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Idioms of Vernacular Humanism: The West and the East

Kathryn Robinson

The Sri Lankan-born anthropologist, Chandra Jayawardena, is a post-colonial scholar whose work helped shape the direction of Australian anthropology. His passionate concern for social justice is reflected in his scholarly interest in the question of inequality. His initial field research was in the plantations of (then) British Guyana, and his work stands as a landmark in studies of the West Indies, in that it did not fall back on racial and cultural explanations to explore the social dynamics of plantation culture but, rather, drew on the analysis of inequality in classical European social theory. His interest in what would now be called global inequalities led him to plantations in Fiji, and then to the independent pepper cultivators of Aceh, in Indonesia, for further fieldwork. This paper takes up Jayawardena's exploration of what I term 'vernacular humanism', through a comparison of his best-known paper on the West Indies (on the 'eye-pass' dispute) with his unpublished paper on Acehnese rebellion. The Acehnese had been the most resistant of all Indies populations to the imposition of Dutch rule, and presented a different set of colonial relations from that of the West Indies. The paper explores the way in which the differing kinds of unequal relations in the two archipelagoes, which were forged in their relationship to mercantile capitalist expansion, were significant in the development of Jayawardena's theorising of inequality.

Keywords: British Guyana; Aceh; Equality; Vernacular Humanism; Peasant Rebellion

Chandra Jayawardena and the Study of Social Inequality

The recognition of human dignity and the erasure of social inequalities were central preoccupations in the work of Sri Lankan-born anthropologist Chandra Jayawardena. Schooled within the Malinowskian tradition of structural-functionalism at the London School of Economics (LSE) in the mid 1950s, Jayawardena carried out his field research among Indian plantation labourers in (the then colony of) British

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Guyana in 1957–58; among Indian plantation workers in Fiji in 1962, 1966 and 1968; and in the Indonesian province of Aceh in 1964 and 1971.¹ Much of the Acehnese research remained unpublished at the time of his untimely death in 1981, at the age of 52.² His work illustrates, even prefigures, the path taken by anthropology in moving beyond a preoccupation with the boundedness of the social worlds we study, the isomorphism of people, place, social structure and culture, to an appreciation of the complex manner in which local communities engage with the social dynamics of a wider world.

This paper argues that the central preoccupations of Jayawardena's work—with questions of equality and inequality and the way in which power at the local level must be understood in the context of imperialist power relations—are powerfully illuminated through the trajectory of his work in the West and East Indies.³ While Jayawardena never explicitly drew out these comparisons, he was fundamentally committed to the idea of 'comparative sociology': the development of anthropological interpretation through comparisons framed by classical social theory. His sociological imagination was sparked by these two archipelagic regions with their commonalities of engagement in the circuits of mercantile capital through plantation agriculture worked by mobile labour. He brings this broad sociological framework to his analysis of the origins of protest and rebellion in poor rural societies.⁴

Jayawardena was born into a lower caste but middle-class Sri Lankan community, and developed an early concern with social inequality. As a student, he was a member of a Sri Lankan group that was part of the Fourth International (an international socialist alliance founded in 1938 by the followers of Trotsky). This early experience forged a political orientation in his work that was sustained through his lifetime. As a young postcolonial intellectual in London in the 1950s, he developed an interest in the social conflict and local experiences of the global expansion of capitalism. The dominant structural-functionalist paradigm of British anthropology at the time emphasised social integration and the study of spatially discrete communities as self-sustaining entities. His doctoral supervisor, Maurice Freedman, had pioneered anthropological studies of Asian migrant communities, and Jayawardena's doctoral project, a study of Indian plantation labourers in (then) British Guyana was one of a number of LSE student projects investigating the Indian diaspora, in order to understand, in particular, the diminution of the significance of caste in migrant communities. However, the particular historical circumstances of Indian migration to the West Indies and the place of Indian labourers in the colonial social structure led him to develop his theoretical understanding about ideologies of equality, and the response to social inequality by subordinated people, including the discovery of what I will call 'vernacular humanist' discourses, and their emancipatory possibilities and limitations. He sought to understand the complex interplay between the valorising of equality within the plantation communities and the achievement-oriented individualism of the wider society. Maurer (1997, 119) summarises Jayawardena's position:

[T]he history of labor extraction in the Caribbean, which denied formal equality to slaves, indentured labourers and free plantation workers alike, encouraged

Caribbean people to imagine themselves as inhabiting a world of substantive equals (perhaps as a form of resistance).

Jayawardena's research in plantations and his interest in theorising social relations of the plantation communities in terms of an expanded understanding of the social universe they inhabited led him to the work of American scholars of global capital, such as Sidney Mintz and Eric Wolf (e.g., Wolf and Mintz 1957). Explicating their position in an undergraduate lecture given in the 1970s (Jayawardena n.d.2), he described Wolf as developing a remark from the anthropologist, Kroeber, that 'peasants constitute part-societies with part-cultures'. Further explicating Wolf, Jayawardena (n.d.2) commented: 'a peasant community cannot be adequately defined unless we also take into account the larger, the total system, and see how the position of the peasant community is defined by this larger system'. The key is domination: political, economic (through land ownership) and cultural. This is the position taken by Wolf (1966), and the developing body of theory along these lines resonated with Jayawardena's analysis in British Guyana.

His interest in the 'peasant' literature coming from the neo-materialism current in American anthropology of the early 1960s was a factor in Jayawardena's focus on Aceh, in another archipelagic post-colony. The Acehnese also cultivated commodities (pepper) for a global market, but this was in a manner in stark contrast to the West Indian sugar plantations (which had used various forms of unfree labour: slave and indentured). The Acehnese had long been independent peasant farmers cultivating pepper in their own plots and selling on capitalist markets. They proclaimed themselves as the originary Muslims of the East Indies archipelago, and Islam was the creed for their anti-colonial struggle, the most protracted and bloody resistance to domination by the Dutch. Islam later fired an Acehnese revolt against the national government of the newly independent Indonesian nation to press for an Islamic state as the form of the independent polity.

Jayawardena took up an appointment at the University of Sydney in 1960, at which time the outposts of anthropology in the British Commonwealth were fiefdoms of British anthropology. However, by this time he had begun his involvement with American anthropologists. He spent 1967 at Yale and Cornell, but his interest in approaches outside British anthropology was not necessarily embraced by his Sydney colleagues (Robinson 2004). In 1969, he became the founding Professor at Macquarie University, also in Sydney, where he named the discipline 'Anthropology and Comparative Sociology' to underscore his commitment to classical European social theory (Marx, Weber and Durkheim) as the foundation for ethnographic study of all cultures.

In the remainder of this paper, I wish to focus on two papers that exemplify common themes in Jayawardena's thinking: an article that seems to be the most cited of his work on British Guyana, and that develops his theoretical approach to the issue of equality (Jayawardena 1968); and an unpublished paper, written in the 1970s, on the (unsuccessful) Islamic rebellion in Aceh (Jayawardena n.d.1). These papers document two 'nodes' in the global expansion of capitalism, which set up different

modes of domination in two archipelagic regions that were strategic locations for mercantile capitalist trade in agricultural commodities. In both situations, he documents a struggle for freedom and autonomy that I characterise as 'vernacular humanism'. While people in one location used a secular rubric of a common humanity, in the other they took Islam as the ideological banner of equality. Jayawardena never published an interpretive approach that relied on a contrast between the East and West Indies; however, the different bodies of his work show a continuity in and development of his central preoccupations.⁵

In addition to these two papers, I have consulted Jayawardena's archived lecture notes to illuminate his prevailing concern with the struggle for human equality, and the manner in which he embraced traditions of social inquiry beyond the prevailing intellectual grip of British structural-functionalism in order to understand the basis of unfreedom and the possibilities (and limitations) of struggles for equality. As a post-colonial intellectual and as someone who pioneered theoretical approaches to emplaced communities that located his research subjects within the 'power geometry' of a world of complex global migrations, market relations and imperial domination, Jayawardena prefigures in his work important trends in contemporary anthropology.

Ideology and Conflict in Lower-Class Communities in Guyana

Jayawardena's research in British Guyana was conducted in residential communities of Indian labourers connected to two sugar plantations. His 1968 paper, which is the one I wish to discuss, is concerned with conflict, in particular a form of intra-community dispute in which an individual responded angrily to a perceived transgression of his rights or diminution of his human dignity. Jayawardena shared his interest in conflict with one of his mentors, Max Gluckman, but, unlike Gluckman who saw conflict as essentially about the maintenance of order, Jayawardena saw the potential of conflict to bring disorder, to challenge forms of dominations. (Like Gluckman, however, Jayawardena was committed to using the range of classical social theory to study the spatially delimited communities that are the primary subject of anthropology.)

The Indian plantation workers in Guyana had been recruited as indentured labourers, in the period from 1838 to 1917, to replace African slaves after emancipation. Many stayed on at the end of their indenture. They were, on the whole, low-skilled, low-income workers, living in company accommodation and 'enjoying' a low standard of living. Their residence in company-owned estates meant that, although they were theoretically free labourers, the company still exercised a high degree of control over their lives; for example, the manager's court had jurisdiction over their family life, commercial dealings and other social relations. According to Jayawardena (1968, 417), the historical distinctions of caste and religion had given way to a sense of solidarity in 'the Indian community', and an 'alternative way of being Indian'; this was expressed in the concept of *mati*, glossed as 'associate, fellow being, equal'. *Mati* operated among the Indians, but could also be extended

outside their group to former slaves. Where *mati* was operative, 'behaviour was governed by norms of amity, respect and consideration for the interests of one's fellow' (p. 417). 'Supporting *mati*' involved sympathy and help for another's needs, and consolation in suffering.

Antagonism to authority, exciting consciousness of under-privileged status and the need to unite in opposition, enhanced the importance of the norms of *mati*. This egalitarianism pervaded all interpersonal relations, so that each person was expected to behave in such a fashion as to recognise, and not to infringe, the equality of personal worth and self-respect of his fellow labourer who was his ally and equal in underprivilege. (p. 422)

This ethic applied not just in the labourer role but in a wide range of contexts; it was commonly expressed in the term: 'Ah we all de same' (p. 422).

Jayawardena saw these egalitarian sentiments emerging in a group of people who were subordinated to management in almost all aspects of their lives, people who 'were deprived of wealth, power and prestige, who knew they could do little to improve their conditions' (p. 423), and he sees this as giving rise to resentment. He argued that, stripped of any other worth and respect, they asserted their only unaffected attribute, 'their human worth, the fact that as human beings they lived, suffered and enjoyed as much and in no way different from the next person' (p. 423). This 'egalitarianism of common humanness' was the moral source of their norms of interpersonal relations.

However, Jayawardena emphasised that, while these norms prevailed in the space of the plantation compound, the plantation workers were simultaneously 'members of the wider society' (p. 425). He saw this wider social world as characterised by values of achievement, material success and competition for prestige, values incompatible with the egalitarian ideology. Achievements such as higher income, a larger house or material possessions were not in themselves infringements of egalitarian norms, unless they became the basis for claiming superiority and greater prestige over one's fellow residents. The expression of such superiority, or the suspicion of it, gave rise to a common form of dispute, referred to as '*eye-pass*'; 'to *eye-pass* was to wound self-esteem, belittle and humiliate and could take forms such as building a bigger house, beating a child, throwing a stone at a dog or fowl' (p. 425; emphasis in original).⁶ While such conflicts could occasionally be resolved in community organisations, they usually took public form as slander and abuse and, in any year, about one in ten adults faced a court case arising from such a dispute.

Jayawardena's interest in conflict developed early in his fieldwork. In a letter in November 1956, Freedman advised him that he should 'concentrate on a single settlement' and that:

what you say about the resolution of conflict is very interesting, but such a study could only be done on the basis of a very detailed examination of the kinds of groups in existence. Before you undertake the broader analysis of social process, you must have thorough information about the primary units in the society you are dealing with.

Freedman suggested that these units would include the 'three religious categories ... types of family organisation and the way in which the marriage system works'. The analysis that Jayawardena developed went beyond what Strathern (1992, 79) has identified as the 'then-prevailing cartographic images of social structure that insisted on boundedness to the division of social interests'. Jayawardena's analysis focused more on tensions between ideologies in imbedded forms of sociality.

Jayawardena concluded that human groups become concerned with issues of fundamental equality (which he identifies as a moral force, as equality rooted in the human condition, in the equality of men deriving from their intrinsic personal or human worth) when they have little influence over the broad forces of inequality operating in the external world.⁷ He contrasted this with another form of egalitarianism, which relates to 'the equality of political, economic and other social rights and opportunities (the egalitarianism of De Toqueville, for example)' (Jayawardena 1968, 415). The two types of inequality were connected, however:

because intrinsic or human equality seems to prevail in inverse relation to the prevalence of social equality. Typically, notions of human equality are dominant in a sub-group to the extent that it is denied social equality by the wider society. The denial may be complete or only substantive in that actual conditions fall far short of the ideal of equal rights and opportunities proclaimed as the standard. In all of the examples of an emphasis on human equality examined here, the ideology prevails in a segment that stands in opposition to the social order that denies, or is believed to deny, to the group access to the sources of wealth, power and prestige in the society. (Jayawardena 1968, 414–15)

Factors in disputes concerning issues of fundamental equality, paraphrased from Jayawardena's discussion on pages 425–26, could include:

- (1) A community in a complex society whose members are uniformly of low status in the wider scheme of things. They see themselves as underprivileged, and are not reconciled to that position.
- (2) A dominant egalitarian ideology which is the basis of social solidarity and occasional protest.
- (3) The norms of such an ideology conflict with the existing degree of differentiation—so community members compete for prestige, as members of the wider society/collective.
- (4) In the absence of formal corporate controls such conflicts lead to frequent disputes between individuals over real or alleged breaches of egalitarian norms.

If Jayawardena had been writing at a later historical period, his emphasis on egalitarianism may have been challenged by the more recent emergence of ethnic conflicts (see, for example, the analysis by Moore 1995). Contemporary ethnographers, however, still describe the operation of principles that we might call 'vernacular humanism' in lower-class communities. For example, Williams (1991, 170) finds similar norms of egalitarianism in contemporary Guyana:

Egalitarianism is not, therefore, a set of precepts aimed at specifying the conditions or mode of conduct for absolute equality ... [I]t is a code requiring individuals to

recognise that 'wan hand cain wash or clap' ... [E]veryone should understand that all accomplishments and their enjoyment are made possible by assistance attained from others; therefore, everyone should be willing to assist others.

As people struggle for individual prestige, they should demonstrate their respect for the dignity of others, and their willingness to engage in generalised reciprocity and to participate in mediation of transgressions of this value. Such norms of egalitarianism and concerns for status equalisation have been identified in other parts of the West Indies: for example, in Austin's (1984) study of working-class Jamaicans, and Maurer's (1997) study in the British Virgin Islands.⁸

Mati was implicated in social conflicts beyond the 'community' of labourers as well. The plantation labourers did not have trade unions or political parties that adequately represented their interests to the external world. There were not infrequent disputes in the cane fields over things like work conditions, rates of pay and working hours, but in such cases 'the labourers fell back on their own resources' feeling no institutions represented them to the world (Jayawardena 1968, 417–18). Here, the norms of *mati* came into play: Jayawardena describes the manner in which news of a dispute that had spontaneously erupted moved through the fields; all labourers downed tools in expression of *mati* even if they did not know the cause of the dispute, 'weld[ing] themselves into a tightly knit group to counterbalance the power of management by an almost complete unanimity of action' (p. 418). '[S]ooner or later the specific grievances were transformed into a wider and more basic sense of the injustice of the social order' (p. 420), expressing their lack of faith in it, and their acute sense of injustice. '[T]he action developed into an effort to compel the institutions of society to operate in terms of the coolies' standards of what was just' (p. 420). Overall their actions were 'expressive rather than instrumental' (p. 420) and, although usually peaceful, could erupt into violence.

The picture emerges of a group that has limited capacity to make demands on the powerful in a society where its members count amongst the most insignificant. The decline of the differentiating institutions of Indian society—class and religion—relates to the development of the radical egalitarian ideology that is a response to their powerlessness. Jayawardena is describing what we can call a vernacular discourse of humanism: a moral imperative staking claims to dignity and a 'fair go' by people whose lives have been radically transformed within new forms of social differentiation and subordination, through their engagement as poor labour migrants moving into a new economic niche opened up by capitalist expansion.

Jayawardena's analysis prefigures the theme that developed in the literature on peasant protest and rebellion that so interested him, in particular Scott's (1985) discussion of the importance of valuing human dignity in the consciousness of the dispossessed and marginal, and the manner in which conflict could be triggered by a denial of dignity, as much as by a shortage of material goods. Scott's (1976) earlier analysis of 'moral economy' was also concerned with the manner in which the expansion of capitalist forms of production apparently eroded social forms of solidarity and co-operation, an assumption also shared with Jayawardena's analysis.

Kerkvliet (in press) notes, in a review of over half a century of students of peasant protest, that: 'In-depth research finds that while people can be deferential and pushed around, they can also assert claims to subsistence, better living conditions, and dignity.'

In contemporary theoretical terms, the subordinate migrant labourers experienced a 'spatial reorganisation of social relations' in the context of international flows and movements, and a 'power geometry of time-space compression' (Massey 1994, 12 and 14), which affords individuals multiple and different ways to access power in relation to those flows and movements. However, outside their own immediate neighbourhoods, the power they exercise is limited and, in Jayawardena's view, *mati* was a poor basis for pressing people's interests as a class. Hence, while Jayawardena's approach, emerging out of the interest in peasant rebellion by left-leaning American scholars, treads some of the same terrain as Scott's influential work, Jayawardena stayed more comfortably within the orbit of Marxist analysis than did Scott, who was centrally concerned with the poor capacity of material conditions to predict peasant protest and rebellion.

Islam and Rebellion in Aceh

The colonised plantation space of British Guyana stands in marked contrast to the colonised space of the East Indies, at least in the province of Aceh where Jayawardena conducted his research. Aceh faces out to the Indian Ocean, and there is a common Acehnese joke that ACEH stands for 'Arab, Chinese, European and Hindu', the influences that accompanied international trade circuits, and that are deemed to have shaped their culture. Whereas for the plantation labourers in Guyana Islam became just another manifestation of 'Indian religion', for the Acehnese Islam became a defining feature of their distinctiveness and a rallying cry for opposition to Dutch colonialism. The rejection of colonialism was not a rejection of cosmopolitanism, though. Apart from their enthusiastic embrace of the Islamic religion brought by Arab and Indian merchants, the Acehnese also enthusiastically entered the trade circuits that, from the fifteenth century, linked them into the global market. Indeed, as Jayawardena (n.d.1) notes, the power of the Acehnese sultans rested on their control of sea trade, rather than on their control over land. The convergence of trade and Islam is expressed in the term '*meudagang*': a form of outmigration for the purposes of trade or study at an Islamic school (see also Siapno 2002, 52).

Jayawardena explores the reasons Islam and the authority of Islamic scholars remained strong, consistently serving as a basis for Acehnese resistance to external domination. He locates his analysis in a historical study of the development of a system of authority at the time of colonial conquest, which exhibited a balance between the secular authority of the *uleebelang* or chiefs (*teuku*) and the religious authority of the *imam* (prayer leader in the mosque) and *teungku* (prayer leaders in the men's prayer house or *meunassah*). The sultan had both religious and secular

authority, with limited control over the *uleebelang*, whose power was territorially based. The Dutch attempt at conquest led to protracted resistance by the Acehnese, who fought colonialism as a holy war (*prang sabil*). The 30-year war ended with the Dutch subduing the Acehnese in 1904, although in the ensuing period there were intermittent suicidal attacks on Dutch officials by self-proclaimed Islamic martyrs.

The Dutch destroyed the authority of the sultan, extending Dutch rule through the chiefs (*uleebelang*) to effect Dutch domination. This forced the *ulama* (religious scholars) and *uleebelang* to oppose each other politically, and the *ulama* spearheaded resistance to colonial power, declaring a *jihād* and ‘drawing on allegiances that cut across territorial divisions and loyalties’ (n.d.1, 33). The compromise with Acehnese leaders brokered by the Dutch scholar, Snouck Hurgronje, was based on a conceptual separation of religion and society, but this separation was challenged by young men returning from the Middle East in the 1930s who had been imbued with the spirit of Islamic reform. They rejected the relegation of Islam to the spiritual domain, and *ulama* became identified with a growing nationalist movement and the promotion of the idea of a state based on Islamic law.

The central role of Islam in Acehnese anti-colonialism and social revolution is supported by Reid (1979) in his landmark study of Indonesian nationalism in northern Sumatra. Reid (p. 254) concludes:

In the case of Aceh, the ideology was Islam, which had always been at the heart of Acehnese patriotism and since the 1930s also a route to modernisation. Once the *ulama* declared that defence of the Indonesian Republic was a holy war ... there could be no doubt that popular sympathy would be behind it. The *uleebelang* fell in the first instance because a few of them had brazenly defied this popular mood.

Islam again became the rubric of protest in the newly independent Indonesia, which was ushered in through the collapse of Dutch authority in the face of the Japanese invasion in World War II. The *uleebelang* (chiefs), however, pressed for the return of the Dutch and the retention of their privileged status, but this was challenged by Islamic groups, especially the youth group (*pemuda*) of PUSA (the Persatuan Ulama Seluruh Aceh, or All-Aceh Religious Scholars’ Association. Siapno [2002, 159] comments that PUSA was jokingly called *Pembunuh Uleebelang Seluruh Aceh*, which can be translated as ‘The killers of *uleebelang* in all of Aceh’). Such Islamic groups supported the new republic declared by Sukarno and Hatta in 1945. The new republican government installed in Aceh passed laws to return all property of ‘enemies of the state’ (which they claimed had been illegally obtained from the peasants and the mosques, in any case) to the rightful owners. Many *uleebelang* families lost their property and were subjected to violence.

The leaders of Pemuda PUSA [the youth wing of PUSA] ... identified the *prang sabil* [holy war] with a *revolusi* [revolution] ... To them the struggle against the Dutch and the Uleebelang [chiefs] was a fight against the ‘*ancien regime*’ and the ‘*kaum feodal*’ [feudal class]. (Jayawardena n.d.1, 44)

Jayawardena observes that the senior *ulama* regarded the *ulebeelang* as *kafir* [infidels] who supported the return of the infidel Dutch (and *ipso facto* opposed an Islamic state), rather than opposing them as a class, but they were 'reaping the whirlwind in their peasant followers and particularly their pupils and protegees' (n.d.1, 44). He notes that 'it was the French and not the Russian revolution. There was a change in ownership, not an abolition of property as such' (n.d.1, 44–45). The property confiscations laid the base for a new propertied class, in the *teungku* (prayer leaders in the men's prayer house), who also assumed political power, and, additionally, there was considerable redistribution of land to the peasantry.

Islam again became the basis for political mobilisation when Acehnese economic and political interests were threatened by the new republic. In 1951, the special autonomous status of Aceh within the republic was revoked, ostensibly as a fiscal measure, but it was followed by the installation of Javanese civil and military officials, and restrictions were placed on Acehnese trade. The *uleebelang* (chiefs) who had fled were invited back to occupy powerful positions (on the basis of their education and experience). The government threatened to set up an inquiry into the confiscation of *uleebelang* lands. The declaration by Sukarno of the Pancasila principles,⁹ which denied a special status to Islam above other religions, was the final trigger for the disappointed Acehnese. The former Acehnese governor, Daud Beureueh, was persuaded to lead a rebellion, which sought contact with the Darul Islam (state based on Islamic law) movement in other parts of the country. There was little actual fighting: after an initial defeat, the rebels retreated to the mountains. Jayawardena interprets the retreat as in part a ritual act, a withdrawal into the mountains where the rebels re-formed a true Islamic society in their *asrama* or barracks. They remained there until 1957, when a negotiated settlement was reached. It did not allow for Islamic law, but did return some of the rebels to critical positions in government.

Why did Islam have such a powerful hold on the imagination of so many Acehnese that it was able to become the basis of the ideal of a just political order? Jayawardena seeks the answer in social organisation, not in religious belief.

In a paper published in 1977, he takes up the puzzle identified by Snouck Hurgronje (1906) and also addressed by Siegel (1969): the apparent contradiction between the Acehnese profession of their patrilineal social organisation, making them the most Arab-like people in the archipelago, and the observed fact of matrilineal elements in their kinship, in particular matri-uxorilocal residence. In daily affairs, the Acehnese acknowledged the important dual regulation of *hukum* (law—derived from Islam) and *adat*, or custom. While the person of the sultan represented both Islam and *adat*, in the space of the village *adat* was regulated under the authority of the *uleebelang* (chiefs), separate from the regulation of Islamic principles by religious authorities. However, Acehnese men had a tenuous tie to everyday village life. They spent their time between their own and their wives' villages, and most of it in the *meunassah* or men's meeting house.

Men conducted their economic activities outside the orbit of the village. They travelled to frontier areas of Aceh to establish pepper gardens, the travelling quest known as *merantau* or *meudagang* (which, as previously noted, can be used to refer to travel in search of either money or religious knowledge). Men in the *rantau*—in pepper planting, trade or the Islamic school—‘did not base their relations with each other on ties of kinship and locality as in the village, for they were no longer applicable in the new setting’ (Jayawardena n.d.1, 29). Rather, they regarded each other, and found the standards to evaluate behaviour and devise and interpret norms, in terms of Islam.

They saw themselves, whether in trading colonies in market towns or as students in a *pesantren*, or for a few hours each day in the *meunassah*, as Muslims, forming an *ummat*, an Islamic community. Away from the village, Acehnese men tended to base their ideology and ethics not on their kinship and residential positions, but on their status as Muslims and Acehnese, which to them are one and the same thing. (Jayawardena n.d.1, 29)

So Jayawardena sees Islam as a counter-force in providing a basis of association across village and kinship ties, as a balance to the power of the *uleebelang*, which was based in *adat*. In the *rantau*, the men find a kind of Islamic brotherhood, an egalitarianism in which social life is regulated by nothing more than the precepts of Islam. Islam provides the basis for a moral order that is in tension with the moral order of *adat*. In this space, the daily practice of prayer allows for the cultivation of *akal*, or rationality, in contrast to the domination of passion, or *hawa nafsu*, in the domesticated female space of the village (n.d.1, 29).

The moral sensibilities of the space of Islamic brotherhood have similarities with the egalitarian moral values whose transgression leads to the ‘eye-pass’ dispute (in Guyana). This egalitarianism provided the basis for the continuing counter-force of religious authority to secular power in Aceh. Religion also provided the basis for the challenge to domination from outside the community (seen as a defence of Islam), in a manner similar to the response to transgressions of *mati* in Guyana by dominant outside forces. In Aceh, the prevailing egalitarianism transformed itself into an equalising grab for resources, when tensions erupted between religious and secular power. In analysing Islam as the basis of an egalitarian order, and as the moral sentiment underlying Acehnese rebellion, Jayawardena displays a concern for the relation between the dynamics of interpersonal relations in a discrete spatial location, and the engagement with moral orders beyond the local, related to more extensive forms of domination. This same concern was manifest in his analysis of *mati* in Guyana.

In developing an approach to understanding the role of Islam in this moral order, Jayawardena is critical of the limitations of the then-dominant Durkheimian perspective in anthropological studies of religion, which he saw as inadequate for the study of world religions (n.d.1, 2–3). The Durkheimian approach (see Durkheim 1965) analyses religious behaviour in terms of rituals rather than in terms of belief, an approach Jayawardena says is inadequate for the understanding of the ‘universal

religions', which have elaborate philosophical systems and textual traditions, and their expression in 'widely disparate social circumstances' (n.d.1, 4). In a comment directed at Geertz's *Religion of Java* (1964), which was a new and important work at the time of his research, Jayawardena (n.d.1, 4) notes that 'the establishment of a correspondence between social structure and religion becomes a hazardous business'. He is critical of the Parsonian interpretation of Weber, of the 'post-Parsonian assumption' that 'the gap between belief and social structure has been interpreted as corresponding to the different orientation of groups constituting a different society' as in *Religion of Java* (n.d.1, 4). The problem for Jayawardena is that Geertz fails to deal with the 'facts that the basic tenets of Islam are accepted by all strata', and he 'fails to relate these common beliefs to the social structure or the social process' (n.d.1, 6). If Islam is identified with the market, how can one explain its rebellious form in Indonesia, by and large conducted by peasants? 'Why should these peasants die for the ideology of the Bazaar merchants?' (n.d.1, 7).

Jayawardena (n.d.1, 8) argues that Parsons was incorrect in his representation of Weber, that 'the relation Weber drew between religion and social change was a paradox that was based, not on a reflection but on the contradiction between religion and society'. 'If religion cannot explain the contradictions of life, it is because it is a contradiction of life' (p. 62). He quotes a longer version of Marx's famous epithet on religion:

Religious distress is at the same time the *expression* of real distress and the *protest* against real distress. Religion is the sign of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the *opium* of the people. (p. 62)

Religion is a 'reversed world-consciousness' (Marx 1975, cited by Jayawardena, p. 1). It is a reflex of social life (p. 63). Jayawardena contends that Weber's position (which he argues has been misunderstood through the Parsonian interpretation) is very close to Marx's true position (misunderstood because of the bowdlerised citations that emphasise the metaphor of 'opium' with all its connotations of evil, anti-social, destruction). In support of his interpretation of Weber, Jayawardena cites passages from Weber's *Sociology of religion* (1965) that emphasise a fundamental tension between religious ethics and social life.

To the extent that religion organizes the world from a religious perspective into a systematic rational order and cosmos, its ethical tensions with the social institutions of the world are likely to become sharper ... Indeed the very tension which this religious ethic introduces into the human relationships toward the world becomes a strongly dynamic factor in social evolution. (Weber cited by Jayawardena n.d.1, 65)

This analysis, however, leads Jayawardena to argue that religion as a basis for rebellion is as impotent as *mati* to effect real change. What happens when religious ideology becomes the basis of a movement to act on the world? 'What happens to those who are guided by the opposite of social reality when they become actively implicated in it?' (Jayawardena n.d.1, 65). In the case of the (unsuccessful) Acehnese

rebellion: 'By a process of dialectical antithesis the successful world-rejecters produced a group very much tied to the power and wealth of the material world ... isolating the intransigent in an irrelevant defiance in the mountains' (p. 66).

Islam on the one hand provides a universal ideology of equality (at least for men!)—a kind of cosmopolitanism—and also it is embraced by all levels of society. However, the Acehnese rebellion, in his view, ultimately failed in the manner of all peasant rebellions. His paper ends with a poignant image of Daud Beureueh retreating with the 'rump' of his army, to the hills, insisting on a purity of project which they could not sustain.

There is perhaps an unresolved tension between Jayawardena's interest in what I have called 'vernacular humanism'—a passion for autonomy and equality, or their potentiality, as an aspect of the human condition—and his pessimism in regard to the capacity of 'peasants' to organise themselves effectively in challenging/claiming power. For both the Guyanese plantation labourers and the Islamic Acehnese, the quest for freedom and autonomy cannot be realised in terms set by their own egalitarian ideologies. The Guyanese plantation workers, in their vernacular humanism, express in a simple form the moral imperative behind human rights thinking, the rejection of the doing of harm to others, on the basis of a faith in an essential humanness.¹⁰ The Acehnese rebels could not transcend the inequalities of the real world in which they struggled to instantiate their Islamic-derived egalitarian vision. The expression of these ideologies in everyday social practice is undermined by the inequalities inherent in the wider social forces that encompass their life-worlds. Jayawardena's biography gave him an interest in vernacular discourses that valorised self-determination and autonomy, but his Marxism gave him a pessimistic view of their possibility of self-realisation in a world increasingly characterised by global forms of dominance and subordination.

Conclusion

Jayawardena was a significant figure in the development of the character of Australian anthropology, its openness to intellectual currents from all over the world. He was an influential colleague and teacher for many of Australia's now 'senior' scholars. His own position as a colonial subject, and his political activism, sharpened his attention to the importance of dealing with the part/whole issue in relation to post-colonial societies. For Jayawardena, the dynamics of an expansive global capitalism, rather than the more limited scope of a 'culture area', set the stage for his inquiries. However, we can see how his thought productively develops through his research across the two archipelagoes (and the island nation of Fiji).

Jayawardena can be regarded as a forerunner of the current generation of post-colonial anthropologists whose approach was critically formed by neo-Marxist approaches to the studies of the Third World that were current in the 1970s. His research purposefully engaged with people experiencing the dislocation and marginalisation common to the residents of these island communities after being

caught up in expansive capitalism. However, his conceptualisation of the way in which we need to understand the local in terms of broader power relations, and his refusal of the ahistorical conflation of temporality and spatiality current in British (and Australian) anthropology of his day, mark his work out as a forerunner of contemporary anthropological concerns. The varied imperial histories of the two archipelagoes with their long mercantile connections to the expansive global order provided him with a 'laboratory' for his ethnographic explorations in 'comparative sociology', the application of the classical sociological theory that theorised the development of capitalism out of the feudal order. These archipelagic sites nourished his development of ways of conceptualising the spatially delimited communities that anthropologists study in terms of the economic, political and cultural flows that we now discuss under the rubric of globalisation.

Notes

- [1] Jayawardena's considerable reputation outside Australia rests very much on his research in Guyana, which is widely cited by current scholars. His Indonesian research is less extensively known.
- [2] I have recently been working on Jayawardena's unpublished Aceh material, which is held in the archives at Macquarie University in Sydney.
- [3] Jayawardena's work with Indian plantation workers in Fiji, conducted in between the 'Indies' research, is also important in the development of his ideas.
- [4] A recent paper by Kerkvliet (in press) reviews the history of scholarly studies of agrarian unrest in Southeast Asia, and Jayawardena's preoccupations reflect the trend of the mid twentieth century, when in-depth studies of particular situations refined understanding of the conditions creating unrest and rebellion, although Jayawardena also remained committed to the grand sweep of history approached through classical social theory.
- [5] Equality and Inequality was the theme selected for a conference commemorating Jayawardena's work, the papers from which were published as a special issue of *Mankind*, edited by Bedford, Bottomley and Hamilton (1987).
- [6] Jayawardena writes of a masculine subject, so it is not possible to ascertain how women were incorporated into *mati*: as active subjects, or as objects of disputes, or both.
- [7] In his essay, Jayawardena (1968, 413) goes on to investigate a number of other case studies of conflict, which he sees as indicating the presence of egalitarian ideologies, and he identifies factors that contribute to their emergence.
- [8] Austin (1984, 251, n. 1), who refers also to Foner's (1973) work on Jamaica, concluded that the frequency of such disputes attests to the lack of power of the working class at the national level. Maurer (1997, 70–71) discusses a similar process of status equalisation.
- [9] Sukarno claimed that he 'discovered' this set of five principles as an autochthonous political ideology for the new nation. The first principle (*sila*) obliges all Indonesians to believe in God, but the form of worship is dictated by the faith professed by each citizen.
- [10] In a world where politicians are promoting ideologies that emphasise our essential differences (currently and most frighteningly in the anti-Islamic Clash of Civilisations discourse), what are needed are gestures on a grand scale that mark out our essential sameness. In responding to the (presumed) Islamic fundamentalist gesture of bombing a nightclub full of tourists in Bali in 2002, the Australian government implemented an airlift of victims who were described by an official as 'all friendly nationals'. (Interestingly, it was a New Zealand airforce plane that brought out the first Balinese medical evacuees.) The partisan grieving and support for White

victims that marked the early official response was a lost opportunity to counter effectively the gesturing to difference inherent in the bombing.

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