

and is a much-needed biography of an enigmatic colonial official. The book is also freely available for download as an e-book from the publisher's website.

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Nira Wickramasinghe

Metallic Modern: Everyday Machines in Colonial Sri Lanka

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Nira Wickramasinghe's recent account of commodities and modernity in colonial Sri Lanka opens with a yellowing, forgotten letter dating back to late 1912: a serendipitous discovery in Colombo's National Archives that soon spools out into a broader historical inquiry. What does it mean, asks the author, for a Buddhist monk, in the remote village of Welipatanwila in the Crown Colony of Ceylon, to conduct a traditional thanksgiving ceremony in honour of the recently deceased Emperor Meiji of Japan, an imagined 'Asian modern' whose cultural salience transcended the strictures of British colonialism?

According to Wickramasinghe, Professor of Modern South Asian Studies at Leiden University, this charged episode speaks to the multiple and often contradictory modes in which modernity was iterated and performed in everyday life in Ceylon in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Expanding on an appreciable body of work on the cultural history of Sri Lankan modernity, Wickramasinghe's latest book, *Metallic Modern*, is concerned with how non-elite citizens negotiated 'multiple worlds of belonging and imagination' (2) through their encounters with novel objects, chiefly imported consumer goods such as sewing machines, gramophones, bicycles, trams and automobiles.

These 'everyday machines' — and the transnational institutions and formations that increasingly brought them into Lankan public and private spaces — are used to recover the new temporal experiences that constituted the subjective 'being with the times' (152) of colonial modernity. Wickramasinghe uses the social life of such mobile, 'Western' consumer objects to explore the development of a global imaginary in an increasingly interconnected Ceylon through a collage of encounters and narratives. Her subjects are knowledgeable agents and nascent consumers, navigating skilfully between multiple cultural situations, conscious of the ambiguities and contradictions of modern time as a lived phenomenon. This fluidity is reflected in the text's treatment of imperial history: while empire forms the contextual backdrop to Wickramasinghe's history, globalisation and

consumerism clearly take precedence as interpretive paradigms.¹

This highly readable monograph is a timely intervention in South Asian historiography. *Metallic Modern* arose in the wake of a 2012 special issue of *Modern Asian Studies*, edited by David Arnold and Erich DeWald, on the cognate theme of 'Everyday Technology in South and Southeast Asia', and it also draws generously on *Everyday Technology*, Arnold's recent social history of the sewing machine in India. While Wickramasinghe explicitly positions her work in relation to the research agenda of such scholarship, *Metallic Modern* also departs from this material by focusing not on a specific case study or technological form (whether objects of transport, communications, entertainment or domestic/industrial production), but rather by examining how a more general 'metallic' modernity arced across a range of interpretive registers and objects. This diversity of focus not only discourages technological determinism, but it also makes for varied and engaging reading; this is a book that can be dipped into, its eight chapters read alone or as a whole.

¹ This model of empire as an influential, yet non-hegemonic force, expands arguments that can be found throughout Wickramasinghe's writing, and echoes the wider focus of the Subaltern Studies collective of South Asian historians. In her 2006 monograph *Sri Lanka in the Modern Age*, for instance, Wickramasinghe argues that the total indifference afforded to colonial power in the Sinhala poetry of the early nineteenth century suggests that despite the significant geopolitical rupture that was British colonisation of the island, British imperialism was but one aspect of Sri Lankan life and cultural experience. The very ability to ignore colonialism bespeaks the historical necessity of placing studies of empire in their more specific historical and spatial contexts.

For all its ambition, *Metallic Modern* is also a surprisingly short book, its complex arguments rendered accessible and neat through crisp and often elegant prose. At times it reads more like a work of ethnography than social history; this organic amalgam of poetic and analytical writing is one of the key strengths of the work. Wickramasinghe's sensitivity to the literariness of her work is due, as she states in the Preface, to a youthful passion for the magical realism of Jorge Luis Borges. Indeed, like the Argentine author's celebrated short stories, *Metallic Modern* is an evocative and highly patterned work. Each of its short, episodic chapters commences in a rhetorical, almost proverbial idiom, briefly reflecting on relevant historiographical debates before moving into a more systematic interrogation of the archival material. A detailed Introduction and Conclusion bracket the work, reinforcing its argument in brief.

For all these strengths, however, *Metallic Modern* arguably suffers from a dearth of archival material, whether read with or against the grain. This is a problem often voiced by the author: poised between the impersonal business archive and the incomplete national material, the text often dwells on the import of unexpected, ambiguous fragments, like the monastic letter with which it opens. Accordingly, Wickramasinghe's conclusions are cautious and alert to the text's own limitations, and this book may be best interpreted as a blueprint for more scholarship to be done in this area. This fluidity of archival material also results in a tacit endorsement of a very open conception of the temporality of modernity: in Chapter Five, for instance, the text seamlessly

moves between cultural phenomena in the 1880s and 1930s, without clearly distinguishing these periods. While Wickramasinghe's cross-generational montage of phenomena makes for evocative reading, this technique would arguably better suit a longer and more detailed history. Nevertheless, given that the text explicitly reflects on 'modernity' as a cultural problem, the author's departure from strict periodisation is a laudable technique.

Moreover, despite being framed as a deliberately miscellaneous text, *Metallic Modern* is actually strongest in its first five chapters, which use a variety of technological formations (namely, the Singer sewing machine, print advertising, steam transport, the Berliner Gramophone, and Japanese consumer goods) to develop a sophisticated argument about the maintenance of a transnational pan-Buddhist imaginary in an increasingly modernising world. This emergent religious identity, argues Wickramasinghe, operated outside the frame of empire and not entirely within one of American-centred economic globalisation; here the temporally inflected tenets of 'traditional' religion, Sinhalese nationalism and modern industrialism informed each other in subtle, braided ways. This can most evidently be heard in the gramophone of Chapter Four, an ostensibly modern mode of relating to sound that was deployed in traditional monastic rites across the island.

The unfolding argument of the first half of *Metallic Modern* takes the reader (along with a host of businessmen, indigenous nationalists and monks) from the villages of Ceylon to the Singer headquarters in Bombay, the Theravada

monasteries of Burma and Cambodia, the court of King Chulalongkorn of Siam, and finally to the 'Asian modern' that was Japan. After this complex and ambitious project, the final three chapters, which focus more narrowly on the politics of labour and domesticity within Sri Lanka itself, make for a less coherent and satisfying read. The Introduction and Conclusion do not reconcile this imbalance in the text's organisation. As such, *Metallic Modern* would arguably be a more satisfying project if it were more explicitly reframed as an exploration of Buddhism and technology in the colonial context, or if the final three chapters were instead distributed among the first five.

Nevertheless, despite these shortcomings, Nira Wickramasinghe's *Metallic Modern* remains a vivid, original and passionately argued contribution to histories of modernity and technology. Appreciating this text does not require a sophisticated background in Sri Lankan history, and it should appeal to the historian of technology as readily as to the cultural historian of South or Southeast Asia. *Metallic Modern* is an impressive work of imagination, an excellently written and argued monograph, and a valuable intervention into histories of empire and mobilities.

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