# Word Cargo from the Far Country

Posted on

**Sailor Robert Knox's captivity in the Kandyan Kingdom for two decades in the mid 17th century resulted in a fashionable travel account that 'loaned' to the English language words of Sri Lankan origin or association for the first time.**

**Words** Richard Boyle

During the mid-17th century, unsuspecting British sailors were captured on the north-east coast around Trincomalee by forces of the tyrannical Rajasingha II, ruler of the Kingdom of Kandy. They were confined to remote villages within the mountainous region and had to adapt to an alien culture and challenging environment. Part of this adaptation involved using the Sinhala names for such things as food or flora and fauna with no English equivalent, with words like 'kabaragoya' (large lizard or water monitor), 'kittul' (the fish-tail palm, source of the coarse sugar known as jaggery, honey and rope fibre), 'kurakkan' (finger millet, a staple food), 'murunga' (the horseradish tree, the fruit of which is used in cooking), 'tic-polonga' (the venomous Russell's viper) and 'wanderoo' (the Sri Lankan grey langur and purple-faced leaf monkey) all becoming part of the sailors' vocabulary.

These 'loan words', as they are known to lexicologists, are still key in Sri Lanka today. Visitors may well witness a kabaragoya as it ambles, hissing, across a road, or taste kittul honey and jaggery as an accompaniment to buffalo curd. Troops of hooting wanderoo, leaping from tree to tree, can be encountered almost anywhere. Murunga continues to play a vital role in the creation of curries. And kurakkan, millet once limited to rural areas, is now used for bread-making in cities too.

Sinhala-English compounds were invented, such as betel-leaf, an essential masticatory ingredient; bo-tree, the sacred pipal tree; and talipot-leaf, an umbrella. The bo-tree is found at Buddhist temples and shrines. The betel-leaf, obtained from the betel vine, is chewed together with areca nut and mineral lime to produce a stimulant. Chewing betel-leaf remains widespread today, but the use of the sizeable talipot-leaf umbrella is confined to just a few rural Buddhist monks.

Several English compounds were created to describe familiar creatures with different characteristics to those back home. Musk-rat was applied to the Indian grey musk shrew, which has an unpleasant musky smell, and land-leech to a member of the tribe that prefers terrain to water and makes passage on foot in the mountains a bloody affair.

One of the sailors, Robert Knox, son of an East India Company ship's captain, managed to escape in 1679 after 19 years in captivity, taking with him in his head – he had no writing materials during his confinement – a considerable word cargo. He made up for his lack of pen and paper by drafting an account of Ceylon, the first in English, during the voyage home.

After his arrival in London he made the acquaintance of the likes of Robert Hooke, Samuel Pepys and Christopher Wren in the popular coffee shops of the day. Hooke, then secretary of the Royal Society, refined Knox's manuscript; An Historical Relation of the Island Ceylon was published in 1681. Thanks to Knox's exposure to the major intellectuals of the day, and the popularity of travel tales at the time, the book was a success, read by even Charles II, who granted Knox an hour's audience.

The words of Sri Lankan origin or association introduced to English through Knox's book had diverse legacies. The use of kittul and kurakkan would be restricted to the island. But a few words – 'Buddha', 'pooja', 'rattan' and, to a lesser extent, 'bo-tree' and 'betel-leaf' – attained international usage.

During the compilation of the first edition of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) in the late 19$^{th}$ century, a scholar resident in the colony, Donald Ferguson, was assigned to read Knox's book for potential inclusions. He and other readers were responsible for the appearance in the OED of 26 words of Sri Lankan origin or association first employed in English by Knox, such as Buddha, pooja and rattan.

Scores of other words brought to England by Knox made it into the OED, which was published in parts from 1884 to 1928. We have him to thank for the inclusion of 'dissava' (governor of a district), gaur (an ox), 'kangany' (overseer), 'illuk' (a grass), 'perahera' (a ritual), 'rillow' (the toque macaque), 'torana' (sacred archway), 'Vedda' (member of aboriginal tribe), and 'vihara' (a Buddhist temple). Not to mention 'cadjan' (matted coconut-palm leaf for the construction of village dwellings), 'chatty' (water pot carried on the hip or head by women), 'dagoba' (dom shaped structure containing relics of the Buddha or Buddhist saint), 'hackery' (two-wheeled, pony-drawn carriage), 'ola' (document engraved on strips of the palmyra

leaf) and ‘patana’ (mountain plain).

Then there are anaconda and serendipity, two words of remarkable etymology with a Sri Lankan connection. The latter’s connection to the ancient name of the country is evident, but who would suspect that the name for a South American snake, the world’s largest and most Hollywood-hackneyed, is derived from the Sinhala word ‘henakandaya’?

With the publication of the second edition of the dictionary in 1989, the number of entries concerning words of Sri Lankan origin or association doubled to 200. Included were ‘chena’ (shifting cultivation or a piece of land used for such purpose), ‘pansala’ (the dwelling of a Buddhist monk or living-quarters of a Buddhist monastery), ‘pol sambol’ (a condiment of shredded coconut, onion, chillies and lime juice), ‘poya’ (the day on which the moon enters one of four phases, observed as a day of religious significance by Buddhists), Sinhala and, finally, Sri Lankan, which seems an apt way to conclude this article.

I must add, however, that work on the third edition of the dictionary has been underway since the turn of the century, but will not be finished for another decade, perhaps longer. It is likely to have 600,000 main entries, double that of the current edition. But so far only ‘malkoha’, the Sinhala term for the flower cuckoo, has been added and described as a “glittering enigmatic jewel in the canopy”.

Richard Boyle is the Sri Lanka English consultant to the Oxford English Dictionary and author of Knox’s Words (Colombo, 2004).



LAND LEECHES








