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0521611962 - The City as Text: The Politics of Landscape Interpretation in the Kandyan Kingdom

James S. Duncan

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Part I

INTRODUCTION

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I

Introduction

This book has three general goals. The first is to provide a methodology for interpreting landscapes. The second is to illuminate the way in which a landscape, understood as a cultural production, may be integral to both the reproduction *and* contestation of political power. The third is to analyze the relationship between landscape and the pursuit of power in a particular place and time: the royal capital of Kandy in the central highlands of Śrī Lankā during the early years of the nineteenth century.

The approach I take here represents a sharp break from the way that American cultural geographers traditionally have studied landscapes. Landscape study, a mainstay of American cultural geography since 1925 when Carl Sauer (1969), the dean of cultural geographers, wrote his immensely influential “The Morphology of Landscape,” is typically presented as an atheoretical undertaking. Sauer and his students have exerted such influence over how cultural geographers have thought about landscapes that they have shaped a corpus of scholarship that has shown remarkably little variation over the years. It was material culture and not man himself that should be the object of geographic investigation, Sauer admonished in 1925, and cultural geographers since that time have shied away from studying the relationship between social organization and landscape.¹ Questions of how landscapes are used to advance or retard the attainment of social and political goals are virtually never asked. In this study I offer a broader approach, more social, more political, more theoretical than has been customary. I hope by this to convince not only fellow cultural geographers but also scholars in other fields that, as a pervasive and surprisingly disingenuous cultural production, landscape is a signifying system of great but unappreciated social and political importance, and that it offers enormous promise as an object of study.

In chapter 2 I provide a general outline of this alternative approach; in chapters 3 through 8 I apply it to a particular landscape. In developing my hermeneutic perspective on landscape interpretation,² I have been influenced by many scholars outside of the field of geography. A few are themselves interpreters of landscape, such as Roland Barthes (1979a; 1982; 1986b; 1987), Michel De Certeau (1984; 1985), and Clifford Geertz (1973a; 1980 1983b).³

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Within my own discipline, I have read with interest the work of the “new cultural geographers” such as Denis Cosgrove (1978; 1982; 1983; 1985), Stephen Daniels (1985; 1987; 1988), and David Ley (1987; 1989). It is interesting to note that Cosgrove and Daniels come from Britain, where the traditional cultural geography inspired by Carl Sauer and his students has had little impact. They now export a new brand of cultural geography, influenced by such thinkers as Raymond Williams and John Berger, which is enlivening American cultural geography.⁴ While each of these scholars differs in his perspective on the nature of theory and interpretation, they share a common goal – elucidation of cultural process through the study of landscapes.

Whereas my perspective represents a departure from traditional cultural geography in many important respects, it also represents continuity in that its central concern is with a time-honored tradition in cultural geography “reading the landscape.” What is meant by this phrase? Usually cultural geographers have taken it to imply that one can discern the impact on the landscape of cultural groups. Such readings have been skillfully practiced by cultural geographers such as Pierce Lewis (1979), J.B. Jackson (1984), Donald Meinig (1979a; 1979b), and Wilbur Zelinsky (1973). Underpinning this work is the assumption that landscapes are communicative devices that encode and transmit information. Cultural geographers have long accepted this proposition and Philip Wagner (1972) has written an important book on the subject which, unfortunately, has not had the influence that it deserves.

Accepting landscapes as texts, broadly defined, we are led to examine a number of issues which have been hitherto ignored. The first is the question of how landscapes encode information. At the heart of this question lies the concept of intertextuality, which implies that the context of any text is other texts. In the case of landscapes the contexts in which they are produced and read may be texts written in other media.⁵ Raymond Williams’ (1982) notion of culture as a signifying system provides a useful overarching framework with which to examine this transformation of ideas from one type of medium to another. I also make use of the concepts of discursive field, discourse, and narrative, for a culture’s signifying system can be thought of as composed of what Foucault (1970) terms “discursive fields” containing discourses which are in turn composed of narratives (Geertz 1973b; 1983b; V. Turner 1974). I will then draw upon a version of critical socio-semiotic theory as elaborated by Barthes (1979a, b; 1986a) and De Certeau (1984; 1985) as well as the work on rhetoric of Hayden White (1978), Kenneth Burke (1945; 1969) and others in order to demonstrate the tropes by which narratives are encoded in the landscape.⁶

This examination of the mechanics of how a landscape works, however,

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represents only the first part of a properly constituted study of landscape. The second part of such a study must breathe some life into this skeleton, as it probes the role of landscapes in the constitution of social and political practice. To address this issue one must first ask how social life in general, and power relations in particular, are constituted, reproduced and contested. Then as cultural geographers we can explore the manner in which one signification system, the landscape, is a constitutive part of this process. In order to achieve answers we must go beyond a consideration of the formal semiotic or tropological properties of the landscape as a system of communication, to see the landscape in relation to both structured political practices and individual intentions.

The relationship between a discursive field and landscape as a signification system is, I believe, best examined in a particular place and time rather than in the abstract. The particular place and time that I have chosen to study is the royal capital of Kandy in the highlands of Sri Lanka during the early years of the nineteenth century. There are a number of reasons why early-nineteenth-century Kandy is a rich locale in which to explore the relationship between a discursive field and a landscape. First, there exists a large literature both on kingship and on the architecture of royal capitals in South and Southeast Asia which can serve as a context for a consideration of the discourse of kingship and its relation to landscape in Kandy. Second, whereas there have been a few studies which have included discussions of the relationship between kingship and landscape in early Lankan capitals (Paranavitana 1950; B.L. Smith 1987; Wickremaratne 1987), there have been none of Kandy, the last Sinhalese capital on the island.⁷ A third reason why Kandy makes a good case study is that Kandyan society was highly textualized. By this I mean that authority was assumed, by the literate and illiterate alike, to lie in texts. The political and religious beliefs that formed the discursive fields within the society were written down and these texts served as the basis of customary law.⁸

The discursive field of kingship, which is the one that particularly concerns us here, was composed of two distinct discourses on kingship. One, the *Aśokan*, was based upon the story of *Aśoka*, the great Indian monarch of the third century B.C. This discourse included a set of beliefs that defined a proper king as pious, righteous, and devoted to the fostering of the Buddhist religion and to the welfare of the people. The other model, the *Śakran*, was, potentially, a competing discourse composed of a set of beliefs, the central idea of which is that a king should model himself upon *Śakra*, the king of the gods and in doing so become a divine ruler, a god-king.

Each of these discourses has a series of political and religious texts associated with it which provide precedent for, and thereby legitimation of, that discourse. Each discourse also has an attendant landscape model. The

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Asokan discourse favors the production of a landscape dominated by religious structures and public works for the benefit of the people, while the Sakran results in a landscape of palaces and cities modeled upon that of the king of the gods in heaven. These different discourses, therefore, not only constitute different ways to think and talk about kingship, but produce different material results as well.

During much of the history of Kandy these two distinct perspectives on kingship were intertwined, as kings adopted elements of each. One could see this syncretism materialized in the landscape of Kandy in the balance that was achieved between religious buildings and palaces. During the early nineteenth century, however, the last king of Kandy, Śrī Vikrama, largely abandoned Asokanism in favor of Sakran ideals. He concretized this shift through a massive rebuilding program in the capital. In this study I will examine the relationship between this Sakran discourse and the Kandyan landscape, showing how the landscape became the site of a political struggle between interest groups who argued in terms of competing discourses within a broader, unchallenged discursive field of kingship.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 provide the context for the interpretation of the landscape of Kandy in the early nineteenth century. Chapter 3 offers an historical sketch of kingship in Lanka from the founding of the first great kingdom in Anurādhapura in the third century B.C. to the fall of the Kandyan Kingdom in 1815. This chapter serves not only to put the discourses of kingship in Kandy within an historical framework, but also to outline the socio-economic context within which their contradictions came to the fore. Chapter 4 examines some of the written texts that underlie the Asokan and Sakran discourses on kingship and their attendant landscape models both in Lanka and elsewhere. Chapter 5 traces the development of the landscape of Kandy from its founding in 1312 until 1815 when it fell to the British. This chapter provides the context for chapter 6 which interprets the landscape of the capital as it existed in 1815.

In chapter 6 I show how the physical form of the city constituted a text which was in turn a transformation of the texts that informed the discursive field of Kandyan kingship. I demonstrate how architectural elements and spatial location within the landscape were tropes that allegorically represented the narratives of Sakran kingship. As such they lent conceptual support to the process of legitimizing the political structure of the society. In chapter 7 a similar analysis is applied to the civic rituals that took place in the capital. These rituals, like the landscape itself, were concretizations of the narratives within the political discourses. I argue that these civic rituals were largely dependent upon the landscape for their effect, since much of their communicative power depended upon the location of the rituals within a symboli-

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cally charged landscape. Thus the civic rituals as well as the landscape can be considered texts, the production and reading of which were interpretively dependent practices in the service of power.

In chapter 8 I examine the conditions under which the Sakran discourse on kingship adopted by the last king was challenged. A major factor leading to this challenge was the hardship caused by the last king's massive building program in Kandy between 1810 and 1812. This program can be satisfactorily explained only with reference to the king's commitment to a Sakran model of kingship. The program entailed such exorbitant demands for labor that it was challenged both by certain factions among the nobles and by the peasants. In this struggle over the meaning of the landscape I quote from the texts, both written and ritual, of three different groups in Kandyan society. I examine first the king's own interpretation of his city-building program; second, the interpretations of a faction of the nobles opposed to the king, and third the interpretations of a group of peasants. I argue that changing material conditions among the nobles and peasants brought into play a latent oppositional discourse. However, this oppositional discourse was articulated differently by these two groups, for each had different material interests at stake. The landscape of the capital, therefore, is revealed not only as the concretization of particular political discourses, but also as the site of political struggle.

As has been shown in a number of recent studies, many different types of landscapes, including those that cultural geographers are wont to refer to as "ordinary" are susceptible to political readings (Anderson 1988; Cosgrove and Daniels 1988; Duncan and Duncan 1984; Ley 1987; Mills 1988; Wiener 1981; R. Williams 1973). In other words although the cosmic symbolism of Kandy may seem radically "other" to us, fundamentally it is not different from any other landscape in that it constitutes a text concerning which there is a politics of reading. Thus the complexity of the relationship between landscape, discourse, and social structure can be profitably explored in many different times and places.

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Part II

TOWARDS AN INTERPRETIVE FRAME

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2

Landscape as a signifying system

Hostility to theory usually means an opposition to other people's theories and an oblivion to one's own (*Eagleton 1983, viii*)

The contextual conception of the world

The study of landscapes, the traditional purlieu of American cultural geography, has also been pursued in Britain, the United States, and elsewhere, by a number of historians, landscape architects, and journalists. With a few notable exceptions, however, researchers have lacked both the interest and the theoretical sophistication to confront what strike me as potentially the most provocative and challenging questions concerning landscape and its role in social process.¹ While traditionally landscapes have been recognized as reflections of the culture within which they were built or as a kind of artifactual "spoor" yielding clues to events of the past, particularly diffusion, only rarely were they recognized as constituent elements in socio-political processes of cultural reproduction and change.² Elsewhere I (Duncan, 1980) have analyzed the failure of cultural geographers to address the question of what has been described as "the inner workings of culture" (Wagner and Mikesell, 1962, 5). Cultural geographers who ironically had little interest in culture, turned their attention almost exclusively to artifacts. Dozens of journal articles over the years have been devoted to the topic of the regional distribution – and occasionally the diffusion – of such artifacts as house types, barn types, fences, or landscape "ensembles" which are claimed to reveal culture regions or culture hearths.

Perhaps because of their object fetishism, their fascination with historical reconstruction, and their belief in the possibility of unmediated observation as a guarantee of objectivity, geographers have largely limited their research methods to observation and archival study. Interviewing where possible or other means of collecting data on consciousness have rarely been attempted.³ Although there are exceptions,⁴ the question of the meaning of landscape is usually addressed only from the researcher's own point of view. Interpretive authority is assumed to result from an unmediated relation between what is simply "out there in the landscape" and the informed scholar's stamina for

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field or archival exercises. This perspective fails to take critically into account the researcher's own "contextual conception of the world" (Butler 1984, 7).

Sometimes a more creative effort is attempted. In such cases it is either claimed that a private and therefore unique interpretation is being offered, that the researcher is engaged in a form of artistic creation for which no clearly articulated methodology is applicable,⁵ or that an illusive phenomenological essence is sought.⁶

Until relatively recently, landscape interpretation in British and American geography has been isolated from what Dominic LaCapra (1983, 5) has referred to as "the heavy sectors" of academic inquiry, the self-reflexive disciplines of philosophy and literary theory. Practitioners have been unconcerned with developments within the social sciences or the humanities – with what a Levi-Strauss, a Derrida, or a Foucault might have to say about the nature of cultural process or representation, on the grounds that landscape interpreters need not be concerned with such esoteric debates. Rather cultural geographers have presented themselves as keen and knowledgeable observers who can describe landscapes in ordinary language to anyone wishing to better appreciate the chronology of events and cultural value systems that are reflected in the human use of the earth's surface. Their vision of the scholar is one who, armed with a sound historical training, goes out into the world and records what is there. This is based on an empiricism which sees outward forms and surface appearances as largely unproblematic. Artifacts are observed and recorded as data, given things. Observational data, whether recorded by the researcher directly or retrieved from archives, is distinguished from theoretical statements which are seen as abstract and hypothetical, and therefore not descriptions of the world. There is a strong anti-theoretical bias in this separation of facts and theories, and, unfortunately, this commonsense view of facts as theory neutral is also naive.⁷

Descriptions are not mirror reflections; they are of necessity constructed within the limits of the language and the intellectual frameworks of those who describe.⁸ Such a language is not a set of words which have a one-to-one correspondence with reality "out there." It is based on discourses which are shared meanings which are socially constituted, ideologies, sets of "commonsense" assumptions. The same words may have different meanings in different discourses. Descriptions can have meaning only in such a context-bound sense. Thus all description, whether explicitly theoretical or not, relies on language, on some form of categorization which is inherent in the very act of naming. And categorization is necessarily theoretical. Therefore, whether or not theoretical assumptions are consciously held or made explicit, they are inescapable. As Catherine Belsey (1980, 4) puts it, not worrying about the

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‘niceties’ of theory “evades confrontation with [one’s] own presuppositions, protects whatever procedures and methods are currently dominant, and so guarantees the very opposite of objectivity, the perpetuation of unquestioned assumptions.”

Furthermore, not everything that is real and which has causal power can be observed or experienced. Thus resistance to the idea of explicit theorizing in the sense of positing theoretical – that is non-observable – entities usually indicates a highly self-limiting kind of empiricism which unnecessarily rules out of consideration many of the most interesting and powerful causal factors effecting social phenomena.

Nevertheless, landscape interpretation can lead us to the center of an interdisciplinary intellectual arena where scholars are struggling with such important issues as the nature of objectification, representation, consciousness, ideology, and the relationship between these aspects of a cultural system. At first sight these questions may seem foreign to some cultural geographers, and indeed they are not home-grown questions, products of our own discipline. They are hybrids produced by the cross-fertilization of such diverse intellectual strains as anthropology, literary and art criticism, psychology, and political science. Nevertheless, I would argue, these questions are central to a geographical understanding of the production and use of landscape and its role as a constitutive component of social processes. They also serve to open up a dialogue between cultural geographers interested in landscape and other academics, for the language of literary theory or cultural anthropology is no longer foreign to the ears of landscape interpreters, and landscape interpretation is no longer seen as irrelevant by literary theorists or cultural anthropologists who have adopted a greatly expanded concept of text.⁹

Such an approach to landscape interpretation represents a departure from traditional American cultural geography in three important ways. First, it stresses the role that landscape plays in social and cultural processes. Second, because of this concern with process, a dialogue is established with researchers in those other fields within the social sciences and the humanities in which the role of objects in social and cultural process is studied. Third, the more general issues of theory-ladenness and the hermeneutic circle, of the role of commonsense social knowledge in social scientific explanation, and the status of data become important issues in landscape interpretation.

Landscape’s own projection

Cultural geographers have long, privileged vision. Since its inception under Carl Sauer, the subdiscipline has celebrated fieldwork and cherished the belief