came to learn that Redigama was known for the textiles produced there. Foreigners and Sri Lankans from other parts of the country would visit her father in-law's workshop, she explained, inquiring about weaving techniques and eager to make purchases. At one point in our conversation, she noted with satisfaction that if a person outside her family attempted to start a *Dumbara rata* weaving business, it would fail. Initially, when I inquired as to why this might be the case, she said that she wasn't sure. After a moment, however, she smiled and excitedly explained,

> Although others try to do it, they can't. Only members of the family inherit that ability…Although others might invest and try to do this business, they can't do it.

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[87] In contemporary Sri Lanka, practices resembling the latter strategy are more generally referred to, and disparagingly so, as *guru musthtiya*, or the tendency for a teacher to deliberately reserve some knowledge from an apprentice or pupil.

> They can’t. But if anyone in this family prepares to do it, they can go forward. It is only within this family. It’s not outside.

The conviction that others “can’t do it,” as in, that they are *unable* because they lack an “inherited ability,” is one echoed by other family members in Redigama, but it is also one whose persuasive force is complicated by its rhetorical conflation with the assertion that others “can’t do it,” as in, they are not *permitted.* As Rukshan explained to me one afternoon in his workshop:

> Whatever happens, whatever they try, we are *sure* that this business will not go outside the family. Whoever tries to do this, they can’t develop it without the help of our family. The best example for that is that when I was an instructor with the Department of Small Industries, I didn’t hold anything back as a teacher [*guru moshtiya tiyagannaeae*]. I taught *everything*. Now, also, you can see *Dumbara rata* done by the [government] handloom center. But when you compare the designs they do there and our designs here, there’s a big difference. It’s a difference in quality.

Rukshan is adamant that others “don’t have the talent,” that “although we teach them a lot, they can’t do it.” At the same time, he indicates that there are limits to this conviction regarding others’ lack in ability, recounting what happened recently when the suggestion arose that, in fact, they *can*:

> People are trying to do the business because this industry has a good market now. A few months back, there was a small issue of starting this business out in the village. We said, ‘if you all can, then try to do it.’ Then we informed the Divisional Secretariat. This industry is reserved for our family. And we disagreed with it, and somehow it was stopped.

A moment later, he concluded, “Although they try to start this business, we believe that they can’t carry on with it.”

There is a telling paradox in Rukshan’s representation of his family’s sole control over the industry—that is, the notion that this control is evidenced in an inherited and internal ability lacking in “outsiders,” on the one hand, and the felt imperative to prevent unrelated individuals from compromising that exclusive control, on the other. The notion of “inborn talent” that he

draws upon to explain and defend his relatives' domination of the industry is to some extended controverted by the apparent need to appeal to government officials to actively prevent others from weaving *Dumbara rata* textiles independently of the family.

Not surprisingly, Rukshan readily reproduces a narrative of privileged, inherited knowledge. Governmental and non-governmental advocates, not to mention scholars, of Sri Lanka's "traditional arts" have long propelled the popularity of this narrative of inheritance, which has also served centrally in the marketability of the textiles produced in Redigama's workshops. Rukshan and his relatives would often point to the fact that an ancestor's photograph was displayed in the Colombo National Museum to as evidence of their lineage-based inheritance. Mentioning the photograph, Rukshan's cousin stressed to me, "You see, *we* were the ones who did this generationally." Today, however, Rukshan's extended family must reckon with an unexpected contender: a government-sponsored program of rural poverty alleviation whose representatives publicly portray the family's wish to exclusively control the industry as expressive of "narrow-minded" (i.e. caste-based) thinking incompatible with Sri Lanka's status as a democracy. It is in meeting this challenge that Rukshan encounters the persuasive limits of the idea of an "inherited" or "inborn" ability. The inconsistency in his account is a consequence of this encounter and, as we will see, resembles other contradictions around the claims that both high and low caste individuals in Redigama make with regard to *Dumbara rata* weaving. These contradictions indicate both a genuine uncertainty as to how individuals ought to orient themselves within an economic and moral field of their own partial making, as well as the confusion that results in drawing on incompatible ideological reserves to do so. In any given moment, weavers in Redigama attempt to select the most compelling narrative with which to

negotiate new and tenuous positions in relation to an arguably thriving village-based industry, but the choice is not always obvious.

A second way in which family members explain their exclusive control over *Dumbara rata* weaving is through reference to the active control of knowledge they strive to achieve in managing their businesses. Sitting alone at a loom in his empty workshop one morning, his arms and hands working furiously to complete an order, Bandula lamented that, despite the lesser pay, his former employees would prefer working in paddy fields to weaving for him.[88] Bemoaning the difficulty of traveling to collect materials, locating the exact color thread needed to complete a custom order, and, most importantly, setting the warp threads on the loom, he concluded that the men and women who have worked for him in the past take his hard work for granted and are ungrateful for the fact that "all they have to do is sit and weave." Bandula's narration of employer generosity sets a unique spin on a phenomenon that his relatives more commonly describe not as serving the interests of their employees, but as necessary to ensuring that the industry does not "go out" from their family. If highest caste individuals attempt to start a weaving business on their own, his brother later told me, "They don't know how to carry on because they don't know the basics. They just sit at the machine and do what we say, but they don't know what's really behind it." "We tell them to sit on the machine and do something small," he explained, "but they don't know what's after that or before that."

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[88] In fact, most of Bandula's employees complained that his salaries were the lowest of all workshops. As discussed in the overview of Redigama in the introduction to this dissertation, current and former highest caste weavers complained that not only are the salaries at all of the workshops inadequate, but also that none of workshop owners makes the government-mandated contributions to the Employees' Provident Fund (a social security scheme). Despite this, and likely given the low rewards and general unpredictability of paddy farming, a number of employees working for Bandula's siblings, cousins, or nephews reported that they had changed workshops rather than quitting because others paid (slightly) better than he did.

While arguably more consistent with a philosophy of free and competitive production than the idea of kin-based, "inherited talent," this active control of knowledge is often explained alongside appeals to the marker of difference in which such inheritance is believed to be rooted in the first place: caste. This is illustrated in the following excerpts from a conversation with Sumal**,** one of the younger Berava weavers and workshop owners in the area. Sumal had been sharing his concerns about highest-caste individuals attempting to weave independently when I asked him whether this had been an issue in the past. He said that it hadn't, and so I asked why he thought it had recently become a point of contention. He replied:

> It's like this: Recently, demand for the industry started to be really good. After the war was over, there was a good market for these products. That's one reason. …There's another one, too. The people who were involved in the industry in the past, they were afraid to speak openly. They never spoke like this in the past [like he is speaking with me]. They lived in fear of the highest caste people. In our grandfather's time—it's a really important thing—in that time, they *never* spoke openly like this. When someone acted against them in some way, they would give a small gift [bribe] and would stay silent. When they couldn't escape from them, they'd give them some small things. They never went against them. But now we speak openly.

Sumal's suggestion is that others' sudden intention to engage in *Dumbara rata* weaving independently of his family derives primarily from the rising post-war demand for the textiles. At the same time, he also indicates that the tension to which efforts to act on this intention has led derives largely from the fact that he and his relatives are no longer fearful or acquiescent in interactions with their highest-caste neighbors. To Sumal, the fact that the industry is "inherited" serves as legitimation for his family's active control of knowledge regarding *Dumbara rata* textile production. However, while explicitly linking this mode of industry transmission to his family's caste status, and thereby demonstrating how caste difference may serve them, he also

complains of what he sees as his former employees' problematic preoccupation with their own highest-caste status as driving the present threat to that control:

> This is an inherited industry. In Sri Lanka, there's a caste system. The people who wove clothing for the king, they belong to one caste. The people who make jewelry belong to another caste. Carpenters belong to another caste. It was separated like that at the kings' time. It's the same here, too. Some people here still have that caste problem. There are some people who think, 'we are the highest caste.' There are some people who came to learn from us. Although they used to come to us for work, now they are thinking about their caste, so they don't like to come to our places anymore because they are concerned about their pride. We have to speak openly….This is a thing that belongs to us. We don't need to be at their feet to give the knowledge to them. If they want to learn, they have to come to us.
>
> What I think is that some people want to take this from us and they want to keep this industry for themselves. We haven't given the full knowledge of this industry to any outside workers, though, because it's generation to generation. It's an inherited thing. So, we have given them *some* knowledge of this industry.

To Sumal, a transformation in the inter-caste interaction in Redigama—a transformation marked by the area's low-caste residents' feeling that they may now speak freely with their highest-caste neighbors—has compromised the latter's willingness to work "under" him and other workshop owners. As far as he is concerned the imperative to withhold knowledge from employees and other "outsiders" is something that has allowed him and his family members to benefit from a heightened post-war demand for *Dumbara rata* textiles and to achieve an economic position from which they may live "without fear" of their socially privileged neighbors. This imperative follows directly from the caste-based "generation to generation" transmission of the industry and the knowledge of weaving that it requires.

Rather than emphasizing an "inborn ability" possessed exclusively by members of his extended family, Sumal therefore centers his narrative around a tale of transformation from caste-based social vulnerability and compulsory deference to a position of advantage deriving

from the exclusive possession of one critical asset: knowledge. This account of socioeconomic improvement is common among the family members with whom I spoke. As Bandula related:

> In the past, when we were small, we went to work in others' fields. After that, because of this industry, we became developed. We have sent our children to good schools in Kandy. My daughter and my son were both sent to good schools in Kandy. So [others in Redigama] are jealous of that development.
> Q: Why do you think they care about your development?
> Yes, that's what I was going to say. From the very first up to now there was a caste problem here. So, they think, 'In the past, these people were working for us, so now why should we go and work under them?'

On an earlier occasion, Bandula had in fact complained that others in Redigama were not "free-minded" enough to work under individuals belonging to a lower caste. They are conservative, he reported, and keen to maintain the caste distinction. Yet, as we see in Sumal's words above, the suggestion that others are concerned about caste belies the extent to which caste-based identification also serves in the perpetuation of Bandula and his family members' control over the production of *Dumbara rata* textiles in Redigama. At the same time that Sumal laments, "some people here still have that caste problem," it is precisely by reiterating his own experiences in terms of caste-based identification that he aims to stake an unequivocal claim of ownership over the local weaving industry. When it comes to reckoning with "threats" to that industry in the form of potential competition from highest-caste weavers, in other words, Sumal and his relatives leverage their identification as Berava. What is more, they arm themselves with a narrative in which it is their overcoming a position of vulnerability imparted to them by virtue of their identification as low caste that reinforces a sense that their exclusive ownership of the local textile production industry is justifiably earned.

Efforts to control or withhold knowledge and the notion of "inherited ability" are therefore central to the narratives in which family members explain and defend their control of

Redigama's weaving industry. The way their non-related highest-caste neighbors articulate their own claims regarding the production of *Dumbara rata* is quite different, with one important qualification: in doing so, they too reinforce caste as a socially significant marker of identification. In discussions of the industry and in conversations more generally, Redigama's highest-caste residents disavow the importance of caste in their own lives and are quick to lament its persistence as a carryover from an unenlightened past. Early on in my research, I naively expected that, in their arguments for a more equitable distribution of control over the local textile industry, highest-caste individuals would affirm this position to undermine the family's claims of occupational exclusivity. As we have seen, family members ground the justification for their exclusive control over the industry in claims regarding the lineage-based transmission of knowledge and in narratives of overcoming caste-based marginalization. Disregarding concerns with caste as irrelevant in contemporary Sri Lanka would be one of the surest ways to delegitimize claims of ownership that make reference to it. Highest-caste individuals did contest their Berava neighbors' claims of exclusive control over *Dumbara rata* weaving by suggesting that concerns with caste are old-fashioned and out of step in a modern, democratic Sri Lanka. At the same time, however, they did not play this card quite as often or as vocally as one might expect them to. In fact, their disavowal of the importance of caste was almost always immediately controverted by demonstrations of investment in its perpetuation.

The fortification of caste in family members' narratives of control over the local textile industry reinforces the notion of an intimate relation between a (Berava) self and a commitment to weaving that encompasses more than just the satisfaction of economic wants. To be Berava is to have an indisputable claim of ownership over the industry and, likewise, to have an indisputable claim of ownership over the industry is to be Berava. By contrast, caste's discursive

production among self-identified highest-caste individuals hoping to more directly reap the benefits of a growing demand for *Dumbara rata* textiles necessitates that claims of ownership over weaving knowledge be couched in very different terms. While undermining their Berava neighbors' efforts at positive monopolization, in other words, their own pursuit of autonomous control over *Dumbara rata* textile production must leave the pretense of "negative monopolization" (Weber 1998:191) intact if they are to maintain their sense of social superiority.

In demanding the freedom to weave independently, highest-caste residents of Redigama therefore highlight the wide and "caste blind" distribution of weaving knowledge, invoke individual skill rather than inherited ability, and insist that family members' efforts to "keep the industry to themselves" are demonstrations of unabashed selfishness. In this circumvention of the language of tradition, heritage, and generation-to-generation transmission of knowledge, Redigama's low-income, highest-caste weavers and others who sympathize with them thereby maintain a safe distance from an industry that they continue to associate with the low-caste status of their neighbors. Despite rejecting the latter's domination of that industry, as we will see, they are also loath to claim the industry as their own or, in the words one Berava workshop owner used to describe his family's relationship to the industry, as an expression of their "identity." Doing otherwise would mean either jeopardizing their own social superiority, or, by the same token, allowing their neighbors to forget their lowly position. Like the family members, then, these individuals come up against the uncomfortable resistance encountered in "trying to have it both ways." Whereas for the former this means facing the paradox that the growth of this "family only" industry owes substantially to the efforts of the non-relatives they have long employed in their workshops, for the latter, as the following shows, it has to do with keeping an arm's length between oneself and an industry over which one feels one has some claim.

To many of Redigama's highest-caste residents, there is an indisputable contradiction in the family members' characterization of *Dumbara rata* textile production as a "family only" enterprise at the same time that the majority of their workforce is comprised of individuals with whom they have no kin-based relationship. In pointing out this contradiction, these individuals are also quick to acknowledge that, even though the family members hire "outsiders" like themselves to weave for them, they have never deliberately imparted their weaving knowledge to their employees. Yet, as the latter are often eager to point out, the family members' unwillingness to teach them has not prevented them from learning anyway; and it is precisely their experience of having learned despite this unwillingness that generates the legitimacy of the knowledge they claim as their own.

In 2007, for example, not long after the incident with the wall hanging that he had woven for a local bank, Danuka, with the assistance of his parents and siblings, began preparing to launch his own weaving business. Danuka planned to weave both *Dumbara rata* textiles and saris and other handloom items. Members of the family reportedly responded with a heavy hand. They physically confiscated looms that the young weaver had borrowed from Rukshan and interfered in his ultimately failed attempt to secure a business loan from a nearby Bank of Ceylon branch (the same bank in which the wall-hanging that Danuka had reportedly woven and not received credit for was displayed). According to Danuka, the bank eventually told him "they couldn't give [a loan] because it would create problems in the village." As far as he and others were concerned, the family members must have used their substantial dealings with the bank as leverage to thwart his efforts and had perhaps threatened to take their business elsewhere should the bank issue a loan to a potential competitor.

Ultimately, Danuka secured a loan from the Kandurata Development Bank and was able to purchase handlooms cheaply at the Kurunegala Handloom Center. With the help of his parents and sister, all of whom were also able to weave after having worked in their Berava neighbors' workshops, he was able to get things off the ground. The business was not a great success however, and, concerned about the increasing financial difficulties his family was facing and disheartened by the conflict to which his own efforts had led, Danuka followed two brothers who had already left Redigama to seek employment in Colombo. When his mother was paralyzed following a stroke in 2013 and his father was unable to get away from his construction job in another town to tend to her in the hospital, Danuka returned home from his job at the multinational conglomerate Hayleys. Asked by the Samurdhi officer if he would be willing to serve as a weaving teacher should they set up a separate weaving center for "outsiders" like him to weave independently of the family, Danuka declined, fearing that it would only lead to further animosity with his former employers.

Agreeing to speak with me one afternoon after visiting his mother in the hospital, a friendly-faced Danuka reclined in a chair against the wall in his family's living room and playfully whopped his pet dog with a plastic cricket bat as his sister served me and my assistant tea. Remarking upon the current conflict, Danuka recalled the challenges he had faced earlier and was quick to highlight an incongruity he and others perceive in the family's claim of exclusive ownership over the production of *Dumbara rata* textiles. He explained, "I don't know why they say that only they can do this. If only their family members can do it, then only *they* should weave! Not the others! But they hire employees." Relating that he had done a weaving course at a handloom center in Peradeniya, Danuka noted in fact that the *hana* products woven in Atwaedagama were also called *Dumbara rata*. "These designs are designed there using hana," he

explained. "If you go and ask the handloom center in Peradeniya, they introduce both these and the ones [in Atwaedagama] as *Dumbara rata,* so they can't say that this is only done by *their* family." Danuka went on to argue that, even if we set this contradiction aside, the family members' typical self-representation as the exclusive bearers of the knowledge and skill demanded of *Dumbara rata* weaving is still erroneous: "When I was working there, I learned *everything* possible. Not only weaving, but also how to set the warp and how to adjust the reed. I learned all of the different thicknesses of the necessary threads and their types." Significantly, he added, "But they didn't teach me anything. I was watching."

Whereas Danuka is reluctant to involve himself in the present government-sponsored initiative to "develop" the local weaving industry, Uresha, a woman who reports a similar experience of learning despite not having been deliberately taught, has become one of the most outspoken critics of the family's resistance to others producing *Dumbara rata* textiles. Uresha began weaving in a Redigama workshop in the early 1990s when she was about twenty years old. Recounting the financial straits that she and her husband found themselves in at that time, Uresha volunteered:

> In the past, there was a caste called Berawayo and a caste called Welawwo. In the past, the people who started weaving were the Berawayo [her voice drops]. It was one of the jobs that they did. They had also worked at the temple for the *theewawe* [drumming during *daana*]. My husband and I started weaving ten to fifteen years ago. Before that, we didn't weave because it was work done by the Beravaayo. If we visited one of their houses for weaving, our families rejected us. Our family members never allowed us to work in a place like that…More recently, though, we joined them to learn. Because this is an industry, right [*meka karmanteyak, nee*?]

Uresha implies here that the transformation of weaving from a job that "they," the Berava, did—that is, a set of practices embedded in "the old forms of authority and hierarchy that *rājākāriya* entailed" (Scott 1999:48)—to an "industry" (*karmanteyak*)—that is, a set of practices embedded in a market economy removed from the practical and ideological load of lineage-based

transmission—allowed her and her husband to begin weaving in their low caste neighbors' workshops without worrying so much about being "rejected" by their own families.

Eventually, Uresha and her husband's financial needs would surpass what they were able to earn as weavers. After fifteen years, therefore, she took a position as a domestic worker in the Middle East to help pay for a surgery that her husband required. In 2013, several years after returning home, she decided to begin weaving again not for the money, she stressed, her husband having by that time recovered and secured a relatively well-paying job with a foreign construction company, but for the pleasure it affords her. Echoing the voices of the high caste women near Atwaedagama who refer to their work with *hana* as a "hobby," Uresha characterized her work as a weaver as more of a diversion than a means of income generation. "Weaving is like music," she related one afternoon as she stood leaning against the loom in her living room, "It calms you down a lot. You can forget all of your problems when you're weaving. I *really* like weaving, and that's why I'm weaving at home. More than doing it for money, it's like my hobby now." Money no longer a pressing concern, Uresha took the opportunity to weave for a nearby government-owned weaving training center and workshop, which pays less for each item she weaves than do the privately-owned workshops in Redigama. Despite the relatively modest pay, she reports a welcome feeling of independence and control over her own labor that was lacking in her experience as an employee of the family member for whom she wove in the past. To the dissatisfaction of the extended family of workshop-owning Berava weavers in Redigama, however, Uresha has eagerly met the government-owned workshop manager's requests for *Dumbara rata* textiles.

As far as Uresha is concerned, the family's dissatisfaction with her decision to produce *Dumbara rata* textiles despite not weaving in one of their workshops is entirely unjustified. To

her, the contradiction that Danuka identifies in the family's claims to exclusive ownership over the industry despite hiring "outsiders," and the fact of her learning despite having not been explicitly taught, provide firm justification for the rejection of any notion of "inherited skill" or commitment to a supposed generation-to-generation transmission of knowledge: "If I learned, it isn't their concern. Otherwise, they shouldn't take people from outside and teach them, right?" Later, she explained, "There is no such thing called '*pihitanawa'* [inherited skill]. My husband told me once, 'if you want our children to be in a good place, then we shouldn't cheat. We should teach others what we know.'" The following account of Uresha's submission of a *Dumbara rata* wall hanging to a government-sponsored competition, a submission facilitated by the manager of the government-owned workshop and training center for which she now weaves, illustrates the difference between this orientation to weaving knowledge and that espoused by the family members who claim exclusive authority over the production of these textiles.

In January 2014, I boarded a crowded bus in Redigama with Priyani, the manager of the small, government-owned weaving training center and workshop to which Uresha currently supplies *Dumbara rata* textiles. Dressed in a crisp, cotton sari and burdened with a long reed wrapped in newspaper, Priyani carefully placed her unwieldy package upon two large sacks of rice evidently headed in the same direction. Clinging to the bar above her head as the bus meandered along the winding road through the valley toward the training center, Priyani smiled and gestured toward the reed, explaining, "Uresha used it to weave a wall hanging for a recent government competition. I'm just taking it back to the workshop." Uresha's submission to the contest reportedly won the first award granted to a non-Berava individual for a *Dumbara rata* textile since the government competitions were introduced in the mid-1970s, a fact that, while giving her great personal satisfaction, aroused the antipathy of several family members. Upon

seeing Priyani, who had encouraged and arranged for Uresha's participation in the competition, walking along the main road that runs through Redigama a few days prior to our meeting, Himali reportedly "scolded" her, shouting, "I heard what you have done. Don't weave *Dumbara rata*! It is ours!" As we exited the bus and ascended the steep, rocky path to the government-owned workshop that morning, Priyani described how this encounter had troubled her. She explained that when she reported it to the Department of Textile Industries, they told her to ignore the family and to *just* weave *Dumbara rata* items. While Priyani explained matter-of-factly that she would never be able to fulfill this order given the number of pieces the Department requires each month and the relative difficulty of producing *Dumbara rata* cloth, she was encouraged by the Department's reaction in part because it supported her own assessment of the situation. Himali and her relatives' anger at Priyani for instructing the government-owned workshop trainees and employees to weave *Dumbara rata* textiles derives, she explained, from a conviction that the industry belongs to their lineage [*paramparawa*]. Echoing the logic underlying what Taylor describes as the rhetoric of "a common human heritage" (Taylor 2009:41), however, Priyani argued that if their concern is truly about safeguarding the knowledge that the industry's propagation requires, as she believes it ought to be, then this fact is surely irrelevant. "Himali's reaction was unfair," she explained, "After we die, the things that we know die with us. So, to protect the things we know, we need to teach others!"

To Uresha and others in Redigama who sympathize with high caste weavers' desire to weave independently of their Berava neighbors, there is an indisputable link between "development" (getting "to a good place"), sharing what one has mastered, and the protection of knowledge. Moreover, they suggest that, to the extent that they are trained (intentionally or otherwise) in the workshops of the family members who dominate the local weaving industry,

that knowledge is indistinguishable from the skills they might acquire in any other context of instruction. As Gamini, Uresha's husband and also a former employee of the family, explained to me: "If I go to an English or Math class or some technical center and if I get trained in that subject and if I am really good at it, then I have a *right* to start that. The teacher can't say, 'you can't do that after I teach you this.'"

In a February 2014 meeting convened to discuss how the local industry might be "developed" under Divi Neguma, government officials tasked with the promotion of the program, sitting before around twenty village residents (including half a dozen family members) offered a powerful and public legitimation of the perspective articulated by Uresha and others vying for the right to weave independently. Prefacing the discussion with an acknowledgement of the "different ideas and debates between people about this [industry]," a representative from the local AG office pointed to my own research interests as indicative of a "special value in the name *Dumbara rata*" and lamented that the discord that I must have witnessed in the village impeded efforts to safeguard the industry for the children of all presently engaged in it. In response, Sumal summarized his family's position thus:

> We would like for us to do the handloom industry and for everyone else to do something else. It's okay for them to do any other kind of industry, but not handlooms. If there are people who want to be involved in this industry, we will welcome them to come and work for us…We have received this knowledge from our fathers and grandfathers, so we have come a long way to get to where we are now…If somebody starts doing this, saying, 'Oh, I also can do *Dumbara rata*,' its identity goes away [*ananyathaawa bindila yanawa*]. They don't have the knowledge [*denuma*] relevant to this, so that's a big harm to *Dumbara rata.* They are like 'Super Stars'—like parrots, they practice the songs, but what about the commitment and hard work of those original singers? The government also tries to create job opportunities for people. In the brass [*bittala*] industry in Pilimathalawa, there are hundreds of shops, but those shops aren't owned by people who have the traditional knowledge and ownership of this art. Those people work in their factories for a small payment. If this happens here, if just anyone has the chance to start their own business, then the same thing might happen in the handloom industry. If we allow this today, that means that we give businessmen the opportunity to know this art.

Likening highest-caste weavers to contestants on a popular and American Idol-inspired reality television program, Sirasa Super Star, Sumal suggests that efforts to weave independently of his relatives amount to a creative theft. Such “parroting” is not only injurious to the “identity” of *Dumbara rata*, he reasoned, but also would lead ultimately to the marginalization and exploitation of those in possession of “the traditional knowledge and ownership of this art.”

Addressing the family members in attendance, the Assistant Government Agent responded to Sumal by acknowledging what all agreed are the industry’s indisputable origins in the latter’s lineage. At the same time, he framed the argument for a more even distribution of the local textile industry’s economic benefits in rather different terms, emphasizing the promotion of “our heritage” in the interests of national development and democratic ideals. His and his colleague’s response to Sumal, quoted at length below, illustrate the force of the authoritative narratives with which family members in Redigama must contend. As we will see, these officials ultimately discount Sumal and his relatives’ claims to lineage-based proprietorship by suggesting that they point to a preoccupation with caste and are therefore not only demonstrative of narrow-minded and backward thinking, but also counter to the country’s economic aspirations and democratic foundation:

> The responsibility of the government is to spread this industry in the village by giving all of the villagers a chance to get involved in it. To get foreign income. This is the function of the government—to develop the village, and through the village, develop the country. **So, you [addressing the family members in attendance] are given the credit for this industry since it comes from the families in your lineage** [*paramparaawen paulwele mulwela waedekerepu ekeTa*]. But the responsibility of the government is to spread this among the other villagers, too. The government’s position is that this industry be spread further. The government’s aim is to make Sri Lanka the **miracle of Asia by 2016, so they expect 50 lakhs of tourists here by then**. **The demand for handlooms cannot be met by this number of people involved in the production. Then your industry will expand and Sri Lankan people will also begin to speak about your industry. Like with brass, which everyone now knows about**… **Sri Lanka is a democratic country,**

and anyone can start a business if he has the potential. If someone can weave cloth, that is their skill. **Take the tale of Guthila Muusila—If someone learns from your lineage [*paramparaawe*], that is his or her hand skill [*athee huruwa*]…**We aren't saying that we want to grab your business and give it to somebody else. We are talking about the advantages of spreading this industry out. As a Sri Lankan citizen, my intention is to begin to do something for these people while protecting your ownership. That is my intention. For a long time, different races have lived as one race in Sri Lanka. But at different times there have been conflicts. **But we all are the same citizens…Sri Lanka is under a lot of foreign attacks and foreign influences. If Redigama is like this today, what about Sri Lanka as a whole? So we have to exhibit our harmony**…**Without keeping rigid positions …because although some people have gone on their own paths with private, narrow motives, we are a race [*jaatiya*] who helps others. Redigama is a village is which the villagers contributed their labor to the fight for independence in 1818**. Labor and life. So, I'm not telling you to change the method of your industry one hundred per cent. We came here to find out about the problem and to figure out how we can solve it. My idea is that we have to improve this industry and we have to spread this industry. Your family has a great responsibility in doing this….

We hope for the development of the area as a whole. Since people learned about the laksha industry, they expanded the business and it has spread beyond the families [*paulwelin baahirawa wyaapta wela*]. The lace [*biralu*] industry also was once done by just a few families. Today, under the small-scale industry project in the south, it has been developed a lot…Those things are **our heritage**, **so we sell them** to the foreigners. **Therefore, my idea is that it is better to be in harmony and continue this industry than to be divided as a village. We are a great race/nation [*usas jaatiyak*]. We have to awaken our Sinhaleness [*Sinhala kama*] and continue this. People in this village have sacrificed their lives for the nation [*raTa wenuwen diwi piduu*], so we have to do these things harmoniously. And on that journey we have to forget about ethnic differences and other shortcomings** [*addu padu*]…We should not let this industry just live and die in this village. We have to improve it. [Referring to the family] These people and their forefathers have brought this industry up to the present, and they are respected for that. That doesn't change. A new community has been formed through you and they take your advice, so you can be proud of that. Now, if the production grows, the demand will also grow, the market will expand. So, get rid of this narrow-minded thinking. That's what you can offer to the society. That is the biggest gift that your generation [the present generation of your family] can give. When we say *Dumbara rata*, it is from Sri Lanka. And where is this produced? Redigama. And who are the pioneers? Your family. So, you have that respect [*gauruwera*]. We are a people who help others, so let's use that characteristic and continue this business…

Elaborating, the officer's colleague addressed the family members in similar terms:

This is a traditional craft, and in the country today traditional crafts are valued. Awards are given—so, these are the types of things that are done to honor the people who have been protecting these crafts for a long time. Being educated means, learning means, not

being with *guru mushti* or keeping [knowledge] to ourselves [*api adhyaapanaya labanawa kiyanne, igenagannawa kiyanne apee guru mushTiyawat api eeka api langa tiyaagena innawa kiyana ekawat newey*]. Even our knowledge—the knowledge of the head or the knowledge of the body, the ability—we should give to others. That's my idea. People in this village have joined your families and have gained some knowledge. So, these people can use that knowledge and guidance [*guruharukam*] with their own bodily talent [*aengen aapudeyak*]…So, you have to be proud thinking that your heritage has been broadened and become popular. The AGA said that we are not going to grab your heritage/inheritance [*urumaya*]. **That's correct. It *can't* be grabbed. For example, when someone gets a patent for something, another person can't get ownership over it.** Like that, there may be some person in your lineage, among your forefathers, who began this craft. Now it has evolved over time and spread to the village and to the country. And if we can spread it to the world—you know that, today, our country is trying to bring our local things to the world…**Now, the world knows that our country is divided by race, by religion, and by caste. So all the world is looking at us.** When we switch on the television, the president always talks about the challenges we have to face as a country. So, people have to join him to overcome these challenges. Even here we have the same thing. This village has a challenge. When the villagers are angry and divided, the village becomes isolated…These divisions and anger with each other are a problem for us now. As a country, we struggle so much with being isolated. We need to work on this at the level of the village, too. So, we have to be a model [*aadarshaya*]…**Today, people don't have heads filled with social differences (*samaja wishyemataawa*) between people. Today, people are struggling to do any kind of job they can. To win the world and to strengthen economically. So, to [get to] that place, [why not go] with these people? I appreciate that idea of not grabbing heritage [*urumaya udure ganna naeae*]—I appreciate that idea and I think it will be there forever. They cannot grab the craft and say that they are the ones who have inherited it.** But with all of your help, and with their ability, the village will be developed. So, everybody will live very nicely in the village. There will be fewer poor people. That is our aim. Reducing poverty is the concept. To reduce the poverty by 2016 is the president's aim. To improve the people's living condition. So, we have to develop economically. The first step to develop economically is to develop as a society. That means we have to live as one person [in unity]. We must live harmoniously…That's why I'm saying, **I think we all need to go to that place by working together in this market as one and not thinking in a narrow-minded way.**

Importantly, neither officer suggests that the roots of *Dumbara rata* weaving rest with anyone other than those who claim lineage-based proprietorship over the industry. While the first invokes his and his audience members' shared citizenship and nationality, he also reassures the family members in attendance that they "are given the credit for this industry since it comes from the families in your lineage." The second also affirms that, indeed, such "inheritance" [*urumaya*]

"*can't* be grabbed." Like the highest caste weavers endeavoring to weave independently, they are thus unequivocal about the industry being "inherited" by the family members. Taking this inheritance as justification for the industry's oligopolistic control by the family, however, is not only just as quickly rejected as "narrow-minded," but also, significantly, regarded as detrimental to an otherwise "great nation" [*usas jaatiyak*-great race/nation].

Both officials rely centrally upon a conceptualization of generosity of knowledge in challenging the monopolizing efforts of the family members in their audience. While the second refers simply to the phenomenon of *guru mushtiya,* or the (nowadays) often-disparaged practice of deliberately reserving some of one's knowledge from an apprentice or pupil, the first invokes a popular Jātaka tale, Guththila Musila, to make the same point. As it was told to me, the tale centers on what transpires when a young and ambitious aspiring musician approaches a master musician in the king's court with a request to take him on as his pupil. Suspicious of the young man's intentions, the latter agrees after an initial period of refusal and, eventually, the apprentice's skills come to rival his own. The apprentice, securing his own place in the king's court, requests that he be paid the same amount as his teacher. The master musician from whom he has learned regards the possibility as unfair. While interpretations of the story typically condemn the pupil for his presumption and scheming, there are those whose readings are sympathetic to his request. The government official's invocation of the tale here is clearly suggestive of such sympathy. Here, those suspected of pursuing "private, narrow motives" are not the high caste men and women who have learned in the workshops of their Berava neighbors, but rather members of the low-caste family who cling selfishly to their own knowledge and thereby demonstrate that they are not truly "educated."

The first official links this endorsement of the notion that one's skill, once acquired, is one's own to do with as one chooses, to Sri Lanka's status as a democracy. What is more, he suggests that the pursuit of such "narrow motives" is not only ultimately deleterious to the perpetuation of the practice of *Dumbara rata* weaving, but also a direct violation of the spirit of generosity and collective (national) sacrifice for which Redigama had recently been publicly recognized. The sacrifice to which he refers, the contribution of "labor and life" to the "fight for independence in 1818," was an event about whose recent commemoration many of Redigama's highest-caste residents had in fact been especially talkative in the months leading up to this meeting. In late November, the government had sponsored a ceremony to observe the 196th anniversary of the death of Weera Keppetipola, the leader of the ultimately unsuccessful 1817-1818 Uva-Wellassa Uprising against the British. Individuals from Redigama had reportedly participated in the rebellion, and several of their descendants, all of whom are highest-caste, had been invited to the recent ceremony to receive awards in honor of their ancestors. The officer's timely invocation of the uprising in this context reminded meeting attendees, and in particular members of the family who were present, that the "nation" trumps concerns with "ethnic differences and other shortcomings [*addu padu*]."[89] Preoccupations with the latter, in driving internal discord and thus preventing the actualization of what is suggested as an inherently harmonious "Sinhala-ness" [*Sinhala kama*], not only hamper poverty alleviation but also permit

[89] A local farmer offered a rather contrary view on the significance of the commemoration ceremony. Referring to his low caste weaving neighbors, he remarked, "They like it if you go to their places and eat and drink what they give. That will bring us down to their level. We don't like that. This is a good village. It's very ancient. In the past, the leaders came to hide in this village. Recently, there was an award given to the village." Here, Redigama's recognition as a "good village," or its residents' contribution to the 1818 rebellion, is inextricably connected to their maintenance of the very boundaries this official characterize as "shortcomings" preventing the village from achieving unified harmony.

Dumbara rata, an element of "our heritage" that could and ought to be marketed to the world on a grand scale, to "live and die" in Redigama.[90]

The officer's colleague reinforces the message in a similarly oblique reference to caste and its popular condemnation as something with which people trying to earn a living *today* are not concerned ("Today, people don't have heads filled with social differences [*samaja wishyemataawa*] between people" but rather "are struggling to do any kind of job they can"). She suggests that it is precisely the kind of lineage-based claims to the industry made by the family that, in instantiating the intra-national divisiveness that plagues Sri Lanka ("the world knows that our country is divided by race, by religion, and by caste"), prevent both the village and the country more generally from realizing its full economic potential.

Such public denunciation of what these officials portray as a narrow-minded preoccupation with caste-based occupational exclusivity bolsters resistance to the family's claims of control over *Dumbara rata* weaving. According to this perspective, not only may the knowledge and skill entailed in *Dumbara rata* textile weaving "belong" to anyone to do with as they choose, but denying as much is tantamount to the very communalism that consistently undercuts the country's world standing.

In an important respect, such criticism of the family's reluctance to soften their control over *Dumbara rata* weaving recalls legal scholar Madhavi Sunder's (2007) observation in a piece on "the invention of traditional knowledge" that "[c]laims by native peoples to hold intellectual property are resisted as threats to the public domain, or as the false consciousness of neo-liberalism, or as a radical assault on our intellectual property tradition, which encourages

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[90] The officer's stressing the importance of setting aside "ethnic differences" is of course more than a little ironic given the overall ethno-nationalist tone of his message.

and promotes cultivation, not stewardship" (106). As Sunder stresses, the kind of "romance of the commons" implied in these officials' calls to "spread" *Dumbara rata* weaving out to others relies upon the notion that "because a resource is open to all by force of law, it will indeed by equally exploited by all" (Sunder 2007:106). That such equal exploitation cannot be guaranteed in Redigama was suggested to me by someone from whom I little expected it, a young, high caste woman who, when we met, had been employed—notably, not to weave, but rather to assist with other tasks—in a family-owned workshop for several years. Remarking on a recent effort to establish a government-sponsored "common place" [*poduwa taenak*] for *Dumbara rata* weaving, she noted sympathetically: "Then there will be no workers for those [family-owned] workshops. So they are again putting them down to the same step where they were in the past."

It is by acknowledging the reproduction of caste-based difference—the implications of which this young employee is gesturing towards—that we may better understand the vehemence with which family members in Redigama resist the efforts of their neighbors and the government officials to soften their claims over *Dumbara rata* weaving. The notion of "equal opportunity for all" invoked by these officers is itself undermined by the way Redigama's highest caste residents tend to contest their neighbors' claims to occupational exclusivity. In fact, we find that some of the most outspoken challengers to the family's claims advocate the notion that the industry and the knowledge it requires may be justifiably claimed by anyone else only up to a point beyond which, as suggested, they might run the risk of compromising their own sense of caste-based superiority. To appreciate why this is so, it is useful to consider that caste is often handled with remarkable ambivalence among residents of Redigama more generally, discussions of its importance in individuals' own lives abounding with contradiction.

Remarking on the economic success with which Redigama's Berava weavers have met in recent years and on its transformation of inter-caste relations in the area, Aruna, a farmer and bank employee, shared:

> Some of our [highest-caste] people, will go to them [a member of the family] to borrow money. They say, "Give me five hundred rupees or a thousand rupees." After that, that person will ignore the higher caste person's status, so it's like that person is at a higher status. The caste matter will be the only thing between them…Our people go there and do things like that [ask for money]. Not *my* family. But there are other people who do it. Because of that, caste is decreasing. They are even going and working in their fields, so no one cares about [caste] now.
> Q: Do you help each other with the fieldwork?
> Aruna: Yes, we do. They come for paddy work. Now, just imagine, we go to their field to help with digging. However, the tea will be prepared in one of our houses, but they also bring something. After preparing the tea, the mugs are also brought from one of our houses. That's how we do it. Just imagine, you're a lower caste person and I'm a high caste person. When you come to help us, the tea will be prepared in our houses. We're helping each other with the work, but the tea will come from our houses. So, we have separate mugs for them.

While Aruna explains caste's declining importance in Redigama as stemming from the Berava weavers' new financial wherewithal vis-à-vis their highest caste neighbors, he is also quick to point out that his *own* family does not engage in the small loan transactions that reflect this transformation. Moreover, he suggests that even, and perhaps especially, when it comes to collaboration in paddy work, it is hardly the case that "no one cares" about caste. When I interrupted to ask about the consequences he might face were he to receive food or drink from his low-caste neighbors, Aruna replied in a manner remarkable for its subtle but undeniable inconsistency:

> [Caste] is a culture that comes from the kings' time. People can't change it… Other than that, there's no problem. Now, take me. I've worked 31 years in [Colombo]. People like them live in Colombo, too, right? Don't we eat from those houses? We do. In this area, also, there is a lower caste person. Their house is nearby. He had a position three grades above mine at the bank where I used to work. He retired as the area manager. He came one day and asked me, 'Aruna,

> how can I invite you to my wedding?' We worked in the same department in the same company…After that, he gave me the invitation card. So, I went to the wedding. The wedding was in Colombo and all of these [low caste] people were also there. Our participation is a big thing for people like them. When they came back, they told the others that I was at the wedding. *I don't care because I ate the hotel food. So, caste is not a problem for me.*

In this conversation, Aruna reported to be pleased with his low-caste neighbors' economic success, remarking, "Now, *our* people are at the same level that we've always been at, but they have developed, and I'm proud about that." This avowed pride is matched by Aruna's appreciation for the relaxation of the rules governing caste-based commensality in urban Colombo. Yet the professed insignificance of caste as "not a problem" for Aruna, something he seeks to illustrate in narrating his willing attendance at his neighbor's wedding, is immediately controverted by the qualification that he "ate the hotel food," or, in other words, upheld those very rules to avoid any confusion (perhaps his, perhaps others') as to his own status. The importance of doing so, as far as Aruna and other highest-caste individuals in the area are concerned, was conveyed to me when I asked why he believes people are unable to change the caste "culture" to which he referred. He explained:

> If I go and eat and drink with them, there will be a problem because there are other [highest-caste] people. They will start to hate me, thinking, 'We are not going, but he's going.' Those people have those ideas. When we go to the outside [of Redigama], there is no such thing. We go to their places and we eat and drink with them without doing any bad things. But we can't do such things inside the village because of those people thinking like that.

Contrary to the local government officer's suggestion that, nowadays, "people don't have heads filled with social differences (*samaja wishyemataawa*) between people" and are simply "struggling to do any kind of job they can," the threat of social ostracism that Aruna voices weighs heavily on the minds of many past and present highest-caste weavers in Redigama. Inoka, a former employee of one family member, explained, "If I go there and drink and eat, *I'll*

be neglected by *my* people. If someone sees that we are eating or drinking there, it will create problems for us. If someone from their family comes to my home, I serve them tea, but if I do the same thing at their places, it will be a problem." Uresha, Inoka's sister in-law, conveyed the same, noting, "Normally, when we go to work under them, we're shunned [*ayin kerenewa*] by our own family members."

Tharanga, who has been weaving for the family for nearly fifteen years, offered a unique exception to this reported fear of derision for breaching the conventional rules of inter-caste relations. Born in 1968, Tharanga lost his mother at a young age. His family lacking both money and land, he found the earnings from the limited amount of farmwork that he was able to do to be insufficient to support his family after he and his wife welcomed their first child in the late 1990s. Tharanga attributed his ability to build a modest home and to care for his children to his and his wife's earnings as weavers. In the early 2000s, his employer had loaned them a loom to keep at home so that they could care for their children and manage their household while weaving. Rather than lament his reliance upon the family and the potential criticism he might suffer for his decision to work "under" them, he professed an absolute disregard for caste, noting, "We are all humans, right?" Meeting me at his home during a break from work one afternoon, we sipped tea in his small living room as he explained:

> Here, in the past, caste—there are those things. These high and low things. We of course don't think about it [it's not important]. We're getting something [an amount of money] from there, right? We think in terms of Buddhism, we don't think like that. People have different attitudes. Because we have the name [that we have], people have this idea that we are good [highest-caste]. We of course don't care about it. But it exists among people… Others don't have my thoughts. I work there, so people think that, because I work under those people, I don't care about it. Other people don't rely on them, right? That's what I think. It's not a problem for me.

To Tharanga, weaving for one of the workshop owners and accepting payment in return is consistent with his self-proclaimed thinking as a Buddhist. In his estimation, Buddhist thinking and the recognition that "we are all humans" run up against the notion that caste is worthy of any regard in contemporary Sri Lanka. Suggestions to the contrary would render his "getting something from there" unacceptable. As far as he is concerned, even his own high caste name is irrelevant. While it may or may not fully explain Tharanga's unique adamancy about the non-importance of caste, it is worth noting that he also reports feeling a significant dependence upon the family for the employment they have provided him. Interestingly, in a rhetorical query in which he asserts that 'other people don't rely on them,' he suggests that others' relative autonomy from the family might account for their differing perspective on the matter.

While past and present workshop employees agree with Tharanga that they are "getting something from there," they typically leave it at that, thus signaling the central dilemma whose resolution, from the position of non-Berava weavers, is aided most strongly by the language of competitive individualism and of skill/knowledge-based "rights" to this productive activity. In general, the fear of social ostracism by (caste-wise) equally positioned friends and relatives is prevalent and is likely the reason why highest-caste weavers often emphasize their engagement in the industry as strictly "for the money." The significance of this trend is most striking when observed alongside the way some members of the family who control *Dumbara rata* production in Redigama explain their relationship to the industry. For them, as suggested in the preceding pages, caste is a double-edged sword, the idea that most compellingly establishes their claim over *Dumbara rata* weaving even as it may undercut their aspirations for social equality with their highest-caste neighbors. The assumption that the industry's continuation rests in its generation-to-generation transmission is reinforced by many (but, importantly, not all) of the

government officials with whom Redigama's Berava weavers interact and who encourage them to "carry on" even when demand for their textiles declines. The following excerpt from an interview with Rohan, one of the younger male weavers in the family, demonstrates this professed non-monetary dimension of the commitment to weaving:

> Rohan: The profit is not sufficient given how tirelessly we work.
> Q: So, you're saying your profit is not sufficient. Why do you continue in this business?
> Rohan: Well, that's what I am saying. Even though it's not like the other businesses, we have some status [*samanye tatweya*]. This is what we're used to. Compared to doing something new, it's our identity [*ananyataaweyak tiyenewa*]. It's the thing we desire. So, somehow we are pulling it along. Government departments and people here and there tell us not to stop doing this because it has a huge value [*loku watinakamak*]. They say, "don't stop this. Teach this to your children."…So, at times when the profit isn't good, that's why we continue to do it and don't abandon it.

The highest-caste weavers of Redigama face something approximating the inverse of this dilemma: they must find a way to establish their own claims over the industry while keeping it at arm's length. Many of them seek to balance a drive toward negative monopolization with their decision to engaged in *Dumbara rata* textile production by underscoring that they weave not because of a conviction that it is their "identity," but out of sheer financial necessity. For instance, Kamini, a former weaver born in 1956, articulated what she portrays as a rather painful decision to weave for the family in this way:

> I was thinking of my children. We needed money to educate our children. And my husband was in the army, and since it was wartime, everything was uncertain. I had my parents with me, too. Even now I can't make it all right in my head. If I'd had a good job then, today I would have a pension, but I have nothing like that. I was thinking of my children's future. In that respect, I'm happy about it.
> Q: Did you like weaving?
> Yes, earlier I liked it, but after that—with the [caste] problems we had to face, I stopped going. Since it was the war period in the country, my husband couldn't come home. My parents were also old, so I had to take care of them and my children. And, when thinking about my education level, I was so upset with

> myself doing that job. During that time, having A-level qualifications was really something.

Kasun, born in 1963, is a subsistence farmer, weaver, and father of four children. He narrated his involvement in the industry since his mid-20s in comparable but more succinct terms, exclaiming, “We are not idiots. We do this because we don’t have anything else to do!” His brother, Aruna, eagerly elaborated, “It’s the low-caste people who are doing that business. The upper caste people go and weave under them, but that is to earn a living.”

The claims that Redigama’s highest-caste residents make over the *Dumbara rata* industry are qualified, then, by the assertion that one’s right to weave, and the decision to do so, derives from the conviction that one’s skills, however acquired, may be justifiably used to meet one’s financial needs. In this respect, a vehemence about wanting to weave that might otherwise be taken as an admission of an intimacy with the industry—one comparable to that proclaimed by their Berava neighbors—is tempered by the assertion that highest-caste involvement in *Dumbara rata* weaving is, at the end of the day, “just to earn.”

Conclusion

In the preceding pages, I have focused on the tensions and contradictions that have sprung up around *Dumbara rata* weaving and its contestation in Redigama. In doing so, I have highlighted a constellation of cultural forms, including caste, democratic egalitarianism, and neoliberal processes, not unlike that seen in Atwaedagama. Indeed, as in Atwaedagama, what we find in Redigama are individuals drawing variously, and at times contradictorily, upon the ideological and practical affordances of such forms as they make sense of (and even defend) their engagement in industries that are fraught in so many ways.

Writing with respect to India, Soumhya Venkatesan laments, "the loss of traditional craft is the loss of the nation's and humankind's heritage," and suggests that "development is one way to protect" it (Venkatesan 2009:8). As we have seen in Redigama, however, the positive trajectories of "development" and "traditional craft" are not so straightforwardly conjoined. The contradictions that characterize orientations to *Dumbara rata* weaving point to an uneasy articulation between caste-based identification, nationalistic narratives of heritage, and conceptualizations of knowledge grounded in a market economy. What we find in Redigama, in other words, is the difficulty to which David Lowenthal refers when he notes that "too much is asked of heritage" (David Lowenthal 1998:227) when we attempt to balance an orientation to "national patrimony, regional and ethnic legacies," on the one hand, and the development and stewardship of a "global heritage shared and sheltered in common," on the other (David Lowenthal 1998:227). I have shown how a comparable tension is signaled by the assertion of the above-quoted government officers that *Dumbara rata* weaving *cannot* be "grabbed" from those who claim lineage-based proprietorship over it, and at the same time that the goal is nonetheless to "spread" the industry out for the benefit of the nation. This contradiction mirrors the conflict between, on the one hand, assertions on the part of highest-caste weavers and their sympathizers that, to properly steward *Dumbara rata*, the knowledge and skill entailed therein must be imparted to anyone interested in learning, and, on the other hand, assertions on the part of the Berava family members that the industry is their "identity." Arguably neoliberal notions of commercial freedom and competitive individualism, notions that resonate with the idea of "global heritage," allow Redigama's poor, high caste residents to claim a certain right to the industry without comprising their own caste superiority. By contrast, the avowed commitments of Berava weavers to the industry's "inherited" quality and to the "identity" that *Dumbara rata*

textiles reportedly mirror back at them serve centrally in their resistance to such claims at the same time that, to the extent that such inheritance is linked not to "the nation" but to their own extended Berava family in Redigama, they re-inscribe their caste-base inferiority.

As we have seen on both sides of this dispute, articulating a position of control with respect to the industry is also an opportunity for the reassertion of difference along caste lines. I hasten to stress, however, that only one "side" is called out, as in the meeting described above, for seeming to cling to caste as a category of identification, which we'll recall is publicly disavowed in Sri Lanka. The industry's *de facto* owners, evoking something akin to the communalistic approach to "heritage" identified by Lowenthal, have positioned themselves in this struggle as the sole and lineage-based proprietors of an ancient and "family only" weaving tradition. Yet the celebration that often attends the consolidation of "regional and ethnic legacies" elsewhere is not to be found here when it comes to caste. Rather, claims that manifest publicly as caste-interested are condemned as "selfish" and "narrow-minded."

Those contesting their Berava neighbors' efforts at exclusive control over *Dumbara rata* are limited in the terms with which they may assert rights over the industry without compromising their privileged social position. Eschewing intimations of personal or collective intimacy with their livelihood, they find an advantage in appealing to neoliberal notions of economic freedom and competitive individualism. In thus framing the discussion of knowledge and skills entailed in *Dumbara rata* weaving, they justify their demands to weave independently while sidestepping the suggestion that their actions may be motivated by a "narrow-minded" concern with caste—despite the fact that, as we have seen, caste-based concerns *do* shape the manner in which they position themselves in relation to the industry.

Those who have historically controlled and benefited most from the industry, by contrast, are publicly portrayed as narrow-minded, anti-democratic, and generally hostile to an ostensibly common national goal of developing the *country's* "heritage" for global enjoyment and consumption. Not having found a way to harness the system of values upon which their highest caste neighbors draw, a system rooted in neoliberal ideas of equivalence, they invoke notions of cultural heterogeneity (non-equivalence) that serve to reinforce local status differences. While drawing on ideas ("tradition," "heritage," "identity") central to a "discursive field of heritage" (Smith 2006:42) out of which much of the perceived value of *Dumbara rata* textiles derives, they inadvertently reiterate their own disadvantage when it comes to a category of identification that, while publicly rejected, continues to shape social relations among the Sinhalese**.** Subject to the criticism that they have failed to "awaken" their "Sinhala-ness," they have yet to call upon an ideology that might successfully rival that upon which their high caste neighbors draw.

I would suggest that, in contrast to the situation faced by the much more marginalized Kinnara in Atwaedagama, the stakes here are simply too great at the moment. The fact is that the Berava in Redigama have done well. They are able to provide their children with educational opportunities once barred to them, and at least some of these children have in turn been able to secure good jobs as teachers, civil servants, customs officials, and so forth. And yet, for those still in Redigama, where identification as Berava may matter much more than it does elsewhere, the economic strides that *Dumbara rata* weaving has facilitated may not be irreversible. It is to this fact that the young high caste women alludes when she noted disapprovingly of her high caste neighbors' efforts to weave independently of the village's Berava workshops: "Then there will be no workers for those [family-owned] workshops. So they are again putting them down to the same step where they were in the past."

From what I have shown here, as long as those currently controlling the weaving industry in the village refer to caste in their efforts to maintain this advantage, such maintenance is far from guaranteed. Government officials discount invocations of ownership grounded in lineage as backward. In the end, they may therefore succeed in "spreading" the industry out. There is some indication that things may change, however. Toward the end of my stay in Redigama, one family member reported to me that he and his relatives had recently decided to form an association and, using a phrase I had not encountered in my conversations with them, perhaps consult a lawyer in the hopes of securing protection for their "intellectual property" (*buddhimaya deepala*). Deploying the legal framework inherent to the same (idealized) neoliberal forms invoked by their neighbors, he and his relatives might thereby position themselves on the same playing field as those who have challenged their historical control over *Dumbara rata*. Should they do so, one could imagine a situation in which their claims upon the industry might not be disregarded so easily as demonstrative of "narrow-minded" thinking.

Conclusion

I began this dissertation by relating the quiet drama that I encountered early on in my fieldwork around disclosures of caste's significance in present day Sri Lanka. The "transgressive uncovering" that I described aroused my attention to something that, as I sat down to write up, I felt uneasy about documenting. Noting with respect to India that it is "impossible to treat caste as the object of nostalgia" but that caste can also "hardly be the marker of a satisfactory present," Nicholas Dirks has noted that caste "can only be embraced ambivalently" (Dirks 2001:314). Beyond applying to what we have seen in Atwaedagama and Redigama, his observation about ambivalence also resonates with my experience in deciding to write about caste at all. In this case, such ambivalence stems from two primary and closely related considerations.

In the first place, writing about caste among the Sinhalese as I have done here is definitively not in the spirit of that local moral economy in which, as we have seen with clarity in Atwaedagama, those who "cause a fuss" or "stir things up" are to be admonished. The instruction "*kiyanna epaa*" (don't tell) at times still ringing in my ears, I have drawn explicit attention to something that, when it is not drowned in silence, is disavowed as soon as it is acknowledged. Perhaps there is something in the nature of public secrets that leaves the anthropologist who has finally gotten ahold of one with a sense of unease about what to do with it. After returning to the United States, I often worried about how I might honor the sentiment in my interlocutors' evident wish that I *not* focus on caste and, at the same time, analyze the ways in which this wish itself figures in the reproduction of caste among the Sinhalese.

Ultimately, I decided that working toward the latter goal would facilitate rather than impede my efforts with respect to the former. As we have seen, while post-independence Sri Lanka has witnessed a "horizontal strengthening of democracy" (Uyangoda 2012:88), and while

structural transformations in Kandy have helped to erode the "economic base of caste"[91] (Gunasinghe 2007:74), neither of these developments may be said to have purged Sinhala society of caste-based identification and the indignities that it entails (See also Silva 1992). Not writing about caste would not only reproduce the reigning public silence on the topic and thereby reinforce a primary condition for the reproduction of caste-based discrimination. More importantly from my perspective as an analyst trying to make sense of this aspect of contemporary Sinhalese social life, it would also leave unchallenged some of the more subtle and insidious aspects of thinking around caste in contemporary Sri Lanka. Foremost among these are the notions that caste is necessarily on the decline, that it is a vestige of another era, and that it is primarily a "characteristic" of low caste persons. The salience of caste that I encountered—a salience owing not to something about the *individuals* upon whom my fieldwork focused but rather to their *structural* position—is not destined to wither, just as it is not destined to linger in some putative original form. As I have demonstrated in the foregoing pages, caste is actively reproduced out of concerns that are not only stubbornly grounded in the present, but also hardly limited to those regarded as "low." To reiterate, the reproduction of caste as I have examined it here is something for which individuals across the strata of caste, class, age and gender are responsible.

And yet, and here is the second and related consideration underlying my initial ambivalence in writing about caste, in focusing on caste's reproduction by persons across these strata of gender, age, caste and class, I worried that I might run a risk at another level: I might

[91] Newton Gunasinghe argues that this structural transformation (1956-1976) was prompted in part by a decline in aristocratic authority in the region. While entailing a noticeable intra-caste socio-economic stratification, this transformation was not accompanied by a significant disintegration of "caste consciousness" or a heightened class-based communality.

reproduce a scholarly handling of caste as “the core symbol of community” or, as it has long been depicted with respect to India, *the “*defining feature” of social organization (Dirks 2001:5). Ultimately, I hope, the approach that I have adopted with respect to caste has allowed me to avoid such essentialist reduction. Indeed, the preceding analysis is fully inspired by the constructivist approach to ethnicity pioneered long ago by Fredrik Barth. In his recent *Beyond Caste* (2013), Sumit Guha in fact also deploys this “boundaries paradigm of ethnicity” to challenge caste’s Dumontian (1970) formulation as the governing logic and mythopoetic kernel of South Asian societies. Seeking to disrupt the apparent “‘ubiquity and strangeness’ of caste that drew foreigners to its study,” Guha points out that we find “’caste-like’ features in a range of societies” and that in South Asia caste became a “highly involuted, politicized form of ethnic ranking shaped by the constant exercise of socio-economic power” (Guha 2013:2-3).

Assuming a similar orientation to caste in the preceding pages, I have figured it here as one of many cultural forms around which the contradictions and paradoxes that shape life in contemporary Sri Lanka coalesce. To reiterate, it was not simply the salience of caste in the lives of the men and women upon whom this dissertation is based that caught me off guard; I was struck even more forcefully by the contradictions that caste-based identification serves to highlight. As we have seen, these contradictions around caste draw our attention to a range of forces that shape the lives of Sinhalese artisans and others invested (or explicitly *not* invested) in Sri Lanka’s traditional handicrafts. While concerns with ostensibly pre-modern forms of hierarchy and honor exerted a unique tug on my scholarly imagination by demanding that I not notice them, such concerns are not to be read here as somehow more fundamental than the range of others with which they are imbricated. Preoccupations with caste-based identification articulate with the practical and ideological entailments of, among other things, neoliberal

processes, narratives of heritage, and conceptualizations of democratic governance and political subjectivity. Documenting this articulation is crucial not only to understanding what it means to engage in Sri Lanka's "traditional industries" today, but also and more specifically to making sense of the contradictions that such engagement can entail.

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