Sri Lanka at the Crossroads of History

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The genre of messenger poetry in Sinhala literature represents a derivative, yet distinctive, form of poetic composition, which one may use to reflect upon the concepts of ‘cosmopolitan’ and ‘local’ as signifiers in premodern literary cultures. A consideration of this genre reveals a strategy by Sri Lankan authors to imitate and transform literary forms from outside Sri Lanka into vehicles for expressing and praising local forms of power and culture. As noted by Sheldon Pollock, Sinhala may be counted among those South Asian vernaculars that developed in royal courts in response to, and in imitation of, the values and forms of Sanskrit literature. According to this theory, the use of Sanskrit in poetry and royal inscriptions produced the forms of cultural and political expression upon which a cosmopolitan order of cultural power was formed across Southern Asia. The production of Sanskrit texts endowed various polities with a self-styled pretence to universal fame and power, although such pretensions rarely if ever achieved their grandiose claims in actuality. Nevertheless, following Pollock, Sanskrit court poetry (kārya) and royal panegyric (prāśasti) were jointly responsible for producing and popularizing certain assumptions about elements of power that aspired to universality but, falling short of that, were replicated in more localized contexts through the development of regional polities and vernacular forms of literature. This too was the case in Sri Lanka. Although there are some extant examples of Sinhala poetry in inscriptions from as early as the sixth century CE in Sri Lanka, the development of a vernacular poetic literature with extant works and modelled after Sanskrit norms dates from around the eleventh century.

The development of Sinhala poetry and the deployment of the distinctive poetic dialect called ēḷu took place mainly in proximity to Sinhala kings and courts. There are hints in such texts that they were often recited aloud before royal assemblies, although there are other poetic works in Sinhala that address broad religious and ethical concerns, which may have been directed to broader segments of the general public. The development of this literature, and the dating
thereof, is consistent with Pollock's model of the ‘vernacular millennium’, and yet it also serves to complicate the idea of Sri Lankan ‘cosmopolitanism’. In Sri Lanka, literary cultures came to embrace the vernacular and to put it to work in the creation of regional polities with claims to widespread fame and influence. Such works appear to have been often deployed for the sake of generating certain impressions and expressions of political power. The Sinhala sandēsas, for their part, are literary works that locate power in the intersection between local and translocal spheres. These texts evoke a sense of both the local and the cosmopolitan, utilizing features of both while being limited to neither. In other words, the use of the term 'local' for premodern Sinhala poetic works should not be understood as exclusive of cosmopolitan, translocal forms and features. We would do well to contest the implication that texts composed in local languages can only result in 'local texts' with greatly diminished horizons. Sinhala poets, as we shall see, employed their native language to extend the fame and influence of their kings and their works of literature.

Emerging out of the interplay of poetry (kāya) and power (rājya) in Sinhala courts beginning around the eleventh century, Sinhala sandēsa poetry became especially popular in the literary culture of fifteenth-century Sri Lanka. This culture emphasized the composition and enjoyment of fine poetic works to distinguish the aesthetic skills of poets and kings, while imagining the court as a centre of power and refinement. South Asian courtly culture was, in general, held to be the home of the noble and the good, populated by those who have cultivated superior moral and aesthetic characteristics. Employing such models of political and social power that emanated from the literature of Indic courts, Sinhala poets between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries sought to replicate these models in Sri Lanka.

One common way for doing so was to imitate the sandeśakāvya genre that was widespread across the Indic subcontinent. Such works belong specifically to a distinctive genre of poetry that emulates Kālidāsa’s Meghadūta (Cloud-messenger) poem. Kālidāsa’s classic sixth-century Sanskrit work, in which a yakṣa petitions a cloud to carry a message of love to his wife from whom he has been separated, helps to frame the broader context for the composition of sandeśakāvyas throughout the Indic world. The popularity of the Meghadūta is illustrated through some references to other such Sanskrit sandeśas or dītakāvyas (‘messenger poems’) in the early eighth century, the large number of commentators on this work, and translations of it into languages such as Sinhala by the twelfth century. There is ample evidence of sandeśakāvyas composed in Sanskrit, Tamil and other Indic languages that dwell on the love and longing of separated lovers for whom the delivery of a message – often by a bird, a bee or some other natural phenomenon – promises to ease the grief of separation. These works customarily follow a two-part structure, comprising a detailed description of landscape for a messenger to travel, followed by the specific message to be delivered upon arrival. The very existence of such works throughout South India and Sri Lanka remind us of the fact that local literary cultures such as those involving Sinhala, Tamil, Telugu and Malayalam were informed by and connected with each other.
Poetic accounts of a message carried by some non-human messenger comprise one of the pre-eminent cosmopolitan genres of South Asian literature. Steven Hopkins has rightly described the *sandeśakāvya* as a ‘transregional and multireligious poetic genre’ that is found in most South Asian languages and across religious traditions. One finds numerous works in which messages are carried by various flying creatures or atmospheric phenomena (such as clouds or wind) from one individual to another. Certain ancient works in Sanskrit and Pāli contain narratives that foreshadow the development of this genre. Rāma sends a message to his kidnapped wife through the monkey Hanumān in the *Rāmāyana*, a swan carries a message from King Nāla to Damayanti in the *Mahābhārata*, and a crow is called upon by a dying man to carry a message to his wife in the Pāli ‘Kāma Vilāpā Jātaka’. In time, entire works become devoted to the subject of messages of love being carried by third parties. The Sinhala *sandēsas* may thus be located within this broader South Asian literary genre.

Upon closer inspection, however, one finds certain distinctive features in Sinhala works that deviate from their Indic prototypes. Messenger poetry in India typically revolves around themes of love and longing experienced by separated lovers, in which even the conventional descriptions of landscapes serve to evoke the feelings of absence and eventual reunion found in the main characters of the work. In most cases, a lover persuades some kind of messenger to deliver a long, lyrical exposition and then describes a detailed route to convey the messenger to the absent lover, who is often portrayed in a state of acute lovesickness. The messages sent are thus poetic expressions of love that convey desire for one’s lover and grief from being apart from her or him. For example, many such works employed the pretence of having the *gopī* maidens employ some sort of messenger to send word of their longing for their beloved Kṛṣṇa. A further characteristic of this genre includes pairing the messenger with its own mate, which helps it to sympathize with the miserable, lovesick state of the recipient to whom they deliver the message. However, Sinhala *sandēsas*, as we will see below, show little interest in love as the motive behind sending messages. This striking departure from one of the definitive characteristics of the genre deserves more consideration, as it suggests that Sinhala poets chose not to imitate Indic *sandeśakāvya* too closely.

More questions arise concerning the specificity of local landscapes in messenger poems. In works such as the Tamil *Haṃsasandeśa* (*Message of the Goose*), written by the thirteenth–fourteenth-century author Vedāntadeśika, the messenger’s journey is dotted by familiar cities, hills, rivers, forests and temples within a particular region. The locations referenced in such works are found scattered throughout the Indic subcontinent and occasionally even cross over to the island of Sri Lanka. The particular geographic details found in messenger poems speak to the genre’s capacity to identify and valorize certain locations. This literary mapping of landscapes may also promote what Hopkins calls a particular ‘religio-geocultural imaginaire’ that is amenable to the royal or sectarian patron of the work. A related argument about Sinhala *sandēsas* has been made by Anoma.
Pieris, who argues that these works ‘stressed the importance of geographic belonging’ that fostered the development of ‘place-based and politically-constructed ethno-cultural loyalties’. The literary conceptualization of territory is a key feature of Sinhala sandēsas, and this subject will be taken up in more detail below.

To this end, closer attention to the fifteenth-century Kōkilasandēsaya (Message of the Cuckoo) and the sixteenth-century Sāvulsandēsaya (Message of the Cock) will facilitate a critical assessment of the aims and places found in Sinhala messenger poetry and, in turn, the manner in which this genre illustrates the complex and sometimes contradictory interests in cosmopolitan affiliations in premodern Sri Lanka. Kōkilasandēsaya and Sāvulsandēsaya have been chosen in part because they appeared more than a century apart and thus together indicate some degree of continuity in the genre’s poetic style and interests. They are also works of substantial length and depth, and they are neither well-known nor accessible to many scholars since they have not been translated into a western language.

**Indigenizing Sinhala Sandēsas**

Since the genre of messenger poetry was nearly ubiquitous throughout South Asia, Sinhala poets had numerous examples from which to model their own compositions. The writing and reciting of Sinhala sandēsas enabled writers, readers and listeners to participate in a cosmopolitan literary culture. Nevertheless, it would be misleading to assume that Sinhala sandēsas lacked originality. Even the repeated takes on poetic elements supplied by Kālidāsa can, as shown by Yigal Bronner, be rearranged, revalorized, or relocated to create something novel in Sanskrit messenger poems. The will to innovate in this genre, however, appears even stronger in Sinhala works. While evoking translocal images and ideas connected to the circulation of Sanskrit literary culture, Sinhala sandēsas asserted particularly local visions in the forms and contents of their poetry. It has been noted that as many as 114 sandēsas were composed in Sinhala between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries. The proliferation of such works speaks to their value and role in the vernacularization of literature in Sri Lanka, particularly in terms of poetry. The high point for Sinhala sandēsa literature appears during the fifteenth century when King Parākramabāhu VI (r. 1411–66) ruled over a united island from his court in Koṭṭe. In this period, many classical bird-messenger poems were composed in Sinhala, including the Parevisandēsaya (Message of the Dove) and Sālaḷihiṇisandeśaya (Message of the Mynah), written by the renowned monastic author Śrī Rāhula, along with the Hamsasandēsaya (Message of the Goose) and Girāsandēsaya (Message of the Parrot), whose authors are not definitively known. The Kōkilasandēsaya appears later in the fifteenth century by a monk from a family called Irugalkula. Around a century later, a lay poet named Alagiyavanna composed the Sāvulsandēsaya in the early 1580s under King Rājasimha I (r. 1581–93).
Although the use of birds to carry poetic messages was not new, the rendering of this genre into the Sinhala poetic language introduced several distinctive features. By virtue of their composition in ēḷu, the literary dialect of Sinhala poetry, all of these works display a commitment to the local language and its particular use of rhyme and metre. Like other South Asian vernaculars, Sinhala kavi employed a vision of literature that could transcend time and place, giving rise to a literary culture that imagined itself as utilizing a language equal to Sanskrit in terms of power and beauty. And yet the adoption of norms and forms from Sanskrit kāvya into Sinhala kavi entailed distinctive efforts to superpose local Sinhala features on to their Sanskrit paradigms. Charles Hallisey has argued that the Sinhala literary culture from the tenth to fifteenth centuries self-consciously adapted what counted as literature in Sanskrit, but also distanced itself from the prototype by rejecting Sanskrit loanwords (tatsamas) and incorporating some new phonemes such as the nasalized ’ū’ vowel and half-nasal consonants. This ambivalent stance of modelling a local literary culture after a cosmopolitan Sanskrit one, while insisting upon several distinctive features to mark its separation from Indic literary cultures, speaks to the ability of Sinhala literature at once to evoke universality while reasserting locality. The authors of Sinhala sandēśās participated in this textual juxtaposition of near and far, local and cosmopolitan, by employing Sinhala poetic forms and metres to recast an otherwise transregional genre in indigenous terms. Their engagement with and transformation of Sanskrit messenger poetry, rather than Pāli sandesas, offers more evidence of the Indic orientation of this genre.

The Kōkila- and Sāvulsandēśas make use of the distinctive alphabet and vocabulary of Sinhala ēḷu, as well as the sivupada style where, in a given quatrain, four lines of verse each end with the same letter – vowel, consonant or combination of both. The rhyming scheme of this type of Sinhala poetry may also incorporate forms of internal rhymes repeated in each line to add aesthetic richness. Further, such Sinhala kavi employed the restrictive ēḷu alphabet that reduced the number of permitted letters from fifty-seven in prose to thirty-six in poetry, doing away with aspirated consonants and the palatal and retroflex sibilants written in Roman letters as ’ś’ and ’ṣ’. The smaller alphabet prevented the use of Sanskrit loanwords and led to a reliance on shorter words that were often homonyms, which could be used poetically to generate complexity as a sign of poetic virtuosity. For instance, the Sinhala word sañda could be derived from the Sanskrit candra (‘moon’ or ‘eminent’), saṃdhi (‘connection’), chanda (‘desire’), candana (‘sandalwood’), chandas (‘prosody’) or saṃdhyā (‘evening’) and refer to any of those meanings depending on context. Learned connoisseurs could be expected to distinguish and identify the correct meaning of a homonym in a line of verse. The plurality of meanings found in a single word could dignify the talents of Sinhala poets and confirm the sophistication of their local audiences.

One finds further evidence of the localization of the sandēśā genre in the narrative themes that appear in its Sinhala variants. As noted above, one typically finds sandeśākāvyas throughout South Asia that transport messages sent from an
exiled lover to a distant beloved. Most works in the genre mimic and evoke the Meghadūta’s focus on love in separation, where the message that is carried by a bird or some other messenger expresses strong feelings of affection and attachment to someone far away. And yet, contrary to this custom, classical Sinhala sandēśas do not deal with separated lovers who long to be reunited. The messages that are carried by birds in Sri Lanka usually concern or address a deity, who is petitioned to grant a blessing or a boon resulting in some form of worldly success related to the protection and prosperity of a king. Having the protection of others (and in later centuries, oneself) as the primary aim for the authors of the Sinhala sandēśas, such works distinguished themselves from the messenger poems from the subcontinent. For instance, the Sālālīhinīsandēśaya carries a message to the god Vibhišana from King Parākramabāhu VI’s son-in-law beseeching the deity to grant his wife a son and heir to the throne. The Parevisandēśaya addresses the god Upulvan in Devinuvara, asking for his help to find a good husband for the king’s daughter and, eventually, a son and heir to the throne. The Hamsasandēśaya contains a message for a leading monk instead of a god, but still aims at protecting the king and extending his reign. As for the works under consideration here, the Kōkilasandēśaya conveys a message of reassurance to Prince Sapumal in Yāpāpaṭunu (Jaffna) to confirm that the monastic author has been praying to the god Upulvan for the prince’s prosperity and protection in the land that he has recently conquered. The author of Sāvulsandēśaya beseeches the god Saman to protect the Buddha’s Dispensation, the beings of the world and particularly King Rājasimha I, his ministers and his fourfold army. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Sinhala sandēśa poems recount journeys but reference no separated lovers or anticipated blissful reunions in their verses. Instead, these Sinhala works adapt the conventions of the Sanskrit sandeśakāvya genre to celebrate and enhance the power of local kings. Conspicuous, political interests lie behind the poems, as reflected by the respective paths that are described to the bird-messengers. The sphere of the political here is no afterthought lying behind a romantic storyline. Instead, birds are dispatched to carry messages that seek divine blessings for kings and their progeny, as well as the religious institutions attributed to the Buddha in his Dispensation (śāsana/sāsana). Emotional expressions of love and longing are nowhere to be found in the Sinhala sandēśas at the height of their popularity in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. If anything, romantic love is displaced by lust, as numerous Sinhala sandēśa poems include erotically charged descriptions of female bathers and dancing girls whose physical charms are conventionally described to indicate the power of kings and the talent of poets. Such erotic verses, as we shall see below, are neither incidental nor merely ornamental to a story about separated lovers. They are instead integral pieces for depictions of royal power and majesty. In this sense, attractive female bodies mimic attractive landscapes as indices to a beautiful, bountiful kingdom ruled at the centre by a strong monarch. In addition to local variations of poetic language and themes, Sinhala sandēśas are also distinguished by their abundant references to local places. The
cities and shrines to be visited by the bird-messengers are found exclusively in the island of Sri Lanka, and no bird is ever sent across the Palk Strait to visit India. The cuckoo in Kōkilasandēśaya makes a lengthy journey starting in Devinuvara on the southern coast, travels up to Vāligama, the monastery at Toṭagamuva, Kalutara, the monastery at Pāpiliyāna, the royal palace at Koṭte, up through Kontagantoṭa, Mīgamuva and further up the western coast to Jaffna in the far north. Throughout the cuckoo’s thirteen-day journey, he is told to rest in various small villages and to observe the local shrines, landscapes and women at each spot. For instance, in the village of Mātara on the south coast, the bird is told to gaze at the women with moonlike faces and bodies like gold creepers, then he is to observe the flowers and peacocks in Polvattē, before proceeding to the Mahavālī village with market stalls of gems and women who rub sandalwood and saffron paste on their breasts. Likewise, the cock in Sāvulsandēśaya begins his journey in the capital city of Sītāvaka, stops at the Bhairava Kovil, goes by the rest house in Vasuvilvita and the guardpost at Gatasätta, proceeds through various other villages until arriving at Delgamuva to worship the Tooth Relic and spend the night, and then journeys on through Kuruvīta to admire the river and jungle, passing by other villages where peacocks and women wander about, before arriving at the city of Saparagamuva, home to beautiful city-women and the shrine of the god Saman.

Both works describe local landscapes with great specificity and elaborate details. In addition to religious shrines both large and small, one comes across ponds, forests, rest houses, guard posts, paddy fields and other sites that collectively serve to construct a detailed local geography wholly within the island of Sri Lanka. In doing so, these Sinhala sandēsas formally resemble the messenger poems from Tamilnadu and Kerala, among other South Asian regions, that similarly mark out and valorize specific places such as temples, mountains, fields and cities. Of course, each messenger poem reconstructs a particular journey and distinctive geographical vision, which in turn represent a strong commitment to endowing local settings with the honour of being described in poetic verse. The routes taken by the bird-messengers are full of realistic details of one-time roads and places in the island. Such details help to produce a sense of local landscapes that in Sinhala sandēsas are roughly coterminous with the geographic spread of the reigns of kings, who often were the patrons of such poems. Each stop along a bird-messenger’s journey thus becomes a symbol of the extension of royal power, territory that falls within the sphere of control and vision of the king and his court. This is seen most strikingly in the long northerly journey of the cuckoo, who is sent to inform Prince Sapumal of the divine blessings that will help him to stabilize his recent conquest over the region of Jaffna, where he acts as the king’s regent. The text effectively serves to demarcate and confirm the newly enlarged extent of King Parākramabāhu’s reign.

While Sinhala authors located their narrative journeys in specific places, they also recognized local figures that resided therein. Local elites in the form of ministers, monks and ritual officiants are often named in these works, serving to
locate these texts in nearby space and time, and endowing their narrative representations with what Stephen Greenblatt calls the ‘touch of the real’, where ‘elements of lived experience enter into literature’. The Kökilasandēṣaya mentions numerous local personages aside from the king. One learns of chieftains such as Virabāhu and ministers such as Devādhikāri who built a city and a monastery respectively. Renowned monks are also mentioned, such as Vijayabāhu Thera at Toṭagamuva and the chief monk named Dharmakīrti in Jayavaddanapura, along with other monks linked to particular temples on the route. Similarly, the Sāvulsandēṣaya mentions two monks by name in its verses – Mihīṇḍulakara at the Delgamuwa Temple and Dahaṁlakara in Saparagamuva, both of whom are praised for being excellent poets. The narrator also praises the ritual officiant at the shrine dedicated to Saman, a man named Nānambi Kuruppu, who was installed in this position by King Rājasimha I. Such references underscore the authors’ careful attention to local details and networks of power and patronage. Inclusion in sandēṣas suggests that such personages enjoyed royal favour and support, while playing key roles in the king’s realm.

Sinhala sandēṣas take on additional indigenous characteristics by emphasizing certain gods located at particular shrines within the island’s territory. Although the poets remain aware of Indic deities and their mythological features that permeate Sanskrit poetry, the bird-messengers address local gods that reside at shrines in the island rather than universal ones such as Kṛṣṇa or Śiva. For instance, several poems petition Upulvan in the southern city of Devinuvara, or Vibhiṣaṇa in Kāḷiya, or even Skanda at his shrine in Kataragama, a favourite of sandēṣa poets in later centuries. The Kökilasandēṣaya praises Upulvan and describes the might and physical splendour he exudes in his shrine at Devinuvara, which is the cuckoo’s starting point on his journey. The cuckoo is told to ‘honor with devotion the lotus-feet of the beautiful king of the gods, Upulvan, who is well adorned’ and who appears in a local shrine to be worshipped. In one verse, the author compares the appearance of Upulvan to a heavenly tree, which signifies both the god’s beauty and generosity.

The noble, heavenly tree of this king of the gods [Upulvan], presents the highest splendor,

Adorned with the bees of his garland made of pleasing blue sapphire gems,
And heaps of the flowers of pearls, made heavy with the fruits of great gifts,
Being decorated with the branches of his hands and the luminous shoots of his very red fingers.

This same deity is praised in several other verses to make clear how others who listen to this work should venerate him. The poet praises his beauty by mentioning how goddesses gaze upon his dazzling body, and likewise praises his courage by stating that Upulvan alone did not desert the Bodhisattva when Māra, the God of Death, sought to prevent him from attaining Buddhahood. It is Upulvan who at
the end of the work is petitioned for protection, to dispel calamities and to bestow prosperity upon the king, the chief ministers and the army.42

In Sāvulsandēṣaya, the poet Alagiyavanna chose a different local god as the focus of his work. The cock-messenger is sent on a journey that ends in Saparagamuva, where the god Saman resides in a shrine not far from the site of the Buddha’s footprint relic on top of Śrī Pāda or ‘Adam’s Peak’.43 This local guardian deity is also called the ‘king of the gods’ and is extensively praised by the poet. The bird is told to worship Saman, gaze upon his beautiful appearance and convey the message with which he was dispatched. The description of Saman in Sāvulsandēṣaya is extended and elaborate, with the god’s physical charms being related from head to toe. One verse describing his arms by comparing them to the heavenly tree adopts much of the imagery and language of the verse from Kōkilasandēṣaya quoted above.44

The arms of the lord of the gods display the appearance of branches on the heavenly tree,
Always bestowing all forms of wealth, pleasing gods and humans,
Upon which the bumblebees of delightful ornaments of blue sapphire gems reside,
With heaps of the flowers of fingernails and the shoots of very long, very red fingers.45

The description of Saman’s eyes, ears, arms, chest, thighs and feet, among other parts of his body, serve to vividly recreate his physical presence in his shrine. The eyes of goddesses are drawn to this divine body, giving further proof to his splendid beauty. The poet praises not only Saman’s appearance, but also his compassion, generosity, and devotion to the Buddha.46 Finally, the cock is told to petition Saman to protect the Dispensation of the Buddha, King Rājasimha I, his ministers and the fourfold army. Thus, in both of these sandēṣas, requests are made to gods associated with local shrines on behalf of those who rule righteously and protect bravely the kingdoms in which the poets reside. As a rule, the people, places and deities highlighted in these Sinhala works all exist in local settings.

Cosmopolitan frames

The conspicuous efforts of Sinhala sandēṣa poems to map and celebrate the local cannot, however, mask the cosmopolitan imagery and ideals that shaped such texts. Despite their distinctive use of the vernacular language and local referents, these works remain beholden to a translocal literary genre in terms of form and inspiration. They are, after all, called ‘sandēṣas’, and they employ the literary convention common throughout the Indic world of sending a bird on a journey across a particular landscape to deliver an important message. For all of their attempts to invest this genre with local significance, the Sinhala sandēṣas gesture to a wider body of South
Asian literature. It is in this sense that authors such as Śrī Rāhula, Irugalkula Thera and Alagiyavanna consciously composed messenger poems in a literary form of the vernacular in order to exalt both their works and themselves. Like other poets who contributed to the vernacularization of literature in South Asia, Sinhala authors of sandēśa poetry could claim to belong to a cosmopolitan cultural order while still proclaiming local cultural affiliations that enabled their texts to compete for fame and recognition with those after which they were modelled. Such works, in other words, were invested with both local and cosmopolitan significance at the same time. Their attention to that which is both near and far is reflected in the praise of their royal subjects and the elaborate descriptions of the settings for their rule.

The localizing practices found in works such as Kōkilasandēśaya and Sāvulsandēśaya always implied a cosmopolitan frame and were frequently written as such. For every local site or personage mentioned in a text, there are other references to translocal concepts. Sites and figures associated with Indic mythology, such as Mount Meru and Mount Kailaśa, or Viśṇu and Śrī, occupy prominent places in Sinhala sandēśa literature. For instance, in one verse of Alagiyavanna’s work, King Rājasimha is praised by the goddesses on top of Mount Meru and the siddhas, vidyadhāras and kinnaras that reside in the Himalaya Mountains. He is compared to gods such as Anaṅga in terms of his beauty and Rāma in terms of his military prowess. Meanwhile, in Kōkilasandēśaya, Prince Sapumal is likened to the god Śakra in terms of wealth and his devotion to the Buddha, while the ministers in his court stand around him like divine subjects. Even the merchants in Mahavāli are compared to the gods Kuvera in terms of splendour, Skandakumara in terms of strength and Brhaspati in terms of eloquence and wisdom. Clearly, images and ideas derived from texts based in the Indic subcontinent find their way into these Sinhala narratives, enhancing the power of the local in the same way that allusions to cosmopolitan forms of Sanskrit literature could enhance their vernacular counterparts. This process could work so well as to obscure the ‘foreignness’ of those elements that came from outside of the island. The local relies on the translocal for its identity and its ability to transcend its immediate surroundings. Meanwhile the translocal could also begin to lose its identity as something distinctive and foreign. Although the composition of Sinhala sandēsas supplied the means for employing translocal forms to map and celebrate local instantiations of culture and power, the cosmopolitan features of these works are never wholly subsumed under the local. Instead, they persist as layers in Sinhala works that lend such poems a measure of status and complexity, enabling them to be associated with wider literary and cultural spheres.

A closer examination of Sinhala sandēsas reveals that even in their descriptions of particular sites across the Śrī Lankan countryside, they often reflect more generic, conventional locations than uniquely specific places. Local landscapes are in this way transformed to resemble idealized places found in other poetic works. The manners in which cities are described appear almost interchangeable among various sandēsas. The city of Devinuvara, from where the cuckoo is dispatched in Kōkilasandēśaya, is thus described as a heavenly abode.
Look at the city of glorious Viṣṇu, overspread with the sounds of instruments,
Having fully blossomed flowers in the house gardens that shine continuously,
Having great halls filled with gems and coral on both sides of the main road,
And radiance like the King of Mountains that spreads many colors.

This beautiful city, always bearing the crown of the King of the Gods,
Having a pair of ear-ornaments of the moon and sun, shining with rays,
Having a large neck of the city gate, made tall and decorated well,
Whose ramparts appear as a girdle of gems, and whose anklet is the water-filled moat.

Since the beautiful faces of women within the window terraces of the mansions,
Which are overspread with blue sapphire gems, are like numerous moons,
The ruddy shelduck birds that amble about continuously, entering large house ponds,
Suffering from confusion, abandon them and go away.

Friend, the banners affixed to the tops of the large, crystal mansions in this city,
Fluttering rapidly in the wind,
Support the splendor of one hundred waterfalls that pour down continuously,
From the beautiful, celestial river off the head of Lord Śiva.\textsuperscript{52}

Such poetic accounts of that city seem curiously detached from any of its actual identifiable features. Similar verses are found in Alagiyavanna’s description of the sixteenth-century capital Sitāvaka, whose beauty and majesty likewise symbolize the character of its ruling monarch, King Rājasimha, who is directly compared to Viṣṇu:

The high, solid ramparts that shine with crystal rays,
Being equal to the beautiful light of the moon that spreads to the ends of all directions,
Are like the coils of the Lord of Cobras, Ananta, that are laid all around,
The Milky Ocean of this city, which shines with the Narāyaṇa of the king.

The manner in which the water of the moat rippled and spread out in rows of waves,
Near the high, expansive, white ramparts that shine with light,
Is like the well-decorated, celestial river that falls around the Kailāśa Mountain,
When Iśvara resolutely begins to dance with the strength and speed of his body.
There the rutting elephants, looking at the splendor of the faces of the beautiful, adorned women,
Who have come to the window terraces of the spotless jeweled mansions,
Thinking, “It is a beautiful, fully bloomed lotus”,
Extend their trunks and wander around with puzzled minds.

When the blue sapphire gems on the banners that flutter on the roofs of tall, great mansions,
Shine and reflect on the ground in this illustrious city,
It displays the splendor of the various kinds of fish that glisten and shine,
Sporting continually in the beautiful Kaliṅdu River.⁵³

Even though such verses purport to describe particular places in premodern Sri Lanka, they actually express idealized visions of a city that exists both nowhere and everywhere. Sinhala sandēśas depict cities in perfect splendour and without adversity, places where masculine heroes reside amid countless attractive women with faces like moons, eyes like blue water lilies and breasts like swans.⁵⁴ In such texts, local cities are recast in terms of poetic ideals of beauty and prosperity. They possess local names but universal features. Meanwhile, forests are invariably decorated with sweet-smelling trees and flowers, and rivers always contain cool water and playful, topless bathers. Although the names are distinctive to the local settings mentioned in the text, their actual depictions are almost wholly conventional and interchangeable.

Sinhala poets relied on the poetic imagery of cosmopolitan literature for more than just their descriptions of local sites through which their birds pass or stop to rest. They also drew liberally from Indic mythological symbolism to glorify local kings in the manner of the praśasti genre of praise-poetry. King Parākramabāhu VI and King Rājasiṃha I, the royal heroes of Kōkilasandēšaya and Sāvulasandēšaya respectively, are consistently portrayed in superlative terms, even on a par with Indic gods whose spheres of influence transcend the island of Sri Lanka. Parākramabāhu VI was celebrated for bringing the island under his sovereign rule, having built a capital in Koṭṭe, subduing the Udaraṭa district in the central highlands, repelling an attack by the forces of the Vijayanagara Empire and overseeing the conquest of the Jaffna kingdom in the north by his son Prince Sapumal.⁵⁵ Eulogized during his long reign in several fifteenth-century sandēśas, Parākramabāhu VI could be compared to any number of magnificent objects of praise.

Like the Lord of the Gods, who is the chief of the north, with his splendor and strong arms,
Like the Lord of Mountains that delights the mind, shining with noble ornaments,
Like the Lord of the Stars and the disk of the sun in terms of his extensive fame and glory,
The Lord of Men, Śrī Parākramabāhu, resides in that city [of Koṭṭe].⁵⁶
The king’s power and glory, compared here to Kuvera, the god of wealth, together with Mount Meru and the moon, transcend the sphere of the local and thus require universal symbols to convey their expansive nature. The monastic author of Kōkilasandēśaya goes further to praise his king by drawing upon other divine symbols to demonstrate how he excels all other rulers.

Just as there is no tree in the great forest that is equal to the Heavenly Tree,
There is no king in this age that has power and glory that is equal,
To this Lord of Men, who is of the Solar Dynasty, and whose ancestral home is the Goddess Śrī’s,
And who is the disk of the sun that causes the lotuses in the pond of the community of poets to bloom.57

Depicted as the divine, wish-fulfilling tree of Indic mythology and a ruler whose prosperity is associated with that of Śrī, the goddess of wealth, Parākramabāhu VI emerges in this poem as a king of incomparable magnificence. Both his descent from a legendary royal lineage and his patronage of poets point to his identity as a majestic ruler.

Similarly, the Sāvulsandēśaya lavishes poetic praise upon King Rājasimha, the implacable foe of the Portuguese, who drove them out of Koṭṭe into an isolated coastal fort, and who subdued the mountain kingdom of Kandy in 1582.58 The poet Alagiyavanna eulogized his king’s power and glory in numerous verses that compared him to universal symbols of divine majesty. Indeed, praśasti works characteristically stress the paradigmatic qualities of kings over their particular features in order to enhance their fame.59

This renowned Lord, who is like the Lord of the Gods in majesty,
Who adorns the necks of the noble women of all directions with the pearl necklace of fame,
Always guards the attachment to his own life fourthly,
After his firm power, generosity, and true speech.60

The comparison drawn with the majesty of a divine ruler serves to elevate Rājasimha into a praiseworthy king whose extensive fame is matched by his great virtue. The poet’s ornate description of his majesty elevates his stature to that of a universal deity. Among the many other verses used to praise the king – thirty-nine in all, which exceed any other Sinhala sandēśa composed earlier – one finds abundant, conventional descriptions of Rājasimha’s majesty, prowess and virtue.61

Because of this Lord of Men’s great and pure heap of fame,
Having the shining body of Viṣṇu and the appearance of Iśvara,
He dwells comfortably, dispelling the doubt,
From the faultless, long, wide, and brilliant eyes of Śrī.62
Such comparisons to Indic deities signal how the king of Sri Lanka is attributed with divine qualities that represent the apparently boundless measure of his fame and power. From the poem’s perspective, Rājjasimha is known and revered by all in much the same manner as deities who are worshipped by devotees in many different lands. Poetry magnifies the king’s qualities as he is shown to embody universal characteristics that surpass local frames of reference.

In another gesture to the cosmopolitan origins of messenger poetry, both the Kōkila- and Sāvulsandēśas contain erotic imagery of nameless women depicted in titillating, albeit formulaic ways. Whether these women are portrayed as bathing in rivers, strolling around capital cities, or dancing in shrines or royal courts, their portrayals are designed to elicit the erotic sentiments (śṛṇgāra rasa) of an audience that imaginatively gazes upon their attractive bodies. By comparison, most examples of messenger poetry composed in Sanskrit also emphasize the erotic sentiment, although usually in the context of the theme of love in separation.63 The descriptions in Sinhala sandēśas of women dancing and sporting in water are also more extensive than in comparable messenger poems from the subcontinent.64 The women described in the Sinhala sandēśas typically lack speech or emotion, as they appear chiefly to embellish the narrative as background characters rather than protagonists in their own right. For instance, the monastic author of the Kōkilaandēśayya uses several verses to describe the physical charms of the city-women who surround King Parākramabāhu VI in Kṛṭṭe and the dancing women near Prince Sapumal at his royal court in Jaffna. The narrator tells the cuckoo that while in the king’s capital,

Look at the women, who stand, appearing in each doorway,
Giving slight smiles with their mouths that are worth this whole world,
Bending every direction with their thin waists that can be grasped with one’s hand,
And adorned with the weight of their pairs of firm breasts.65

Later, once the bird has arrived in Jaffna, he is told to gaze upon the dancing women that excite and entertain the people in the prince’s court. The dancing women are said to have tied strings of pearls on their foreheads, which are made to resemble the new moon moistened with rays, while jiggling their breasts that are covered in unguents and shaking the jewelled girdles around their waists.66 Such descriptions of women may illustrate longing and attachment, but these feelings are felt independently of separated lovers, who are altogether absent in these works. Great kings are apparently signified not only by their majesty, but also by the female beauty that surrounds them.

Alagiyavanna’s Sāvulsandēśayya also highlights the physical charms of women in proximity to the Lord of Men, Rājjasinha I, in his court at Sītāvaka, as well as those women who bathe or dance around the environs of the shrine in Saparagamuva where Saman, the ‘Lord of the Gods’, resides. Indeed, the juxtaposition of these two lords who attract beautiful females and are entertained by
them must surely be intentional. The powerful figures of the king and the deity are also said to be beautiful, and thus they draw other beautiful bodies to them. In Sītāvaka, where Rājasimha dwells, attractive city-women play on the balconies of mansions, captivating the young men with their eyes like blue lotuses and their faces like the full moon. Later, when the cock reaches the city of Saparagamuva, the poem describes the enchanting beauty of the women who bathe in the river there.

The breasts of the noble women that please the mind,
Remaining above the surface of the water that spills over and strikes the front of their chests,
Appear like luminous, very splendid golden swans,
Grasping and pulling the lotus stalks with the tips of their beaks.

The erotically charged descriptions of women serve not only to indicate the presence of a powerful, masculine king or deity, but they also evoke the style of messenger poetry composed outside of the island. These efforts to arouse the erotic sentiment are wholly consistent with the cosmopolitan form of Sanskrit sandeśakāvyā or dūtakāvyā. The inclusion of such female figures, even by a monastic author, satisfies at least in part the standards established for poetic excellence, bringing as much fame to the poets as to the kings and other celebrated characters who are objectified in verse. The assimilation of cosmopolitan features associated with messenger poetry connects local Sinhala works with their Indic prototypes, evoking yet also rivalling their referents in Sanskrit and other languages.

Paying tribute to kings and poets

The very existence of Sinhala sandēśas is a testimony of the degree to which poets writing between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries imagined themselves as belonging to a wider literary world. These authors were, of course, not the first Sri Lankans to engage the literary forms and values of texts composed in other lands. The sixth-century Jānakīharaṇa, a Sanskrit mahākāvyā composed by a poet named Kumāradāsa, shows that Sri Lankans had adopted literary forms developed outside of the island much earlier. And yet the ways in which poets like Irugalkula Thera and Alagiyavanna composed sandēśas in the poetic eḷu dialect of Sinhala reveal complicated ties between local and translocal literary forms. There is no question that works such as Kōkilasandēśaya and Sāvulsandēśaya are the products of conspicuous efforts to effect the vernacularization of a cosmopolitan literature composed primarily in the Sanskrit language. In both name and form, these sandēśa texts work to evoke much of the style and prestige of texts celebrated in other lands.

And yet, one may ask if the composition of bird-messenger poems in Sinhala is simply a straightforward example of poetic borrowing, whereupon the forms
and values of a cosmopolitan Sanskrit genre were adopted in full to compete with it on the universalist terms it had set. Sinhala sandeśas adapted and subverted their Indic models by recasting them according to indigenous tastes and interests. The Sinhala authors of Kökilasandeśaya and Sävulsandeśaya composed works that borrowed heavily from older Sinhala texts, while deviating in important ways from their counterparts in the Indic subcontinent. As noted above, Sinhala sandeśas dispensed with the romantic overtones of most other messenger poems, replacing the pathetic pleas of absent lovers with petitions to deities or monks in order to obtain blessings for the kingdom and the Sangha. Political interests appear foremost in such works, and they adopt the style of praśasti poetry with eulogies of contemporary kings to a greater extent than typically appears in the Sanskrit sandeśakāvyas and dūtakāvyas. This would indicate that in addition to the pursuit of poetic renown, the Sinhala authors of messenger poetry were more concerned with enhancing the fame of their rulers than celebrating love. This subversion of certain aspects of cosmopolitan literary norms suggests that the poets’ interests had shifted away from simply mimicking Sanskrit kāvyas and its universalist aspirations.

In other words, the Sinhala sandeśas addressed a number of specifically local interests within the cosmopolitan genre of messenger poetry. One such motive is seen in the notable innovations that the authors of sandeśas contributed to the development of Sinhala literature. Whereas earlier Sinhala verse works tended to focus on stories of the Bodhisattva in the non-rhyming couplet style of gī verse, the sandeśas composed in the late fourteenth century and later emphasize worldly topics, including praise for contemporary kings and monks, in the rhyming quatrain style of sivupada verse. This change in the composition of Sinhala poetry coincided with an increase in poetic writing during the period when King Parākramabāhu VI was ruling in Kōṭṭe. For kings who styled themselves after powerful Indic rulers, there was a strong impetus to combine adherence to the Buddha’s Dharma with the enjoyment of aesthetic and other pleasures. As this interest gained prominence, the Sinhala sandeśas began to take on more of the qualities of praśasti poetry, with the glorification of powerful rulers replacing the celebration of romantic love and devotion to Indic deities in the messenger poems from the subcontinent. What appears striking when reading select Sinhala sandeśas next to messenger poems in Sanskrit, Tamil, Malayalam and other languages is the degree to which a cosmopolitan literary genre is appropriated to signal the distinctiveness of its Sinhala variants. There is abundant evidence for literary and cultural exchanges between Sri Lanka and various South Indian regions during the fifteenth century. These relations facilitated the adoption of some of the formal characteristics of messenger poetry, while also giving cultural salience to the Sinhala transformation of the genre.

This pattern of adapting from a cosmopolitan literary world while simultaneously distancing oneself from it mirrors what Hallisey has noted in his consideration of the development of Sinhala literary culture between the tenth and fifteenth centuries. Referencing Sri Lanka’s ‘constant struggle for autonomy’ while
in proximity to large-scale imperial formations in medieval South Asia, Hallisey observes that the position of Sinhala authors towards Sanskrit literature involved both participation in a cosmopolitan world and the attempt to mark distinctions through the creation of an autonomous literary space. The suggestion that pre-modern Sinhala authors balanced adaptation with innovation speaks to a general ambivalence felt towards belonging to a wider cosmopolitan sphere rooted in the subcontinent. Works such as *Kōkilasandēśaya* and *Sāvulsandēśaya* participated in the appropriation of Sanskrit literary forms, but without employing mimicry to such a degree that their distinctive features would be lost. The local appropriation of *sandeśakārīya* could enhance the reputations of indigenous poets and elites by imitating the cultural transactions of the larger Indic world, while at the same time reasserting the validity and vibrancy of Sinhala literary culture.

The distinctive emphasis on the fame and power of contemporary kings in Sinhala *sandēśas* resonates with broader efforts to protect their kingdoms from being overrun by foreign armies and foreign texts.

This wary stance towards the appropriation of a cosmopolitan literary genre resembles efforts by other vernacular literatures to conform to cosmopolitan literary conventions while still creating difference from them in order to rival and displace them at the local level. One finds the ambition to replicate cosmopolitan images of power and fame. Yet the focus of Sinhala poets in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries remained squarely on the island of Sri Lanka. Although appropriating certain features of Sanskrit poetry, the Sinhala authors under study here were careful to distinguish their works from messenger poems composed in the subcontinent. Nor should we assume that these works reflect political processes to shape discrete ethnicities and contrive a corresponding sense of geographical belonging, whereby Sinhala authors could have claimed the island for themselves.

The politics in premodern Sinhala *sandēśas* are instead concerned with enhancing the reigns and reputations of kings and the literary cultures that they were expected to support. Any indication of the salience of ethnic identities appears too faintly to register in these works. The routes travelled by the cuckoo and the cock map the spheres of royal power, not the territories belonging to distinct ethnic communities. Sinhala *sandēśas* from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries evince premodern concerns about the reigns and patronage of kings but do not anticipate or intervene in modern debates over races and nations.

Insofar as the *Kōkilasandēśaya* and *Sāvulsandēśaya* represent the broader genre of Sinhala messenger poems in premodern Sri Lanka, one may deduce that these works exemplify how people in the island negotiated their place within a wider politico-cultural order. The idealized locales in the island, conventionally described but particularly identified in these texts, serve as a kind of pivot, whereby familiar settings take on the trappings of the universal through the use of familiar poetic tropes. Sinhala *sandēśas* enabled local kings and poets to appear to rival those on the Indian mainland, as their respective reigns and writings were attributed with far-reaching influence. As noted above, the author of
Kōkilasandēśaya asserts that Parākramabāhu is without equal in power and glory among all other kings of his age. 78 Whereas, in Sāvulsandēśaya, Rājasimha is celebrated as the ‘the Lord of the Four Directions’ (satara digata him himi), whose glory obscures the fame of enemy kings. 79 Sinhala poets similarly appropriated the cosmopolitan order by composing works in the messenger-poet genre, but they distinguished their works by their use of language, their eulogies of living kings and the descriptions of local routes and places in the island. They praised themselves as great poets who produce fine literary works that are second to none. The monastic author of Kōkilasandēśaya refers to himself as the ‘noble, spotless lord of the Tilaka Monastic Collage’ (piruvan) who increases the fame and splendour of his lineage. 80 At the conclusion of Sāvulsandēśaya, the poet Alagiyavanna praises his own reputation by claiming to have immersed himself in the poetry and drama of Sanskrit and Pāli, and to have destroyed the other ‘elephants of poets’ like a lion. 81 These poets’ imitation of Indic messenger poetry was the sincerest form of self-flattery, offering the means to enhance the fame of local kings and authors. Both figures emerge from the sandēsas as individuals who act on a cosmopolitan scale and who rival – if not defeat – their counterparts in the subcontinent.

One way to understand Sinhala sandēsas within the larger Indic genre of messenger poetry is to compare how they appropriate the cosmopolitan and exalt the local with descriptions of tributary relations between kings. Tribute paid to other kings had been an age-old tradition both in Sri Lanka and throughout the region, serving to maintain diplomatic relations while asserting one’s power as an overlord, even when done to honour others. 82 The idea of tribute is a common element in both Kōkilasandēśaya and Sāvulsandēśaya, figuring as a characteristic of the kings that are eulogized therein. In the former text, King Parākramabāhu VI is described as having ‘the great and noble kings of the Coḷas, Pāṇḍyas, and Kēraḷas’ offering the ‘flowers of the shining gems on their crowns to the soles of [his] feet’. 83 This image of having foreign kings prostrating before one’s own king is extended in the next verse of the work:

Taking camphor, sandalwood, and musk that have lovely fragrances,  
And various cloths together with beautiful, delicate silk,  
The kings of various countries, giving these [to him] continuously like a flood of water,  
Stand there while venerating again and again without interruption. 84

The Kōkilasandēśaya serves in this way to glorify the local king by illustrating how neighbouring kings do obeisance and offer precious gifts from their respective kingdoms. Likewise, in Sāvulsandēśaya, King Rājasimha I is extolled for the honour and recognition that he receives from other kings. He is compared to the ‘beautiful king of swans’ that takes ‘the nectar of tribute (paṇḍuru) from the lotuses of the hands from the kings of various countries’. 85 And like those before him, he too is said to be honoured by Indic kings in person.
The collection of delightful Coḷa, Pāṇḍya, and Kēraḷa kings,
Who have become caught in the fire of his faultless glory, which is like the sun,
Submerging themselves in the great river of the rays of the toenails of the Lord’s feet,
Stand offering their lotus hands on the top of their heads, venerating [him] again and again.86

The similarities in these descriptions of the two kings in these sandēśas is noteworthy in itself. However, it is the image of Sri Lankan kings receiving gifts from subservient Indic kings that is pertinent for our analysis of Sinhala sandēśas. The portrayals of Parākramabāhu and Rājasimha receiving tribute and honour from countries in the Indic subcontinent do more than simply enhance their royal statuses. They also reflect how Irugalkula Thera and Alagiyavanna envision their own relations to the authors of sandeśakāvyas composed elsewhere. Like Sri Lankan kings who accept tribute from Indic kingdoms as a way to assert their superiority, the authors of Sinhala sandēśas accept the riches of Indic poets and yet improve upon them with their own compositions that effectively transform the genre. They receive gifts from other lands but are neither defined nor constrained by them. These poets rather are like kings who enjoy and use foreign wealth for their own ends. Their imitation of cosmopolitan literary culture serves the purpose of dignifying their own poetry, making a compelling case for their own skill and fame. In this way, the development of Sinhala sandēśa poetry, including the innovations made by local authors, represents a way to adopt the prestige of a cosmopolitan cultural order while asserting the distinctive value of an indigenous one.