

Towards recognizing Traditional Knowledge Systems

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Abstract

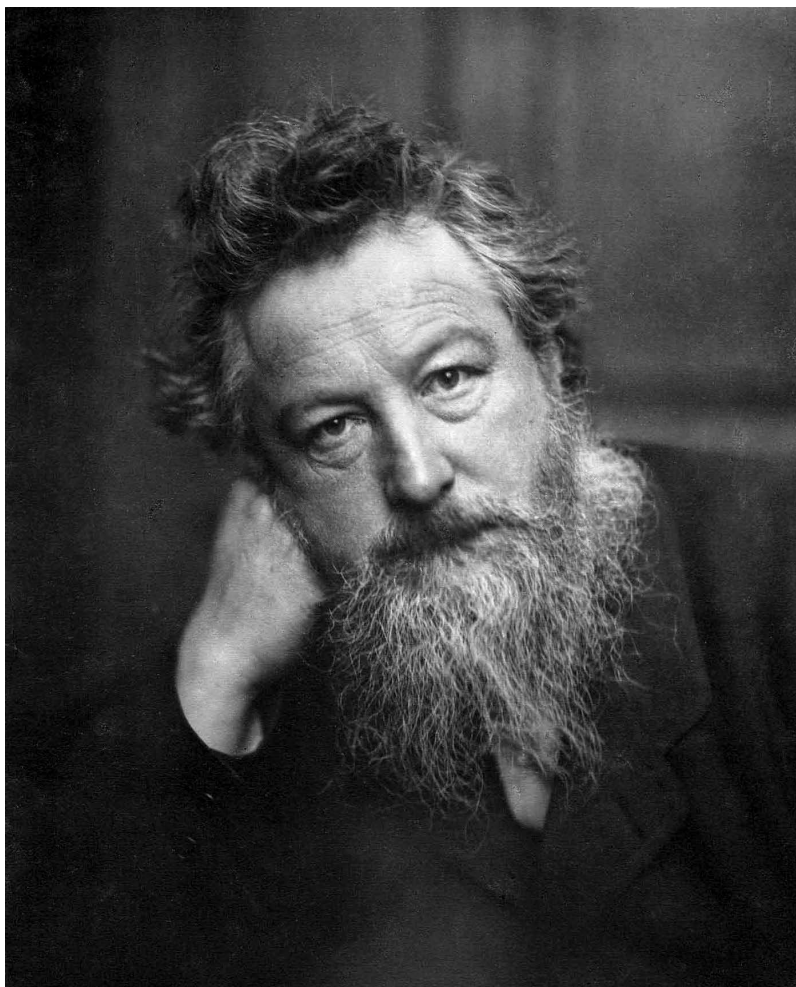
Despite his strong association with William Morris who pioneered the Modern Conservation Movement and became one of its advocates, Coomaraswamy highlighted the importance of traditional knowledge systems, traditional crafts and associated literary and other sources among which was the Sri Lankan version of the Mayamata. Such knowledge, although overlooked by those who developed the modern conservation movement is now being considered globally as important sources for conservation and management of heritage both cultural and natural. The purpose of this brief survey is to provide a glimpse of such knowledge as evident from several sources.

Keywords: Conservation, Traditional Knowledge Systems.

A quick survey

In his writing on “Ananda Coomaraswamy and William Morris”, Lutchmansingh suggests that “perhaps the most comprehensive and complex body of opinion to develop principles of association between the related terms (though not politics, at least not in the same degree) along Morrisian lines was that of the Sinhalese Orientalist and art-historian, Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947)” (Lutchmansingh, 1990: 35), the key personality focused in this volume. However, Morris became a popular and well known within the heritage circles, whilst, Coomaraswamy was more popular, in the circles of philosophy of art and religions due to plethora of work done by him. Despite being as Roger Lipsey’s claims that Morris was his “greatest mentor, the man from whom he learned the most and upon whose life he patterned his own throughout [his early] years” (Lutchmansingh, 1990: 35) one could wonder why he is lesser known in the heritage circles (not the museums). This is not entirely true as Lipsey has noted how Coomaraswamy “adapted the ideas and even the language of Morris to a new setting” in his 1905 *An open letter to the Kandyan Chiefs* calling for the preservation of Sri Lanka’s architectural heritage. Through this letter, he introduced the early concepts of conservation by Morris to Sri Lanka which had a long recorded pre and post-colonial history of conservation (Wijesuriya, 1993). He highlights philosophy being propagated in the early days of the development of conservation discourse by Ruskin and Morris as follows:

The ruinous state of ancient buildings and their scandalous neglect might also be written on. It is not restoration they need, but more preservation, a few tiles or a new beam, and protection from white ants. Instead of this, the most ancient buildings in the remoter districts are simply rotting away, and often used as cattlesheds; very occasionally they are unjudiciously and unwisely “restored” and thereby absolutely ruined as works of art and beauty? (Morris in Lipsey,



WILLIAM MORRIS, CA.1887. Photograph by Fredrick Holyer. *Image: Public domain.*

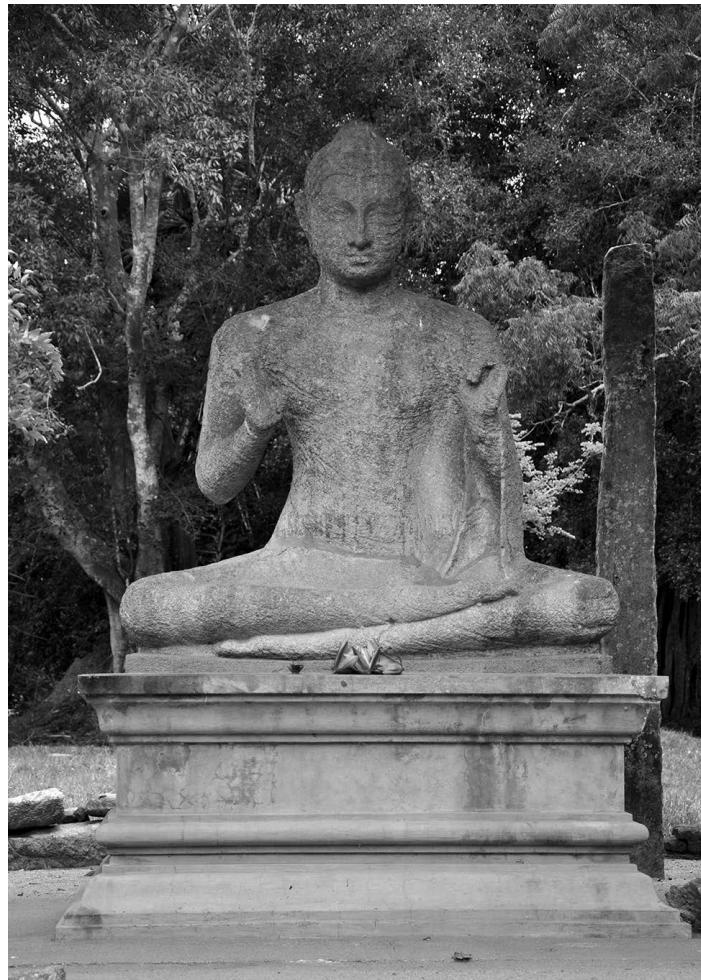


ANANDA COOMARASWAMY AND STELLA BLOCH. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. *Image: Public domain.*

1977: 261, quoted in Lutchmansingh, 1990: 36).
Furthermore, as suggested by Lutchmansingh,

*A more concrete connection between Morris and Coomaraswamy came about in 1907 when the latter, upon returning to England after service in the Mineralogical Survey of Ceylon and settling in Broad Campden, purchased from Ashbee's Essex House Press and put into service an original Kelmscott press, even taking along some of Morris's own workers. Thus was printed his first major art-historical work, *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art*, in 1908. The inspiration drawn directly from Morris as regards the scope and intent of the work and the circumstances of its publication was suggested in the foreword, where Coomaraswamy wrote as follows: It is of interest to record, in connection with the arts and crafts aspect of the questions just discussed, that this book has been printed by hand, upon the press used by William Morris for printing the Kelmscott Chaucer.... I cannot help seeing in these facts an endeavour to restore that true Art of Living which has for so long been neglected by humanity (Lutchmansingh, 1990: 36).*

Mediaeval Sinhalese art, in the own words of Coomaraswamy, is “a record of the work and the life of the craftsman in a feudal society not unlike that of Early Mediaeval Europe” (Coomaraswamy, 1979: v).



BUDDHA, ANURADHAPURA. Image: Valerie Magar.

Mediaeval Sinhalese art is not a mere description of traditional arts and crafts of Sri Lanka, but a compendium of traditions of crafts, paintings and architecture as well as traditional knowledge systems that existed in Sri Lanka, his motherland. It is these manifestations in the form of paintings, sculptures, monuments and ruins, for the preservation of which he wrote the letter mentioned above to the rulers and guardians of the country during the British colonial rule. Contents of the volume also includes a summary of the *Mayamata* as it prevailed in Sri Lanka. This document of which a chapter is translated in this volume was in circulation in the region for guiding the construction of buildings, cities and villages as well as their long term care (conservation). In addition, he also introduced other texts like Rupavaliya (containing instructions for the drawing of images) which contains detailed guidance of constructing sculptures including Buddha statues. These literatures also include restoration of dilapidated statues, similar to the "Chapter on Renovation" extracted and translated from the Indian version of *Mayamata*.

Undoubtedly, he referred to well-known written sources but there were plenty of examples of traditional knowledge systems existing in diverse forms of written materials in chronicles, inscriptions and texts themselves (Wijesuriya, 1993). Following are only a few samples.

According to the *Mayamata*:

Those (temples) whose characteristics are still perceptible in their principal and secondary elements (are to be renovated) with their own materials. If they are lacking in anything or have some similar type of flaw, the sage wishing to restore them, (must proceed in such a way that) they regain their integrity and that they are pleasantly arranged (anew); this (is to be done) with the dimensions - height and width – which were theirs, with decorations consisting of corner, elongated and other aedicule, without anything being added (to what originally existed) and always in conformity with the advice of the knowledgeable (Mayamata, 2018: 24).

A 9th century Inscription found in Sri Lanka refers to specialized persons who lived in a specific village allocated to them:

*[There shall be] clever stone-cutters and skillful carpenters in the village devoted to the work of [temple] renewal.
They all... shall be experts in their [respective] work.
...shall be granted to the officer who superintends work.
...his respective duties, shall be recorded in the register.
...they alone shall be answerable for its correctness.
The limit [of time] for the completion of work is two months and five days.
Blame [shall be attributed to]... who do not perform it according to arrangement.
Literary sources reveal all types of terminology to suit different interventions.*

There were principles related to treatment to objects as well:

...when an image is slightly damaged, it should never be discarded; but when its arms, hands, feet and legs are severed, when it is broken, split up or nine Yava portion of it gone or when it gets disfigured, it is usually to be discarded. If its fingers, etc., are cut up (or broken) the sages recommend binding (repairing) them (Silparatna).

The King should not set up or keep in a temple a disproportioned or broken image; worn out images of the angels, and ruined temples, are to be carefully restored (Sukranitisara of Sukracarya).

Maintenance of what we consider as heritage today, when they were constructed was a concern to the rulers for which there were specific measures. Allocation of properties to draw income for the maintenance of sacred buildings and complexes was one such mechanism. Such properties were protected by Royal decrees of which evidences is still visible in the form of stone inscriptions. Texts written in one such inscription for their own protection is as follows:

To the villagers, royal officers and irrigation officers shall not enter. Those of the archery department, the tax officers, headmen in charge of districts and of provinces shall not enter. The employees of two offices, deruwana, perelaki, archers, guards, and those of the paid services shall not enter. Carts, oxen, laborers, imposts of cooked and raw rice, and periodical gifts of milk and oil should not be taken... having forbidden the entry of the aforesaid persons, we, two of us (the two officers who planted the pillar) have given to these villages the immunities (sanctioned by) the council (Paranavitana, 1933: 105).

Specific terminology and definitions for diverse interventions also existed in literature: Some are as follows:

- *'patisankharam'* – restoration
- *'puna karayi'*- 'renovation' of a section to its original form
- *'navakamma'*- 'replaced anew'
- *'pinnasankari'* and *'navamkamankaryi'* as 'replacing sections that have been decayed'
- *'parkathika'*- 'replacement of unit as it was previously'

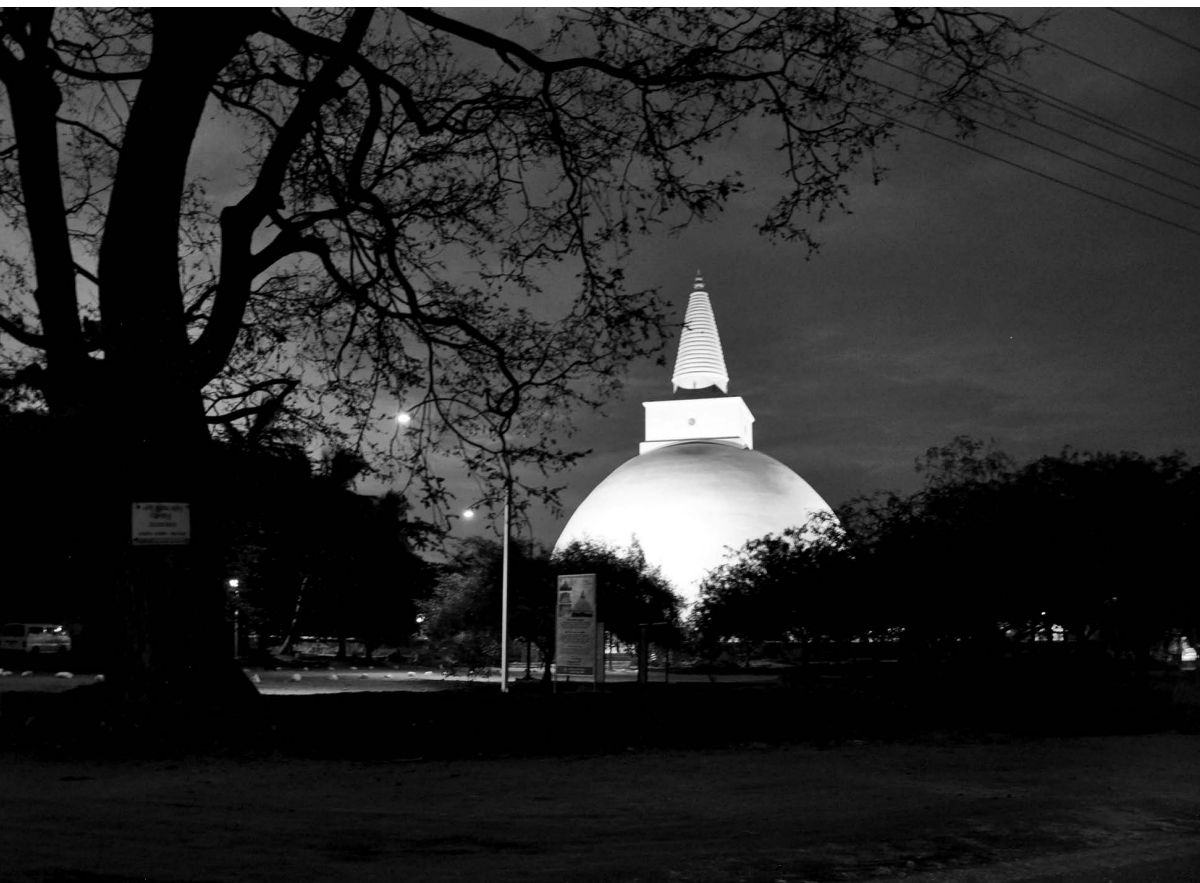
Despite, the recognition and reference by Coomaraswamy, the significance of traditional knowledge was ignored by the modern heritage discourse developed in the West influenced by ongoing secular values. However, these systems have come to the fore in the recent past in particularly after a paradigm shift within the heritage sector since the mid-1990s (Wijesuriya, 2017).

The *Convention on biological diversity*(1992) was the first international treaty to recognise the measures for the use and protection of traditional knowledge. Accordingly,

(j) Subject to its national legislation, respect, preserve and maintain knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity and promote their wider application with the approval and involvement of the holders of such knowledge, innovations and practices and encourage the equitable sharing of the benefits arising from the utilization of such knowledge, innovations and practices... (UN, 1992: art. 8).

Recognising the importance of the Traditional Knowledge has been defined in the recent past as

a cumulative body of knowledge, know-how, practices and representations maintained and developed by peoples with extended histories of interaction with the natural environment. These sophisticated sets of understandings, interpretations and meanings are part and parcel of a cultural complex that encompasses language, naming and classification systems, resource use practices, ritual, spirituality and worldview (International Council for Science - Conseil International pour la Science, 2002: 3).



STUPA, ANURADHAPURA. *Image: Valerie Magar.*

The *Nara document on authenticity* (1994) expanded diverse aspects which can be considered for assessing the authenticity of heritage. A follow up regional meeting in Africa added traditional management systems as an additional aspect of assessing authenticity which was added to the *Operational guidelines* in 2005.

In the *Convention concerning the protection of the world cultural and natural heritage* (1972), popularly known as the World Heritage Convention, there is no reference to Traditional Knowledge System, but thanks mainly to the influence of heritage practitioners from the African region, the Traditional Knowledge System is recognised for managing world heritage since 2005. Accordingly,

- *All properties inscribed on the World Heritage List must have adequate long-term legislative, regulatory, institutional and/or traditional protection and management to ensure their safeguarding* (World Heritage Centre, 2005: 25).
- *Management systems may vary according to different cultural perspectives, the resources available and other factors. They may incorporate traditional practices, existing urban or regional planning instruments, and other planning control mechanisms, both formal and informal* (World Heritage Centre, 2005: 28).

Recognition of the Traditional Knowledge System is growing within the heritage sector. One of the pioneers in this process was the Africa 2009 Programme of ICCROM. They published the first volume on the subject (Joffroy, 2005).



STUPA, ANURADHAPURA. Image: Valerie Magar.

Furthermore, Africa professionals have recently published a volume on Traditional Knowledge Systems (Abungu, 2016). Influenced by this, the Asian region had its first major forum on the Traditional Knowledge in conservation and management of heritage, the publication of which is in press by ICCROM. Recognizing the dynamic nature of traditional knowledge systems, the forum particularly focused on the applicability and availability of Traditional Knowledge Systems. The Forum concludes (Wijesuriya and Court, forthcoming):

Recognising the significance of Traditional Knowledge Systems and the benefits they bring, as well as the changing contexts described above, it should be noted that conservation efforts are an appropriate framework within which to promote Traditional Knowledge Systems, as they provide opportunities for sharing traditional knowledge and reviving practices before they are lost. It is hoped that the contributions made by the authors to this volume will highlight new ways forward for the conservation of heritage in Asia and beyond.

Any form of work on Traditional Knowledge Systems will be a tribute to Coomaraswamy.

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