



CENTRE FOR ASIAN AND
TRANSCULTURAL STUDIES
SOUTH ASIA INSTITUTE



UNIVERSITÄT
HEIDELBERG
ZUKUNFT
SEIT 1386

Part of the Series “Governance and Politics of South Asia” (SAI)

1 July 2019, 4.15 p.m., Room 010.00.21, CATS

THE POLITICS OF AUTHENTICITY: CULTURE AND SINHALA NATIONALISM IN SRI LANKA

Prof. Dr. Harshana Rambukwella
(Sri Lanka Chairholder, South Asia Institute)

The classical wave of scholarship on nationalism from the 1960s to the late 1980s was largely dominated by a focus on the political economy of nationalist discourse and nation-state formation. However, with the interventions of scholars such as Benedict Anderson and Partha Chatterjee the study of nationalism took a ‘cultural’ turn. But most of this work looked at nationalism as an ‘invented tradition’ or constructed discourse.

This talk goes beyond the invention of tradition paradigm by deploying the notion of authenticity. It historicizes the discourse of authenticity in Sinhala nationalism, and in doing so raises a series of interrelated questions that apply not only to Sinhala nationalism and Sri Lanka, but also to nationalism and authenticity more generally: Why is authenticity so central to nationalism? What kind of conditions demand, sustain and reproduce it? Can we think of multiple and contending authenticities instead of one homogeneous discourse? The talk explores the life worlds of three key figures of Sinhala nationalism from the late 19th to the 20th century and through them the politics of authenticity in the formation and propagation of Sinhala nationalist discourse.



Harshana Rambukwella is Director, Postgraduate Institute of English, Open University of Sri Lanka. He received his PhD from the University of Hong Kong, where he is Honorary Assistant Professor at the School of English. He has been a fellow of the Institute for Advanced Social Studies and Humanities (IASH) at the University of Edinburgh.