




Book Review

Mountain at a Center of the World: Pilgrimage and Pluralism in Sri Lanka

By Alexander McKinley. New York: Columbia University Press, 2024, xii + 344 pages, ISBN 9780231210614 (paperback), £30.

Bhadrajee S. Hewage 

Trinity College, University of Oxford

In *Mountain at a Center of the World*, anthropologist Alexander McKinley highlights the remarkable pluralism associated with the storied mountain known variously as Sri Pada or Adam’s Peak—among many other names—located in Sri Lanka’s Central Highlands. Believed variously to hold the footprint of the Buddha, Śiva, Adam, or even St. Thomas, depending on whom one asks, the mountain itself becomes the critical vantage point for McKinley. Avoiding the tendency of established historiography of the mountain to divide the story by religious denomination or by linear chronology, he instead prioritises the “agency of the mountain” (9) to craft what he describes as the “intentional mytholith” (15) of his monograph. Natural features and processes are examined alongside human activities and structures to create a more composite picture of a space in which actors—human and divine, geological and hydrological—bring their own narratives and make their own interventions.

McKinley’s own narrative unfolds over three separate parts. Part one, containing chapters one and two, explores “engagements with the mountain that precede and exceed the religious.” In chapter one, he looks at its deep temporal presence to highlight the long-standing links connecting the human and natural worlds given the “evolving relativity of all natural forms and our myths about them” (26). A geo-history of the mountain’s formation accompanies analyses of Buddhist understandings of deep time, while descriptions of the literary and symbolic significance of the mountain further consider its importance in the island’s biological and ecological processes. Mountains as “complex assemblages” (58) are thus far more than just the geology of their bedrock, McKinley argues, and they demonstrate the potential and power of natural systems in human reasoning.

Chapter two, by contrast, tracks the encroachment of human habitats built upon the mountain. McKinley contrasts the initiatives implemented by precolonial indigenous rulers with the infrastructural projects of the British period which he, in turn, compares again with current activities on the mountain. Whereas indigenous patronage involved “Buddhist soteriological framing,” he argues that colonial motivations “were more often medical or commercial” and frequently departed “from standards set by Lankan kings” (69). The motivations of the mountain’s mainly Tamil labourers are further evaluated alongside those of its defence personnel in government service, with the activities of both groups juxtaposed with the investment and sponsorship objectives of private businesses and pilgrims. As McKinley illustrates of the mountain, “trade and pilgrimage



have long gone hand in hand,” with the proliferation of corporate branding “only the most recent piece of this trend” (103).

In part two, McKinley moves to discuss the challenges and frictions inherent in plural existence through analyses of Islamic and Hindu engagements with the mountain and the resulting reaction from Buddhists who today form the bulk of its many pilgrims. In chapter three, he explores the accounts which emerged from Muslim seafarers from Arabia and beyond who encountered the mountain in their travels and implanted new narratives as to its significance as the location of Adam’s descent to Earth. Islamic historiography, cartography, and pilgrimage practices involving the mountain are described to illustrate how what was once a “vague space” became an “anchoring place” (109) for Muslims across south and southeastern Asia. McKinley further relates a “Buddhist counterreaction” (122) which emerged in the seventeenth century and which he believes represents an appropriation of Islamic traditions and ultimately coincides with Muslims “ritually delinking” (137) from the mountain in recent times.

Chapter four in turn explains the similarities and tensions between Buddhist and Hindu veneration of the site. It is difficult, McKinley writes, to ascertain “how, why, and when” (153) the mountain achieved significance for the island’s Tamil Hindus. Yet he argues through examinations of Tamil literary works that the mountain became part of the “larger ambit of [S]aiva sites” and “remained a piece of the Lankan Tamil imaginary” (166) well into the twentieth century. Whereas both Buddhist and Hindu sources reflect the shared veneration of the mountain’s natural features, McKinley nonetheless highlights how [S]iva—the key link between the mountain and Hinduism—represents “at best a benign metaphor and at worst an unwelcome interloper” (182) in the Buddhist compositions of the mountain’s importance.

Following from descriptions of the mountain’s past and present, part three details the lessons which McKinley believes the mountain can teach future generations. In chapter five, he tracks conservation and environmental activities involving the mountain to demonstrate both the opportunities and harms human behaviour exerts on natural cycles. The practices of “healthy forest engagement” have diminished, he writes, while those of “ritual control” (222) have strengthened, thus placing undue pressure on the wider nexus which links ecological and religious concerns at the mountain. McKinley’s advice for all its actors is to turn away from emphases on a presumed religious pluralism and to focus instead on the self-evident “dynamic pluralism” at the site which stresses and connects both the “natural” and the “social” (227) and sustains all its beings.

The book’s conclusion builds upon this theme with McKinley considering the mountain’s lessons in terms of the Anthropocene. Our activities and impact on the mountain, he maintains, mirror our activities and impact on the planet. “To start, we must learn how to look for the signs of the epoch written on the Peak” (242). Its reduced forest cover, the proliferation of human waste, and the decline of its endemic fauna serve as a microcosm of wider developments across the world. The mountain itself is sure to outlive us, but whether we learn its lesson “to see our being as coeval with the nonhuman” (243) is down to us and is just as—if not more—important than simply sharing religious values or assuming equal worship spaces at the site.

Although a voluminous body of research in its own right (the bibliography stretches to almost twenty-five pages, single-spaced), McKinley’s monograph nonetheless features some key omissions which weaken his wider narrative. His singular focus on the site as the critical point of reference means that there is precious little to which the mountain as an entity can be contrasted. While he claims that it is unlike other sacred mountain sites such as Govardhan or Kedarnath, deeper comparisons of such sites with the mountain—beyond the simple remark that its rock is not “equated with divinity” (8)—seem necessary to support its uniqueness. Moreover, the mountain is just one of several places within Sri Lanka where we see pilgrimage and pluralism

(if we can presume the latter). With only fleeting mentions throughout the text of other multireligious complexes, such as those at Kataragama and Kurugala, McKinley struggles to make a wider argument about pilgrimage and pluralism in Sri Lanka.

Despite the detailed analysis of the mountain's significance for Sri Lankan Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims, McKinley also curiously neglects to consider its importance for Christians through links to St. Thomas. He references a nineteenth-century Sinhalese Christian "propaganda poem" which "discouraged belief in the footprint" (70) at its summit and concludes that the tradition linking the site to St. Thomas is merely an "old European invention" (225). Yet McKinley's assertion belies the beliefs of many local Christians and others from South India and beyond who continue to value the mountain's connection to St. Thomas as a point of pride in their religious practice. Furthermore, even in his discussions of Buddhist engagement with the site, he focuses exclusively on the Sinhalese Buddhist community in his analysis. While McKinley briefly notes the presence of "foreign Buddhists" (237) today, he misses the historical awareness of and pilgrimages to the site by Buddhists from places such as China and Siam/Thailand, things even Europeans discovered during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Indeed, aside from his coverage of pan-Islamic engagement with the mountain, McKinley's primary fixation on its place for islanders suggests *Mountain at a Center of the Sri Lankan World* as a more apt title for the monograph.

What is perhaps a more pressing concern, however, is McKinley's treatment of and reference to the Sinhalese language throughout the monograph. These distract the reader from considerations of his wider narrative. Aside from countless orthographic errors, e.g., "voṭunu" (61) instead of oṭunu ("crown") and "geviṣaka" (144) rather than *gaveṣaka* ("explorer"), several incomplete and inappropriate translations are present. Explaining the etymology of the area of Colombo known as Dewatagaha, he suggests parsing the word as *dēvatā-gaha* and so "godling-tree" (136) when a simple look at the original Sinhalese orthography illustrates that the name derives from *dawata gaha* ("corkwood tree"). The aforementioned *gaveṣaka* is also erroneously translated as "researcher" and *piṭisara minissu* ("rural people") are dismissively described as "Wild people" (231). As a final jarring example of what is a recurring theme, McKinley translates *vālaṅda siṭina api saṅskrutika vahulun vemu* as "[t]his made us all cultural slaves to trade" (228) when there is no mention of "trade" anywhere in the phrase transcribed.

Poetic and prose texts, despite their multiplicities of meanings and symbolism, are further treated in ways which appear unnatural for native Sinhalese readers. Referring to a quatrain from the *upahāsa sāhāli* ("satirical ballads") genre of Sinhalese poetry, McKinley explains its last three lines as "monks being clever for gaming an impossible soteriological system to get free food" (148). Yet the farce in *okkoma hāmuduruvarū dan kāmaṭa itā surū niruvānē yāma borū* seems either to be the acknowledgement that monks will always receive donated meals regardless of their deeds and the attainability of nirvana, or, more simply, the realisation that it is far tougher for monks to obtain nirvana than meals. The words do not really suggest to a native Sinhalese reader that monks are trying to "game" nirvana for free food. Just because Sinhalese *can* be translated in certain ways does not necessarily mean that it *should* be.

To "counterbalance" his textual analyses, McKinley resorts to his own "empirical prose" (15) to further his narrative. Yet even here McKinley often stands guilty of failing to provide complete descriptions and explanations of the topics he describes. In his account of the practice of *kemmura puja* on the mountain, McKinley discusses the ritual cleansing of the shrine on the "days when the resident god is most powerful" (206) as an example of the "merit making" reserved only for "ritually elite participants" (208). While the *kemmura puja* on the mountain is distinct, his characterization of it is only a partial explanation of the wider *kemmura* ritual. Rather than just a purification practice to accrue karmic merit, *kemmura* is instead generally practiced to *appease* the resident deity and to ward off bad omens. McKinley further writes how

an interlocutor described objects such as “rusted chains, ladders, water pumps” (83) and the like as *kristu purva* (“from before Christ”), because of their location on the older of the two mountain trails. However, in my experience, Sinhalese—no matter their education—do not use the term *kristu purva* to describe objects in this way.

McKinley’s analysis regarding the existence of another concealed sacred footprint at Makkama, however, overshadows even these previous examples. “Ravana-school historiograph[ers]” (144)—those who idolize an indigenous and historical Ravana—imagine its existence somewhere in northwestern Sri Lanka. McKinley instead posits Makkama as figuring the geographical Mecca, and downplays its place in Sinhalese works. Yet characterizing the *Nam Pota* as a “primer for children learning to write letters” (144), he confuses two very different texts sharing a name: a text for children and a monastic register. The latter records ancient shrines located *on the island*, not abroad. The *Kōkila Sandeśaya* further describes a cuckoo that “heads north...passing familiar sites on the coast” (144) of *Sri Lanka*, not Arabia or any place else. Similarly, mentions of Makkama in local *oncillā keli* (“swing-set songs”) again do not inherently suggest its location away from the island in some “faraway figural space” (145) as McKinley argues.

While I commend McKinley for drawing the attention of Western scholarship to lesser known and understudied Sinhalese textual sources, his questionable proficiency in Sinhalese thus greatly distracts from his broader message. The bricoleur researchers and amateur scholars of McKinley’s detested [Ravana] school will surely seize upon these inconsistencies and gaps in his arguments to dismiss his wider efforts in their entirety—much as he does theirs. This would represent a great shame as, in his fusion of the natural and the social in his evaluation of the mountain, he makes a convincing claim as to how inclusive, dynamic pluralism can overcome the pitfalls of religious pluralism and create a more sustainable pilgrimage ethic. While McKinley’s engagement with Sinhalese sources and description of aspects of Sinhalese culture leave much to be desired, the work’s overarching narrative and broad coverage of the mountain’s presence and role in Sri Lanka deserve praise and will surely generate further discussion.