Kin, friends, philanthronationalists: "Relations" as a modality of colonial and post-colonial charity in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Through an historical ethnographic analysis of Sri Lanka's oldest charity, the Colombo Friend-in-Need Society, this article explores changing modalities of humanitarian "relations" in colonial and post-colonial contexts. For two hundred years, "the Society" would provide a model of liberal humanitarianism premised on "friendship," a civil and secular relation that the organisation distinguished from "kinship" on the one side and "religion" on the other. Sorting and ranking kinds of charitable practice according to their relations became a project through which the elite could establish the relative values of different forms of mutuality and autonomy and their contribution to colonial and post-colonial development. Paying attention to the Society's role in this process also helps to reveal the historical contingencies of "relation" as a foundational anthropological concept and analytical objective.

Introduction

On the shores of Beira Lake, a stretch of water marking the eastern boundary of Colombo's financial district, are the headquarters of the Friend-in-Need Society – Sri Lanka's[i] oldest charity. Established on 17 March 1831 under the patronage of British Governor Sir Edward Barnes, "the Society" would become a spectacle of elite largess and the chief provider of voluntary relief in the island. The Society championed a "scientific" approach to the selection and support of charity recipients and became an example for colonial government poor relief to follow. Following independence in 1948, however, the extension of universal public welfare saw the loss of the Society's valuable government grant and its status as the premier poor relief organisation in the island. In 1983, the Society found a new role for itself when it became the lead supplier of the "Jaipur limb," a low-cost prosthetic, just at the moment the civil war broke out. The project would sustain the Society by attracting foreign investment for the next thirty years until the end of war in 2009 when overseas aid dried up and the organisation struggled to fundraise from local sources once again.

For one hundred years, the Friend-in-Need Society offered a model of how charity and humanitarian relations should be organised in the island. The Society's appeal was, in one president's words, "that extra touch of humanity which in the true spirit of giving, makes it so much easier for the receiver to receive and the giver to give" (Colombo Friend-in-Need Society, n.d.). Yet as an organisation that displayed with pride its origins in colonial elite society, by the time of my fieldwork in 2013, the Society had become an anomaly in the contemporary Colombo "philanthroscape" (Osella et al., 2015) increasingly populated by actors openly promoting their commitment to anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism. Since the end of civil war in 2009, populist leaders with pro-Buddhist prejudices and a readiness to embrace Sri Lanka's strategic location along China's Silk Road had dominated high office (Venugopal, 2018). Ethno-religious divisions had sharpened and charitable activity had fractured along

communal lines – leaving little space for the "liberal" humanitarian subject the Society promoted (Gajaweera, 2015, 2020; Mahadev, 2018; Silva, 2015). During an interview in 2013, Mrs Kalyani Ranasinghe, the Society's president, explained how the new political climate represented financial jeopardy for the organisation. "The problem with us is that we are not a religious charity. We are for everybody. But people like to give to their own," she told me.

I have described the coalescence of wartime and postwar Sri Lankan capitalism, philanthropy, and nationalism as "philanthronationalism" – an interplay of market and voluntary activity that reproduces claims of Sinhala indigenism and hegemony (Widger, 2016a, 2016b, 2017). As an ostensibly secular charity, the Friend-in-Need Society appealed to a dwindling pool of supporters uncomfortable with a new militant Buddhism, anti-Western rhetoric, and promotion of Sino-Lankan relations that other organisations were at least tacitly embracing. They typically descended from the colonial bourgeoisie that had benefited from the British rule (Jayawardena, 2000), who although having maintained their influence during the first few decades of independence, were now being displaced by the rise of a new moneyed class doing well out of the philanthronationalist economy. Those that had not emigrated during the intervening years found their ageing British-era homes and members clubs dwarfed by a city skyline rapidly dominated by modern high-rises financed by the China-powered post-war boom.

Mrs Ranasinghe was not one to shy away from her ancestry, nor hide her impatience at what Colombo had become. Born into an upper-class family, she had studied sciences at university in the UK before returning to Sri Lanka after graduation in 1980. After having children and giving up plans of entering medical school, she began volunteering at the Society in 1981. She demonstrated a skill for management and fundraising at a time the organisation was in financial crisis, and, thanks to her solution-oriented approach, rose quickly up the ranks. "I joined [the Society] in my twenties, and ever since then I have been stuck here! I was

working with very senior members, I was probably the youngest one then," she remembered with a laugh. Throughout her career, Mrs Ranasinghe had been committed to upholding the history and reputation of the Society while securing long-term sources of funding, but what she referred to as "independence and all that" had made her job more difficult. As an organisation reliant on donations, Mrs Ranasinghe's task was to balance the need for financial security and fundraising from any willing donor, with protecting the Society's "reputation" that was rooted in its past. "We are very particular as to whom we take into the Society," she told me, "We only admit people of good standing." By this she meant individuals who could appreciate and respect the Society's origins and who ideally would facilitate introductions to likeminded friends with deep pockets.

The Society's history encapsulates the changing landscape of charity relations in Sri Lanka from the early 19th century to the present day. From the ages of Victorian "scientific charity" and post-colonial welfare to those of international development and market liberalisation, how the Society reinvented itself tells a story of shifting transnational relations of poverty assistance across two hundred years. From one perspective, the Society's story is a familiar tale of colonial and post-colonial transformation. Ideologies and practices of charity, welfare, and development moved into and out of fashion in response to changing social, political, and economic circumstances, and was a process that took place across different territories of the British Empire, especially in South Asia (Osella, 2018; Watt, 2005). At the core were competing virtues of mutual aid and assistance that helped to determine the morality of charity and its effects.

Yet there is also another story to tell here about the *relations* of charity. As I explore in this article, the Society's efforts to meet those challenges involved ongoing debates over the meaning of "friend" in "Friend-in-Need" – a construction of autonomous "liberal" persons rooted in a modern capitalist economy that stood in contrast to "vernacular" forms of

association and mutuality. Anthropologist Marilyn Strathern's (2020) survey of the term "relation" in Anglophone usage draws our attention to how, in early modern English, the terms "friend" and "kin" implied a similar form of association determined by mutuality and obligation. By the 19th century, however, "friend" had lost its connotation of kinship, and indicated a voluntary relation between autonomous individuals and "involving self-control, moral self-governance, authentic self-making and a post-Enlightenment commitment to free choice" (Bell and Coleman, 2020). The concept of "friendship" became, in the words of Julian Pit-Rivers (1973: 90) "an invention of soi-disant [so-called] 'civilised society' which has abandoned kinship as an organising principle." Defining and sorting friends from kin would become an important part of the British civilising mission, through which relations premised on market self-interest and humanitarian altruism subsequently would emerge (Carrier, 2020).

By studying the Society's own changing understanding of relation as a modality of charity, I seek to open a critical examination of anthropological approaches to charitable and humanitarian giving that have, I argue, paid insufficient attention to their own relational constructions and their roots in colonial encounters. While anthropologists often deploy "relationality" as a critical theoretical, political, and ethical antidote to the Euro-American imaginary of ontological autonomy and pre- or non-relationality, the concept does not exist outside that same historical context. That is, anthropology's "relation" is just as dependent upon the concept of "autonomy" as, for example, "gift" is just as dependent upon "commodity" (Parry, 1986). Indeed, as Strathern (2020) has suggested, after the study of relations became anthropology's *raison d'être*, it was often sufficient for anthropologists to conclude their analyses by pointing to how objects seemingly ontologically autonomous were always relationally constructed. If this allowed anthropologists to engage critically across a number of domains by challenging assumptions that pervaded Euro-American understandings of the world, it also blunted examination of the inherent liberalism of the relationality concept itself.

"Relations" became the extrinsic fact of social life to be found everywhere (Candea et al., 2015), ready to be uncovered with the aim of building a post-ontological world that could transcend sectarian, ethic, and racial differences and prejudices (Kaur and Klinkert, 2021).

Attending to the term's colonial history in a context like Sri Lanka has implications for its wider anthropological uses – including humanitarianism studies. In recent years, anthropologists have begun referring to diverse humanitarian tradition as "vernacular," implying they are representative of charitable traditions that are different from those that gave rise to "liberal" (Euro-American) humanitarianism (Brković, 2017). Common to how such alternative traditions are described is a stress on the relationality of the humanitarian subject that vernacular forms centre, which stands in contrast to the autonomous subject centred by "liberal" humanitarian discourses (Bornstein, 2012; Brković, 2016, 2017; Fechter and Schwittay, 2019; Rozakou, 2017; Weiss, 2015). Anthropological work on vernacular humanitarianisms is valuable for how it unsettles assumptions about who and what a *humanitarian* might be – but it also needs to be critically aware of the origins of its own conceptual vocabulary, including what the concept of "relations" brings to analysis, and what it excludes. In Sri Lanka, examples of vernacular humanitarianism would include precisely those mobilised by the obligations of "kinship" and "religion" that stand in contrast to "friendship" and "humanity" that the Friend-in-Need Society was so keen to champion. Yet as I show below, those very categories were the product of two centuries' worth of colonial and post-colonial exchange, such that the "vernacular" and the "liberal" in the Society's definitions of charity were always implied by, and contained within, reference to each other.

In this article, I develop an analysis of this using the methods of historical ethnography. I combine my fieldwork research into charity and humanitarianism in contemporary Colombo, conducted between 2012 and 2014, with a detailed study of the Society's colonial and post-colonial archives. The documentary material I use includes minutes of the Society's annual

meetings from 1939 to 2002, and Sessional Papers of the Ceylonese parliament from the 1930s to 1950s. In so doing, I follow anthropological approaches to colonial archives that treats them as fields of social and political power and control, which through colonial administrators imposed new relational ontologies upon subject populations (Battaglia et al., 2020). However, as anthropologist-historian Ann L. Stoler's (2009) work with Dutch colonial archives also reminds us, "[i]f there is anything we can learn from colonial ontologies, it is that…'essences' were protean, not fixed, subject to reformulation again and again." I have thus approached the Society's archive as a dynamic materiality itself caught up in the production of those same processes of relational construction and change that I seek to illuminate. The materials I discuss show how debates took place over what the category of "friend" could or should encompass and exclude. Those debates owed as much to the changing realities of charity in colonial and post-colonial Sri Lanka as they did to later generations' readings of old Society minutes and government reports in their efforts to respond to the Society's changing fortunes.

This ongoing effort to establish the presence of the past in the present in charity debates continues to this day. For Mrs Ranasinghe, the Society's president, the archive provided epistemic surety – a paper foundation that affirmed the standing of the Society as Sri Lanka's oldest, most trusted, charity. She was keen that I should consult the archive as a complement to my ethnography so I could learn more about "the many things the Society was doing during its heyday." Yet my reading of the archive revealed considerable ambivalence and uncertainty, both in relation to the very survival of the Society at any given moment in time, and in relation to the relations with donors that made the Society's work possible. This gave historical meaning to the patterns I had already been tracing in my ethnographic work on contemporary humanitarian practice, and the arguments between liberal humanitarians and philanthronationalists I had studied closely (Widger, 2016a, 2016b, 2017). In this first part of this paper, I offer an historical ethnography of how the Society sorted charity relations in

colonial and post-colonial periods. In the second part, I describe how the Society has sought to make a space for itself in the philanthronationalist economy. I conclude by reflecting on what lessons anthropologists might draw from this history when it comes to their own conceptualisation of "liberal" and "vernacular" humanitarian relations, with reference to calls to "decolonise" anthropology and development studies.

"A friend indeed"

The origins of the Colombo Friend-in-Need Society lay in elite unease at growing levels of poverty that from the 1830s began to threaten social and political unrest in the colony (Rogers, 1987). Moved by scenes of homelessness and destitution on the streets of Colombo during a visit to Ceylon in 1831, the Bishop of Calcutta raised the idea of forming a Friend-in-Need Society with the aim of providing poor relief to those who were ineligible for government charity. At that time, this included anybody of "poor moral standing" whose misfortunes could be put down to "personal" failings, as well as the large immigrant Indian "coolie" population employed on the tea and rubber plantations, who lacked Ceylonese citizenship. Soon after the Colombo Society was launched, a dozen or more sister organisations appeared in larger towns and cities across the island.

Over the next one hundred years, "the Societies" became focal points for elite benevolence, and by far the most well financed voluntary organisations in the colony. Their mandate was to "to relieve the really necessitous and, as far as possible, to suppress mendacity in the settlement," which they would do through "personal investigation of the cases referred to the society for relief…[and]…the detection and exposure of the pretences of unworthy objects" (Colombo Friend-in-Need Society, n.d.). With funds provided by membership fees and donations collected from "subscribers," the Societies distributed "pensions" to the impoverished and destitute, maintained vagrants' hostels, orphanages, and elders' homes, and

ran hospitals and drug dispensaries. In Colombo, the municipal council also delegated most of its own charitable services to the Society, for which it received a sizeable government grant.

Anthropologists and historians have traced the emergence of modern charity ideology and practice during the 19th century as part of the story of British colonisation, Christian proselytization, and local resistance (Abeysekara, 2002; Gajaweera, 2020; Gombrich and Obeyesekere, 1988; Malalgoda, 1976; Seneviratne, 2000). Philanthropy too became a central concern of the Ceylonese bourgeoisie, for whom humanitarian engagement became a measure and expression of Anglophone identity (Jayawardena, 2000; Peebles, 1995; Wickremeratne, 1996). As the premier charitable organisations in the colony, the Societies were an important feature of this landscape, although in several ways they also stood apart from it. In England at that time, ideas of "charity organisation" – the rational investigation of claimants' backgrounds to avoid haphazard wasteful and irresponsible giving – were beginning to take root (Humphreys, 2001). Based on "scientific" methods, charity organisation would help to institutionalise humanitarian ideals that saw assistance given between autonomous persons based on evidenced need rather than the relations of kinship or religion. Many would express this commitment by referring to the old English proverb that "a friend in need is a friend indeed" by including the term "friend" in their name. Thus, the "friendly societies" of 19th century Britain embodied the value of liberal humanism that came to shape the Victorian worldview.

In Ceylon, the Friend-in-Need Societies became a conduit for precisely such efforts. Although originating in colonial Anglicanism, the Societies' mandate saw them carve out a field of activity distinguishable from both the religious concerns of Christian missionaries and the self-aggrandising of "aspirational" philanthropists. Alongside European subscribers, they attracted elite Ceylonese for whom an ethnic and religious identity as Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim, and Burgher, Buddhist, Hindu, or Christian, mattered less than their (upper) class identity.

Subscribers would define their approach to charity in contrast to what they viewed as wasteful and disorganised "native" charity practiced by their lower-class compatriots, which they argued tied recipients into relations of dependency and despondency. Emerging ethnological and ethnographic studies of kinship[ii] that argued familial bonds provided the framework of and glue for native association inspired this view (Wickremeratne, 1996). Commenting on how the Society had worked to undermine such charitable "primordialism," on the organisation's 130th anniversary the Society president, Mr. D.B. Ellepola, celebrated the ethos of *friendship* that he claimed had added "that extra touch of humanity" to charitable relations in the island. The "true spirit of giving" that the Society embodied, he argued, "makes it so much easier for the receiver to receive and the giver to give" (Colombo Friend-in-Need Society, n.d.).

Yet as historian Upali C. Wickremeratne (1996, 140) has observed, the colonial elite simultaneously viewed native charitable traditions rooted in kinship as "capable of protecting…[the]…needy." Importantly, the British depended upon those traditions for helping to maintain "coolie" relations that underpinned the industrialising agricultural and plantation economies in the island. Not only did the indentured nature of estate labour depend upon caste, class, and gender inequalities to function (Jegathesan, 2019), but also native charity provided a safety net during mean times. So-called "native" forms of mutual aid and assistance helped to ensure the survival of the plantations, and crucially the retention of estate workers, during the several periods of recession that struck the economy during the 19th and early 20th centuries. If the British mission was to civilise charitable practice by replacing "kinship" with "friendship," how to retain the benefit of native mutuality became a question that troubled the elite over coming decades.

Kinship and friendship in the colonial archive

The problem of how to reconcile the primordial relations of kinship with the civil relations of friendship featured centrally in three Sessional Papers of the pre- and post-independence parliaments of Ceylon that would lay the foundations for the welfare state (Sessional Paper VII, 1947; Sessional Paper XI, 1956; Sessional Paper XX, 1934). Together, they formalised the older British view of charity that had established a bifurcation of relations between "kin" and "friend," formally recognised the value of native mutuality, and carried those classifications forward into the policy frameworks of the new post-colonial state. For all three, the Friend-in-Need societies stood as the model of charity to emulate – a stage between unorganised native charity and bureaucratic state welfare.

In his "Report on the Proposal to Introduce Statutory Provision for Poor Relief in Ceylon," government officer M.M. Wedderburn made the case for a Poor Law to replace the patchwork of voluntary and government charity then existing in Ceylon (Sessional Paper XX, 1934). For Wedderburn, the Society was the preeminent example of what a scientific approach to poor relief could accomplish. Yet Wedderburn also celebrated what he termed the "notable virtue" of generosity that was inherent within the character of the people of the island and showed how "kinship" had provided a sufficient mechanism for supporting the island's poor and destitute. For Wedderburn, it was not deficiencies in "native charity" per se that necessitated a Poor Law, but the growing complexities of Ceylon's economic fortunes as the island entered world markets and events – the First World War and Great Depression among them. Stopping short of recommending universal welfare, Wedderburn's report championed the rational approach the Societies had pioneered and argued it should provide the model for the government Poor Law to follow.

On the eve of independence in 1947, government officers Jennings, Weerasooria, Pillai, and Das Gupta published their "Report of the Commission on Social Services" (Sessional Paper

VII, 1947). As a document establishing the case for universal welfare, the authors of the Jennings Report were unequivocal in their criticism of the "notable virtue" of charity that Wedderburn had written positively about fifteen years before. The report stated how although "[t]he duty to feed the poor and assist the needy derives from an ancient tradition which is supported and maintained by precepts of all the religions in the island," it had "the defect of producing casual and indiscriminate charity. It encourages the professional beggar and the social parasite" (Sessional Paper VII, 1947: 1). Where Wedderburn had been reluctant to propose a model of universal welfare and favoured instead the promotion of organised charity by committed groups and individuals as a key supplement to the Poor Law, Jennings et al. ultimately saw the state as the only actor capable of delivering appropriate poor relief (Sessional Paper VII, 1947: 2–3). Like Wedderburn, however, they also singled out the Friend-in-Need societies for their valuable and worthwhile contribution over the past one hundred years.

Ten years later, A.S. Kohonban-Wickreme, the director of the new Ministry of Social Services, made an identical argument in his "Report on the Beggar Problem in Ceylon" (Sessional Paper XI, 1956). In the report, Kohonban-Wickreme noted how "[t]he habit of giving alms to beggars…is strongly ingrained in the character of the people of this country," but produced deleterious effects:

> Some give alms because they believe that by doing so they will acquire merit. Some are moved strongly to sympathy on the sight of the beggar. Some give because it is the quickest way of getting rid of a nuisance. Some do not wish to be considered to be lacking in charity by any onlookers while still others give without thinking purely as a matter of habit…Quite often such charity helps the wrong person…Since giving is

unorganised and haphazard it fails to achieve any really useful results (Sessional Paper XI, 1956: 16).

Between Wedderburn's report in 1934 and Kohonban-Wickreme's report in 1957, the government position on "native" charity would harden. Importantly, the case against "organised" charity as an alternative to universal welfare also became undeniable. Nevertheless, this was not to say government was unprepared to accept a space for charity at all. The reports grappled with the question of what to do about the "notable virtue" that made levels of "unorganised" giving so high. For example, Wedderburn commented on the extent of charity to be found in the population, "not only formal charity—the feeding of the poor by the well-to-do on special occasions, and the custom that no supplicant can be sent away without alms—but also in the engrained charity of the people towards their poorer neighbours" (Sessional Paper XX, 1934: 67). Kohonban-Wickreme also remarked on how the financial value of what was given, which, "if added together, would amount to a considerable sum" (1956: 16). Due to a lack of planning this often amounted to nothing but "a waste of public money" – the answer was not to prevent giving (even if one could) but manage it better. The Jennings Report would best frame the government's solution – "To the obligation which arises from kinship must be added the obligation which arises from humanity." Only by modernising charitable relations in Ceylon would the "notable virtue" of native giving have virtuous effects.

Historian Sujit Sivasundaram (2013) argues the British rule of Ceylon was characterised by a dual process of social differentiation and division on the one hand and attempts to create a unified polity on the other hand. I suggest this process of "partioning" and "islanding" (ibid.) was especially notable in the field of charity, where sorting out the proper relations of giving formed one means through which the colonists catalogued native difference and sought to promote their civilising agenda. Identifying the roots of native charity in

"kinship" came to function as a racializing category that conveyed a form of "traditional" subject-hood that stood in contrast to – and sometimes in the way of – the "modern" autonomous person of market and humanitarian relations. At the same time, "kinship" became a virtue of native life that helped to protect the colonial (plantation) economy from collapse – *and* represented a valuable resource if given properly. In what follows, I briefly examine three key instances of this. The first concerns the Colombo Society's efforts to respond to changing economic and social realities following the end of British rule. The second the outbreak of civil war and appearance of funding from international sources. The third the end of war and loss of overseas aid.

"Gone are the lush days of times old…"

Questions of charity's relations became crucial following the Poor Law, Independence, and universal welfare – all of which happened in quick succession between 1938 and 1956, and each of which represented existential threats to the Societies. As a response to Wedderburn's Poor Law in 1938, the Colombo Society learned that it would lose its mandate and funding to deliver charity on behalf of the Colombo Municipal Council. In response, the Society sent a deputation to meet government officials to "lay briefly the claims of the Society for the continuation of Government assistance in order to secure its future" (Colombo Friend-in-Need Society, n.d.). In particular, the Society was keen to stress that "[t]he Society's continued usefulness [in poor relief] could only be met…by the assurance of government assistance" (Colombo Friend-in-Need Society, n.d.). Those appeals went unheard, however, and the Poor Law as it entered the statute books lacked any provision for the Society's work. From 1 January 1940, the Society would no longer receive its usual government grant, "and…only a sum of Rs.4,000/- in respect to the first quarter of January to March 1940 could be hoped for" (Colombo Friend-in-Need Society, n.d.). At the last moment, however, the Colombo mayor

announced that the Council would honour the government grant of Rs.12,000/ for the year – a move that helped the Society to avoid immediate calamity. But along with the reprieve also came a warning – as "[t]he time would come,…at the end of the current year, to consider the Society's future policy without overlapping on the work that would be undertaken by the [Colombo council]" (Colombo Friend-in-Need Society, n.d.).

As the Society saw it, the expansion of government welfare would necessitate tax increases that would in turn reduce the charitable capacity of existing subscribers and deter new members from joining. In response, the Society ended a range of core services including in those areas of child and elder social and health protection the state had taken over. The largest remaining category of the poor, the "able-bodied unemployed and their families," who were not eligible for government support under the Poor Law, were also the most problematic (Colombo Friend-in-Need Society, n.d.). Like the government, the Society had always maintained a highly ambivalent attitude towards this group, fearing that charity merely prevented the able-bodied from seeking or returning to work. If the Society was to maintain an active role in charity provision, this reluctance would need to be overcome.

One (temporary) solution would be to stop the gap created by the slow introduction of work schemes for the able-bodied, which had not yet been established when the Poor Law was introduced (Colombo Friend-in-Need Society, n.d.). In September 1940, the Society president commented that,

> The problem of affording relief to able-bodied unemployed and their families has been growing more acute, for these unfortunates cannot hope to receive assistance under the Poor Law – except in the form of work – but no work schemes have yet matured and consequently the Society is faced with the difficulty of continuing to afford relief wherever destitute conditions appear to exist (Colombo Friend-in-Need Society, n.d.).

At the same time, the Society sought new ways of fundraising. Initial suggestions did not stray far from tried-and-tested methods, namely, appealing to the great and the good. In 1940, for example, ideas included personal requests from subscribers to enlist the support of their friends. Other countered, however, "this involved hard work" and the initiative was not particularly successful (Colombo Friend-in-Need Society, n.d.).

It was not for another twenty years, in 1961, that the Society gave serious thought to expanding its pool of donors beyond elite circles. The problem, as Mr Ellepola, the Society president, argued, was that "Our list of Annual and Monthly subscribers is still very limited. We appeal to the many more of the well-to-do citizens of Colombo." To that end, Mr Ellepola called for a radical change of outlook:

> We need…to survey afresh our stand in Society. Gone are the lush days of old times free from the curbs of heavy taxation, when rich friends, individuals and agency houses could provide all the funds that were required for our work. Today these individuals and agency houses make large contributions to the coffers of the State by way of taxation and necessarily do not find themselves in a position to contribute as lavishly as they did before…True it is, that some part of the taxes they pay flows back to social services, now more widely distributed all over the island. In consequence, it happens that individual Societies are now hard put to financing their organisations, and our Society is no exception (Colombo Friend-in-Need Society, n.d.).

In May 1962, the Society's women members organised a "flag day," which would involve an entirely novel approach – fundraising directly from the city streets. They erected stalls across Colombo at which passers-by could deposit a cash donation, upon which they received a little

flag bearing the Society's name and insignia. By evening the flag day had raised almost Rs.10,000 – a significant amount. The president deemed the initiative a success and confirmed the flag day would become an annual event.

The flag day was an important event in this history of the Society because for the first time the organisation acknowledged that Ceylon had changed. The Society could no longer cling nostalgically to the colonial times and rely on its old friends for help. As Mr Ellepola told subscribers,

> We recognised that the time had come when the ordinary worker in the City should also make his contribution towards the relief of suffering among the distressed…[M]ore than 75% [of the money collected] came from ten cent contributions…[which] goes to show that the small man is a willing contributor. It is true to say that the conditions of the ordinary worker are today a great deal better than they were before. It is at the same time a pride to record that he is ready to recognise the small part at least that he also has to play in the solution to the problems of the distressed – hence the willingness with which he gives on Flag Days

The redefinition of charity's relations the flag days entailed included a subtle but important shift in how the Society viewed the charitable potential of ordinary Ceylonese. The Society discovered that the "notable virtue" recorded by Wedderburn and "considerable sum" noted by Kohonban-Wickreme could be tapped via direct appeal to "the ordinary worker."

Despite the early promise of the flag days, throughout the 1960s and 1970s the Society continued to struggle to fundraise from local sources. In 1970, Mr E.D. Cosme, the Society president, wrote that the Society's Transit Home for Cripples relied on a government payment of "Cents -/75 per head per day," which he complained was "barely sufficient to keep body and

soul together of the unfortunate crippled men, women, and children who seek shelter here" (Colombo Friend-in-Need Society, n.d.). Three years later, the Society voted to change the constitution so that each member would be compelled to donate 5 per cent of his or her annual income to the Provident Fund (Colombo Friend-in-Need Society, n.d.). By 1976, monthly expenditure was once again exceeding income, a situation met with renewed calls for public fundraising campaigns, none of which managed to match what the flag days had achieved a decade before (Colombo Friend-in-Need Society, n.d.).

"This low cost marvel"

From the 1980s, however, the winds of change began blowing once again. In 1982, in search of a new direction that might appeal to public interest, the Society reinvented itself as the national provider of artificial limbs. A lecture given in Colombo by the Indian surgeon Professor P.K. Sethi, co-inventor of the "Jaipur limb" – a low-cost rubber prosthetic – had inspired the Society's secretary, Mrs Swarna Ferdinand, who took the idea to the president, Mrs U.L. Ranasinghe. A year later, in 1983, armed conflict escalated, and thirty years of civil war broke out. Suddenly finding itself in high demand, the Society's "Jaipur limb project" opened the door to a new kind of friend – the foreign donor and development agency looking to support the war-wounded and conflict reconstruction and reconciliation in the island. By 1990, the Society could list the high commissions and embassies of Britain, Canada, Australia, and Germany, as well as USAID, UNICEF, Caritas, World Vision, Handicap International, Rotary and Lions clubs, and Save the Children, among its funders (Colombo Friend-in-Need Society, n.d.). As the Society's president would remark, "the timing was crucial…The Society realised the value of this low cost marvel and felt the need to do something about the ever increasing amputee population in the country" (Colombo Friend-in-Need Society, n.d.).

The project rescued the Society from collapse. With core funding secured by international donors, throughout the 1980s and 1990s the Society experienced a period of financial security it had enjoyed since the high colonial age. Then as now, the Society's fortunes depended crucially upon the involvement of foreign support – the colonial elite during the 19th century and the development industry at the end of the 20th century – a fact that speaks volumes about who the Society's "best" friends were. Having rebranded as a development NGO, the Society formed partnerships with international agencies and became involved in a range of other development programmes. While the Society did maintain many of its older charity projects alongside these new initiatives, the organisation nevertheless adopted the language and methods of "development" and focused more on long-term transformation and less on immediate "poor relief."

"A warm hearted nation"

Yet of course the flow of international aid could not last forever. The end of civil war in 2009 triggered the departure of several major donors and the economic boom that came with the peace saw the country attain the IMF's "middle income" status – triggering a second wave of withdrawal. At the same time, recession in Euro-American economies led to declining funding for aid agencies, and reduced spending in countries like Sri Lanka with their own growing middle classes. Just as the end of British rule fundamentally altered the economic and social landscape within which the Society was operating, so the end of war marked Sri Lanka's transition from a nation in receipt of development assistance to one increasingly expected to "help itself" (Widger, 2012).

For the Society, this meant a return to fundraising from local sources. The Society received an early taste of this new reality in 2002, when the loss of a major USAID grant spelt trouble. At that time, however, the Society president, Mrs Kalyani Ranasinghe, had been able

to plug the gap by appealing to local donors. As she told subscribers, "We made a significant discovery this year, that if we try hard enough we could manage our Programme on local donations." Like those Society presidents and government officers fifty years previously, Mrs Ranasinghe attributed the Society's success to the inherent generosity of Sri Lankan people: "Sri Lanka as you know is blessed with…a wealth of public generosity and goodwill. A call for help in urgent need always brings an avalanche of response. We are a warm hearted nation and do not hesitate to give when the cause is genuine" (Colombo Friend-in-Need Society, n.d.).

By the time I interviewed Mrs Ranasinghe in 2013, however, her earlier optimism seemed to have waned. As I reported above, changing political realities in the philanthronationalist postwar had meant the Society struggled to fundraise in an environment in which religious identity increasingly determined donors' interests and willingness to give – "We are for everybody. But people like to give to their own," she told me. Charity and NGO directors I interviewed from minority communities also shared Mrs Ranasinghe's concerns. For Tamils, Muslims, Christians, and Hindus, Sinhala Buddhist philanthronationalism represented an existential threat. They countered this by minimising or avoiding reference to their own ethnic or religious identity and centring their commitment to Sri Lankan nationhood, through a process I have referred to as "strategic detachment" from the communal obligations of charity and a commitment to liberal humanitarianism (Widger, n.d.). As the Society also found, however, strategic detachment might have helped to protect minority-led organisations from interference and attack from Sinhala nationalist groups, but it also significantly reduced the range of local donors prepared to support them.

The rise of philanthronationalism has reordered charity relations and the meaning of "friendship" in Sri Lanka once again. Organisations like the Society hold on to a concept of "liberal" friendship while many others embrace "religion" – a concept that sociologically if not politically occupies the same terrain that "kinship" once did. Throughout colonial and much of

post-colonial history, Society presidents and government officers regarded "kinship" as an ambivalent force in the charity field giving rise to significant levels of giving most of which they deemed "wasteful." In the contemporary period, "religion" implies a form of charity given according to communal identification (and often a sense of fictive "kinship" too). What differs today is the moral value placed upon "religious" giving, which the government no longer dismisses but embraces as part of its own efforts to embrace and build a Sinhala nationalist community. Meanwhile, the status of "liberal" giving itself has waned, becoming the domain of worried minority philanthropists and colonial-era organisations clinging with no small degree of nostalgia to a bygone era.

Finally, approaches to that "notable virtue" of inherent charitability within the island has changed, too. Sri Lanka routinely falls in the top ten most generous countries in the Charities Aid Foundation's annual "Global Giving Index" in terms of public donations and volunteerism. Presented and celebrated in this way, the "factors" that help to give Sri Lanka its high score – what colonists and philanthronationalists have termed the obligations of "kinship" or "religion" – have become matters of *professional* concern. Much as Society presidents and government officers had spoken of a large but untapped well of charity in the island, today's development agencies talk of replacing falling overseas aid funding with "indigenous" sources of charity and philanthropy (Widger, 2012). How to access this resource has become a question of increased urgency in the new aid landscape, leading to the creation of a novel professional field – that of philanthropy advisors helping organisations to fundraise from local sources – something the Society, of course, has struggled with for centuries.

Conclusion

Over a period of almost two centuries, the question of the Society's relations shaped not only the morality of charity practiced and given, but also how social attachments or detachments

would come to draw together or hold apart charity's subjects. At three decisive moments in the Society's history – independence from British rule (1948), the outbreak of civil war (1983), and the end of war (2009) – the Society offered different definitions of the "friends" it depended upon as changing financial circumstances forced the organisation to reassess its most likely donor and the relative value of liberal and vernacular charitable traditions. Furthermore, sorting the relations of charity would become an important means through which colonial and post-colonial administrators and development professionals would imagine, construct, mobilise, and contest "relationality" itself as a social and political concept. Although Society presidents and government officers took "kinship" and "friendship" as pre-existing categories, it was through the colonial archive that they acquired their material, historical, and social force (Stoler, 2009). Sorting and categorising the relations of charity (and then welfare and development) became a domain of colonial, post-colonial, and anti-colonial disagreement and conflict, most recently in the philanthronationalist landscape where "strategic detachment" has become a matter of survival for minority groups. The history of the Colombo Society reveals how such efforts were not mere sideshows in processes of colonisation and post-colonial development. They were central stages upon which the elite developed new categories of personhood and belonging through which they would seek to govern.

Paying attention to those changing meanings of and commitments to liberal vernacular humanitarianisms draws anthropologists deep into politically charged worlds – but also offers an opportunity to consider further how the concept of relations emerged from encounters of the kind I have described. Colonial encounters in which "kinship" was "primordialised" through its dialogical opposition to "humanity" forged anthropology's epistemology that today disrupts the ontological autonomy of objects. In Sri Lanka, the elites' descriptions of charity's relations emerged from the same Anglophone tradition that produced anthropology's concept of relations, including distinctions made between "kinship" and "friendship." This means

acknowledging how colonial efforts to sort charity's relations had lasting effects on the construction of humanitarian subjects within anthropology as much as the charity and development sectors (Benton, 2016).

Thus construed, an anthropological study of humanitarianism that problematizes the historical construction of relations cannot itself take the undergirding concept of relationality for granted. Recent calls to "decolonise development" by challenging the imperial, extractive logics of intervention (Herring, 2020; Khan, 2021; Langdon, 2013) must be coupled with questioning anthropology's commitment to liberal humanism that derives from that same tradition, as others have argued (e.g. Jobson, 2020; Yazzie, 2018). Such questioning cannot simply result in an embrace of "the relational" as if it really is or can be the antithesis of colonial liberalism and liberal humanism, as so often appears to be the case. At the same time, historical and contemporary ethnography helps to reveal the systems of thought and practice that undergird other ways of theorising people and things and how they connect with one another, including how the exchange of gifts, including in the form of charity, philanthropy, and development, makes up those connections. Perhaps the best place to start, then, is simply without the assumption that the relationality/autonomy dualism is a necessary departure point for, and conclusion of, ethnographic and anthropological analysis.

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[i] In this paper, I refer to the island using two names appropriate to the historical periods I am describing – "Ceylon," for the years before 1972, and "Sri Lanka" for the years thereafter.

[ii] From the mid-20th century, Ceylon became an important focus of anthropological studies of kinship. Those studies would also highlight the social protections that mutuality afforded, in so doing adding further empirical support to the argument that native forms of charity had intrinsic value. How those studies also helped to create and sharpen the divide between "kinship" and "friendship" and "native" and "liberal" charity I am exploring here is an important question, though one beyond the scope of the present article.