

Sri Lanka Studies: a discursive approach to development and conflict¹

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Introduction

The title of this article embodies in essence the main issues my good friend and colleague, the late prof. R.M. Ranaweera Banda, focused on in his work, most notably his dissertation which was posthumously published earlier this year under the title ‘Transnational Culture and Expert Knowledge: Responses from a Rural Community in Sri Lanka’ (Ranaweera Banda 2013). Around a case study of the village Denagama in Southern Sri Lanka, he deals in this book extensively with issues of knowledge production, both globally in terms of transnational culture, and in the Sri Lankan context from pre-colonial and colonial times to the post-independence era. In the contemporaneous setting he specially elaborates on the role development plays. He describes how development as a knowledge and practice is promulgated and promoted by international development experts, local elites and local bureaucrats, and interacts with the village that, however, shows its own agency in appropriating or rejecting part of the development package offered.

Though conflict played perhaps a smaller role in his dissertation by short references to the *Janatha Vimukhti Peramuna* (JVP) and the role of caste, through his contribution to the Social Harmony Project, his co-authored publication ‘Perspectives from the South’ (Ranaweera Banda and Abeyratne 2005) in the book *Dealing with Diversity, Sri Lankan Discourses on*

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Peace and Conflict (Frerks & Klem 2005) and the establishment of a Centre for Conflict Studies at the University of Ruhuna, he was concerned intensely with the recent conflict in Sri Lanka that came to dominate the field of Sri Lanka Studies very much over the last two decades. In both his work on development and conflict Ranaweera Banda adopted a discursive, constructionist approach. It is therefore only proper that I deal in this article on Sri Lanka Studies by taking a discursive approach to the issues of development and conflict.

Sri Lanka Studies

If we discuss a topic as Sri Lanka Studies we have to denote what this field comprises, how it has emerged, what intellectual pedigree it has, and to what pressures and processes it has been and continues to be subjected. Sri Lanka Studies can be defined as that subfield of history, political and social sciences in its broadest sense that deals with Sri Lanka. I remember that the University of Ruhuna organized a large, well-attended international conference on Sri Lanka Studies in 2003 and I also can inform you that since a couple of years international Sri Lanka seminars are held annually at European universities. One can observe that there is an academic community both in Sri Lanka and abroad that contributes to this field and reckons itself to be part of Sri Lanka Studies.

Having said that, we need to realize that the field is multi-disciplinary and may encompass a range of different approaches and methodologies. It also has a variety of quite diverging academics that contribute to its development. But this is also the case in other subfields that deal with certain countries or regions like American studies, Asian Studies or African Studies. Though it may be doubtful whether one can talk meaningfully about the field of Sri Lanka Studies from one particular ontological and epistemological perspective, the resulting variety and diversity may also be seen as rich, productive and insightful.

The very notion of Sri Lanka Studies *per se* is already an issue in and of itself. The subject and name of this field, Sri Lanka, is commonly used to refer to what presently is known as the political entity of Sri Lanka. The official designation of the country by this name dates only from 1972 when it replaced the colonial term Ceylon that was in use by the British who unified the country after a long time in 1833. During earlier periods there were several political entities (kingdoms, fiefdoms and chieftaincies known under different names) that were most of the time not yet unified under one central sovereign ruler. Hence, the idea of a unified polity of Sri Lanka and correspondingly of Sri Lankans as its citizens, is a recent

intellectual and political construction and arguably it is historically and politically incorrect to use it for most of its history. Having said that, for reasons of readability and convenience unless otherwise indicated, I shall still refer throughout my text to Sri Lanka and Sri Lankans also when talking about periods in which this name was an anachronism.

Knowledge as a manufactured construction

In essence, we know that all knowledge is a historical and social construction produced in a certain context under particular conditions. Early anthropological works on Sri Lanka and other countries produced during colonialism showed the norms, biases and interests of the colonial powers of that period. Ranaweera Banda observes in his book that: “The colonial discourse is a story of how knowledge was constructed about non-Western peoples and societies by the West and transported to [their] colonies to exercise and maintain its control over them”. He quotes Edward Said who pointed out that it is difficult to understand how the Western imagination has constructed the East (Orient) without examining Orientalism as a discourse ... one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage –and even produce– the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period (Ranaweera Banda 2013: 26 and 27). This discourse legitimized the differences between colonizers and the colonized and created new hierarchies.

Early works on Sri Lanka by travelers and colonial administrators must therefore be scrutinized on their colonial biases, even though they simultaneously may contain rare and valuable information about those periods. Though anthropology has outgrown its colonial roots, it is still largely a European or nowadays US-based undertaking. Happily we see also prominent anthropologists arising from the earlier colonies, including India and Sri Lanka, even though many of them have stayed again at western universities. The emergence of the field of post-colonial studies may in fact be seen as a conscious attempt to understand the societies of the former colonies according to a completely different epistemological approach than that used by conventional western anthropology and sociology.

The role of the past and present in knowledge production

The past does influence us and weighs on us currently by what is sometimes called the ‘presence of history’, but the present in turn also leads to the construction of a particular

version of history, as we look at historical events through a particular lens that is colored by what we know and experience here and now.

Much academic work in Sri Lanka revolves around questions of ethnicity and origin and tends to be looked at from the dichotomous realities of the current political situation which may have less of a historical validity than often is thought. For example, archaeology in Sri Lanka often has dealt with the question whether or not findings corroborate claims about homelands or particular historical settlements of either Tamils or Sinhalese, leading one observer to remark that archaeology in Sri Lanka is rather a political science instead of archaeology proper. Indeed, the interpretation of history has been strongly affected by present realities and political commitments and the other way around. This can be especially seen in the discursive framing by Sinhalese ethno-nationalists of the recent war (1983-2009) between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in terms that seem to be borrowed straight away from the *Mahavamsa*, and which Frerks and Klem have called the *Dutthagamini* discourse (2005: 8-10). Kapferer speaks in this context of the ‘invention of tradition’ and of Sinhalese nationalism as a process of ‘remythologisation’ whereby myths and legends of the past are reinvented as a more or less coherent ideology.

It is part of our task as social scientists to understand and deconstruct this type of framing and try to conceptualize historical ‘reality’ as what it is: a discursive socio-historical construction that is continuously shaped, reshaped, negotiated and renegotiated. It is this discursive constructionist approach in social studies that can help us deal with many of the complex subjects that are studied within the field of Sri Lanka Studies.

The construction of Sri Lanka’s past

It is generally assumed that in pre-historic times Sri Lanka was inhabited by small tribes of gatherers and hunters living in caves in Sri Lanka’s jungles, of which the present Veddas are the descendants. These tribes are believed to have been the original inhabitants of Sri Lanka. There is further evidence of a proto-Sinhalese and proto-Tamil megalithic and Iron Age ‘Balangoda’ culture from 10,000 – 1000 BC which showed similarities to, and was probably introduced from, Peninsular (South) India and which established rice cultivation, animal domestication, the horse and small-scale metallurgical operations (Senivaratne quoted in: Sitrampalam 2005: 233). Waves of immigration from the North and South of India further took place between some 2500 and 2000 years ago. The Indo-European Aryans (associated

with the current Sinhalese) came from the North, while the Dravidians (associated with the current Sri Lanka Tamils) originated from present Tamil Nadu in South India. Though there exists not much archeological evidence with regard to the earliest settlers, it is clear that by around 500 BC settlements developed in several parts of the island and that by 250 BC a literate culture emerged (De Silva 1981: 9, 12-13).

One of Sri Lanka's prominent historians, K.M. de Silva, asserts that the Dravidians came to the Island from very early times and that by the third century BC the Dravidian involvement in the affairs of Sri Lanka became very marked. Dravidian invaders took over power in Anuradhapura in 177 BC, followed in 145 BC by King Elara (De Silva 1981: 12). It is interesting to note here that there is a current debate in popular media whether the 'Sinhalese' or the 'Tamils' first arrived in Sri Lanka. According to the myths reported in the Buddhist *Mahavamsa* chronicle, as elaborated below, the first settler Vijaya was the forefather of the Sinhalese, but there is no conclusive evidence for either viewpoint, except that both groups arrived between about 2,000 and 2,500 years ago in significant numbers and that Sri Lanka was already inhabited for a long time at that moment.

De Silva emphasises the multi-ethnic nature of Sri Lanka's early society: "Thus Sri Lanka has been from very early in its recorded history a multi-ethnic society in which a recognisable Dravidian component was present, but not sufficiently powerful to alter the basic Aryan or North Indian character of the population. Ethnicity was not an important point of division in society and it would seem that neither the Sinhalese nor the Tamils remained racially pure". Sitrapalam (2005: 238-239) mentions evidence of an early common cultural zone encompassing South India and Sri Lanka, which is at variance with the mythical origins depicted in the Sri Lankan chronicles.

It is debatable whether the groups existing at that time could already be identified as 'Sinhalese' and 'Tamils' or that these identities *per se* emerged much later. Quoting Goonetillake, Sitrapalam argues in fact that the origin of distinct Sinhalese and Tamil identities is a later process (2005: 234), and that Sinhalization was a cultural process associated with Buddhism and hence came after and not before Buddhism. De Silva states that the rise of three Hindu powers in South India in the 5th and 6th century AD led to ethnic and religious antagonisms between them and the Anuradhapura kingdom in Sri Lanka. As a consequence, according to De Silva, at that time: "the Tamils in Sri Lanka became increasingly conscious of their ethnicity which they sought to assert in terms of culture and

religion, Dravidian/Tamil and Hindu (1981: 20-21). Sporadic tensions emerged between the distinct groups of Sinhalese and Tamils, but “There were nevertheless, for long periods, harmonious social relations between the Sinhalese and Tamils and strong cultural and religious ties, and while there may have been a sense of ethnic identity, there was never ethnic ‘purity’, least of all among the kings and queens of Sri Lanka and the princes and princesses of its ruling houses” (De Silva 1981: 20-21). The Tamil historian S. Pamanathan states that Tamils developed in a separate community of their own since the rule of the Cholas in the 11th century, and that in the early centuries of the Christian era they seem to have been absorbed within the framework of cultural homogeneity of the island along with Sinhalese Buddhists (Pamanathan in: Jeyaratnam Wilson 2001: 14). All this evidence indicates that only subsequent cultural and political factors helped produce Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic identities, rather than these being present from times immemorial, as a primordialist view, and the views of many Sinhalese and Tamil nationalists, would have it. In this connection, it is also important to look at the Sri Lankan chronicles and the way they have manufactured views on ethnicity and religion in Sri Lanka.

The *Mahavamsa*’s construction of Sri Lanka’s past

Written by Buddhist monks, the famous Sri Lankan chronicles – the Dipavamsa (4-5th century AD), Mahavamsa (6th century AD) and Culavamsa (13th century AD) – have played a powerful role in defining Sinhalese understandings of Sri Lankan history and the identity of its component groups and, in doing so, may well have affected the course of its political history. The most famous of these chronicles is the *Mahavamsa*. This mythical chronology, written in Pali, describes the arrival of Vijaya, the legendary founding father of the Sinhalese, and the succession of Sinhalese kings from the sixth century BC to the fourth century AD. The *Mahavamsa* describes the protection and conservation of Buddhism (against invasions from India) as the main task of these Sinhalese leaders. De Silva notes that being the work of Buddhist monks, the *Mahavamsais* “permeated by a strong religious bias and encrusted with miracle and invention. The central theme was the historic role of the island as a bulwark of Buddhist civilisation, and in a deliberate attempt to underline this, it contrives to synchronise the advent of Vijaya with the *paranibbana* (the passing away) of the Buddha” (1981: 3-4). De Silva observes that: “This was to become in time the most powerful of the historical myths of the Sinhalese and the basis of their conception of themselves as the chosen guardians of

Buddhism and of Sri Lanka itself as a place of special sanctity for the Buddhist religion³. This intimate connection between the land, the ‘race’ and the Buddhist faith foreshadowed the intermingling of religion and national identity which has always had the most profound influence on the Sinhalese” (1981: 4). In reality, according to De Silva, Buddhism was brought to Sri Lanka in the latter half of the third century BC during the reign of Mauryan King Asoka by Asoka’s son (or brother) Mahinda and then quickly spread around the Island (De Silva 1981: 11).

In one of its most famous scenes, the *Mahavamsa* describes the ‘heroic’ resistance and victory of Sinhalese King Dutthagamini over Tamil King Elara who had invaded Sri Lanka from South India. This account of successful struggle against foreign Tamil invaders became archetypal for a dominant strain in current Sinhala-Buddhist thinking. De Silva adds important nuances to the *Mahavamsa*’s ‘dramatisation’ of this duel as “an epoch making confrontation between the Sinhalese and the Tamils and extolled as a holy war fought in the interests of Buddhism” (1981: 15). De Silva asserts that the “facile equating of Sinhalese with Buddhists for this period is not borne out by the facts, for not all Sinhalese were Buddhist, while on the other hand there were many Tamil Buddhists” (1981:15), something that also is stated by Sitrapalam (2005: 248). De Silva also says that “There were, in fact large reserves of support for Elara among the Sinhalese” and that Dutthagamini “had to face the resistance of other Sinhalese rivals”, too (1981:15). In this regard the respected anthropologist GananathObeyesekere notes the existence of a new pattern of myth and mythicized history, which incorporated ...: “the Sinhalese as defenders of the *sasana* (=Buddhism) versus Tamils as opposers of the *sasana*”, which he argues is not always in accordance with the facts of history (1997: 358-359). De Silva also debunks the idea that since the mythical figure of Vijaya all Sinhalese kings were rulers of a single, politically unified island, since there had been several kingdoms on the northern plains at the same time and on the island as a whole for that matter. (1981: 13-14). Obeyesekere underlines that “the mythic significance of Dutugamunu as the saviour of the Sinhalese race and of Buddhism grew through the years and developed into one of the most powerful myths of the Sinhalese, ready to be used as a powerful instrument of Sinhalese nationalism in modern times. the general message that emerges everywhere is the same: “The Sinhalese kings are defenders of the secular realm and the *sasana*: their opponents are the Tamils”” (1997: 361). With respect to the interpretation of

³ Also referred to as ‘*Dhammadipa*’: the Island of the Just, or the ancient home of pristine Buddhist Society

the *Mahavamsa* a discursive constructionist approach in social science can help us understand how the Duttagamini discourse works in moulding understandings, interpretations and actual practices and actions by especially the Sinhalese-Buddhist sections of the population.

Summarizing the pre-colonial history of Sri Lanka, we can see there have been periods of mutual accommodation as well as competition and strife between different groups and their polities throughout pre-colonial history. I cannot deal with all details of Sri Lanka's long and rich history. However, these struggles and dynamics had a clearly territorial component with South Indian invasions playing an important role, but the groups involved could not (yet) simply be defined as 'ethnic', nor as Sinhalese versus Tamil, as they had more to do with fluctuating political alliances and internal dynastic strife among the Sinhalese kings that were much more opportunistic in nature. Arguably, culturally and religiously a process of hybridization and syncretization took place between Tamils and Sinhalese, as a consequence of centuries of cohabitation and interaction as well as mutual rule and domination. Nevertheless, historical reconstructions, particularly as a consequence of the powerful *Mahavamsa* narrative, have sought to give Sri Lanka's history an ethnic or ethno-nationalist slant, more than thorough historic evidence would permit.

In his description of Denagama, Ranaweera Banda shows how the happenings depicted in the *Mahavamsa* also do figure in the village context. The Denagamainhabitants directly relate their village to the ancient *Magama* Kingdom from where king Duttagamini hailed. Oral history also revealed that Duttagamini's Royal ElephantKandula was caught in the mangroves of Denagama and similarly it was asserted that one of Duttagamini's ten giants, Gotaimbara, was born in Denagama (Ranaweera Banda 2013: 70-71). Ranaweera observes how "[t]he rich oral history places Denagama in a historical context. It also provides a cultural identity to its people, linking them with regional as well as national cultures and polity" (Ranaweera Banda 2013: 72). This historical identity provides a base for their dealings with 'others' in the Southern Region (Ranaweera Banda 2013: 71). One could easily infer that this identity as an imagined community –to use the words of Anderson– firmly based in Sinhala-Buddhism also forged their current relationships with 'others' at the national level , either Muslims or Tamils.

Colonial manufacturing of identity

Colonialism brought new religions and introduced new group distinctions such as between Christian and Buddhist Sinhalese and Catholic and Hindu Tamils. One other important aspect of British rule was their use of population censuses, which had the effect of formally categorizing the Sri Lankan population for the first time into distinct groups. Wickramasinghe states that as a result identities became ‘fixed and gelled’ and perceived as ‘embodied, inescapable features of being’ (2006: 44). These categories became important, as they, for example, “provided the basis for entitlements and rights, such as places in the administration and in the Legislative Council” (Wickramasinghe 2006: 45). The 1814 and 1824 censuses gave information on caste and religion and Wickramasinghe observes in this connection that “at least until 1824 Sinhalese and Tamils were not perceived as clear-cut ethnic groups, but first and foremost as members of a number of caste groups of various sizes” (2006: 48). The 1871 and 1881 census introduced the notions of ‘race’ and ‘nationality’. In the 1871 census Sinhalese and Tamils were both a race and a nationality. In 1881 there were according to the census seven races in Sri Lanka: Europeans, Sinhalese, Tamil, Moormen, Malays, Veddas and others, and 78 nationalities. In 1911 the category nationalities disappeared and there was a further subdivision in racial sub-groups: Low Country and Kandyan Sinhalese, Ceylon and Indian Tamils and Ceylon and Indian Moors, next to Burghers, Eurasians, Malays and Veddas. This shows how such categories were constructions of colonial bureaucratic policy rather than primordial concepts. It also shows the impact of the state on such issues according to a Foucauldian logic of governmentalization. Also the occurrence of revivalist religious movements in the 19th century added to ethnic awareness, though at that time there was more Buddhist opposition to the Christians than that there was a divide with the Hindus or Muslims. This emerging sense of ethnicity was compounded by political developments in the 20th century, including the advent of independence and post-independence election dynamics.

Discourses on conflict and peace in Sri Lanka

Whereas the recent history of Sri Lanka has been determined to a significant degree by the conflict between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), this does not only color our understanding of that particular period and the related events, but also our interpretation of issues and situations before and after that time. Conflict parties and other stakeholders, for example, actively frame our knowledge and understandings by propaganda, stories of origin, enemy images, grievances, and claims for

self-determination and so on. This discursive framing is based on an active ‘reconstruction’ of history, something which one was and still is able to observe in Sri Lanka. Discourse, as a system of representation, attributes meaning and frames how actors understand and relate to the world around them. Actors in Sri Lanka or –if you want– ‘discursive communities’ manufactured representations of ‘reality’ and used discourse in the articulation of political grievances, for mobilizing support for armed struggles or counterinsurgency and for legitimizing them. Through discourse, they have interpreted and reinterpreted the past, defined the image of the enemy, and reshaped social identities and boundaries. With my co-author Bart Klem and our research partners at four Sri Lankan universities, including the University of Ruhuna, we collected studies, articles and stories on the Sri Lankan conflict and organised workshops where these were discussed.⁴ These materials served to represent the major prevailing narratives on the conflict in the country and we were able to distinguish no less than nine different coherent discourses⁵ on the genesis and development of the Sri Lankan conflict (Frerks and Klem 2005).

I also have worked more recently on the construction of peace in Sri Lanka. Like discourses on conflict can be analysed and deconstructed, so can discourses on peace. Just as wars are fought in the discursive arena, so is peace. Peace is often heavily contested and controversial. ‘What peace? Whose peace? Peace on what terms?’ These are questions that come to mind when using a discursive lens in analysing peace (Frerks 2013).

After the defeat of the LTTE in May 2009, the Sri Lankan government has tried to promote its own particular interpretation of the LTTE’s struggle and of the role of the international community and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) during the war. It also outlined a particular vision of Sri Lanka’s future in peace, and the peace-building process needed to achieve it. Though promoted with the massive power and political preponderance of the current government, this vision has not convinced all stakeholders. In effect, despite the radically changed military and political situation on the ground, the government’s attempt to

⁴ These activities were carried out in the framework of the ‘Sharing Studies on Peace and Conflict’ programme funded by the Royal Netherlands Embassy in Colombo.

⁵ These discourses included: the ‘*Duttagamini*’ discourse; the Sinhalese grievances discourse; the failed nation-building discourse; the neo-colonialism and state terrorism discourse; the homeland discourse; the Muslim discourse; the ‘Batticaloa’ discourse; discourses of social revolution; and the peace and harmony discourse.

attain discursive hegemony over competing discourses has not -or not yet- succeeded. The same applies to the international arena where a discursive struggle is being fought over the end of the war and alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity. The government's efforts to promote its own story-line therefore continue up to present and form a rewarding subject for discursive study.

The development discourse

Having dealt with the discursive construction of Sri Lanka's past, its conflict and its peace, I now want to turn to a second paradigm that is important to Sri Lanka studies, i.e. discourse on development and modernity. Ranaweera Banda posits a nearly straight and linear connection from the colonial discourse that considered non-Western societies as entities that were still to be civilized with the intervention of the west, to the current development or modernity paradigm. Though now operating in a post-colonial setting the former colonizers are still "interested in establishing their dominance in non-Western countries for political, economic or strategic reasons" and started to interfere "in the form of cultural, economic and development programs thereby re-enacting a new type of economic colonialism in non-Western countries"(Ranaweera Banda 2013: 16). Very much in line with our earlier emphasis on discourse, Ranaweera Banda argued that "development is not a set of actions aimed primarily at gaining growth and welfare, but rather an external force penetrating into a community from outside with powerful ideologies. In this context development benefits are secondary as they act as the vehicle of transmitting such powerful ideologies. Our extensive fieldwork at the local community demonstrates how power associated with development discourse has changed and revised the ways of thinking and actions of the community both at the community and individual levels"(Ranaweera Banda 2013: 17). This idea of development is also linked to a powerful, interventionist state that is not only responsible for the development and welfare of its subjects, but according to a more Foucauldian notion of 'governmentalization' also controls the lives and bodies of its population through a complex assemblage of institutions and procedures (Ranaweera Banda 2013: 17).

I would like to propose that in the domain of Sri Lanka studies more of such critical intervention studies would take place. Without necessarily having to return to the earlier *dependencia* or center-periphery theories, there is enough scope and reason to critically deconstruct the development enterprise and its associated discourses, as done by authors as Escobar and Ferguson. This may include a critique on the networked nature of the enterprise

with local elites and bureaucrats as also noted by Ranaweera Banda in his section on how expert knowledge works (Ranaweera Banda 2013: 59).

I personally feel that the modernist economic paradigm is still very powerful and popular among Sri Lanka's ruling elites, despite the government's ambivalent and sometimes problematic relationship with the western powers. Yet, the government's discourse, whether promoted as the *MahindaChintana* or as the 'Wonder of Asia' still boils down to being very much a modernist, developmentalist approach full of large-scale infrastructural works, clearly smacking of the macro-economic modernization theories of the 1950s. Economic development is also seen as *the* recipe for the post-war reconstruction agenda of the government, next to an energetic resettlement of the displaced population and the rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-LTTE fighters. It can be questioned, however, whether economic development on its own is sufficient to deal with the post-war challenges Sri Lanka is facing, as I have argued elsewhere (Frerks 2013).

Hence, a more fundamental debate on development discourses, approaches and implementation practices in Sri Lanka as a means for social transformation and post-war rehabilitation could be profitably initiated as a theme for Sri Lanka Studies.

Conclusion

I have reviewed the way knowledge is manufactured in daily life, politics and academia. I have taken and argued for a discursive approach in Sri Lanka Studies and reviewed the socio-political construction of Sri Lanka's past and its ethnic religious composition and claims through, among others, the writings of the *Mahavamsa*. I also discussed how the genesis and development of the conflict between the LTTE and the Government of Sri Lanka could be understood from at least nine diverging discourses. Following Ranaweera Banda I also referred to the colonial discourse and its current incarnation: the development and modernity paradigm. I argued that a concomitant deconstruction of such discourse could be a valid endeavor in the context of Sri Lanka studies, especially since modernity still seems to take a prime place in current government policy both as an overall societal approach and as *the* recipe for post-war reconstruction.

Sri Lanka Studies can therefore benefit from a discursive and constructionist approach to deal with the many complex issues the country and therefore its academia are facing, especially when dealing with ethnicity, conflict and post-war reconstruction.

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