

Urban ambiance, meaning and emotion: The symbolic spectrum of Colombo, Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the symbolic spectrum of Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka, which is explored by mental mapping. As explained in the theory on urban symbolism and hypercity every city has a layer of ritual and symbolism in which its cultural character is expressed. In this framework the most prominent characteristics of Colombo are street names, religious buildings and rituals, and the features of conflict as shown in the presence of the military and the fear of the people. The fear overwhelming the city results from a complicated process of Sinhalese citizens confronted with Tamil migration to the capital, governmental worries about those Tigers and possibilities of terrorist attacks. These fears are shown by the defensive roadblocks placed by the government, information spreading about dangerous places and moments in the city, and the avoidance of crowded places by the citizens. The prominent place of fear is a part of the total symbolic context of the city, which is quite diverse.

KEYWORDS: hypercity, urban environment, meaning, emotion, symbolism

Introduction

The cultural character of a city is expressed in layers of rituals and symbols, which is explored in the theory of urban symbolic ecology and hypercity (Nas 1993; Nas, Jaffe and Samuels 2006). The focus of this essay is the symbolic spectrum of Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka, and is based on the vision of its population. Sri Lanka's lively history is the crux for this variety, as many signs of the different stages ranging from early to modern times, including the different European rulers in the colonial period, can still be found in Colombo. The various stages in its history have both continuous and transient symbols,

ANTHROPOLOGICAL NOTEBOOKS 14 (3): 67–89.

ISSN 1408-032X

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taking into account the concept of a historically-tiered symbolic system. In Colombo, the buildings and symbolic elements are situated throughout the area, with colonial houses standing in the shadow of modern office buildings, displaying the non-linear history. Some of these symbols are top-down, representative of the nation and regime, whereas others are bottom-up, such as the places of worship. They can also be a combination, such as changes in street and place names.

Colombo is not only a mix of historically-tiered symbols; it is also an amalgamation of different ethnic and religious groups. The population of Colombo consists mainly of Sinhalese but there are other ethnicities, such as Tamils, Moors and Burghers. The population is mainly Buddhist, whilst other common religions are Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. These differences are visible in the city through the representation of sacred symbols in the form of different religious buildings, rituals and festivals. The city is not only divided into ethnic areas but there is also the aspect of the function per district. In this context the concept of compartmentalized symbolism will be discussed.

Colombo can be seen as the commercial capital of Sri Lanka. There are universities, hospitals and businesses which attract all kinds of migrants. Furthermore, it is seen as a safe place which attracts Tamil migrants. Although there is no particular symbol expressing Colombo's identity, the migrant citizens are inclined to take over local habits in order to claim indigenous roots. There is a clear distinction between the migrants and those who are born and bred in Colombo.

In relation to the previously mentioned distinctions between heritages, be they ethnic or cultural, fear and insecurity also play a role. Colombo is a city full of emotion. This is due to the political context and repeated attacks by the Tamil Tigers. These emotions are exposed through a range of occurrences. The military roadblocks and security checks set up by the authorities in order to protect themselves and other citizens, the avoidance of crowded places and the discrimination of migrant Tamils are all examples. Emotional symbolism is a concept that can be used to indicate the role of this fear and other feelings that are present in Colombo. These kinds of emotional symbolism are shown in some of the mental maps drawn by informants, as well in some poems and songs.

In this essay on urban symbolism, the emic vision of Colombo's population is explored. Mental mapping as a technique of data collection is introduced and descriptions of Colombo's history and related symbols presented. Subsequently, the relation between ethnicity and religion with respect to the urban landscape is discussed, while urban-rural migration is illustrated in relation to Colombo's identity. Considering the various elements of ethnicity, religion and the urban-rural migration, the focus in the last section is on emotions on both a national (concerning the conflict) and a local scale (concerning urban conditions) and their symbolic reflection within Colombo.

Portraying images

To research the emic vision of Colombo's population, mental mapping is one of the methods that can be used in the field. Mental maps are, as Nas and Sluis (2006: 131) discuss, 'drawings of informants who are asked to sketch their urban environment and note the items they consider important'. As Reinders (2007: 167) argues, 'mental mapping can be

used to get an overview of the way people collect, order, summon and manipulate their environment'. It is a way of portraying their image of the city. Appley (cited in Nas and Sluis 2002: 131), 'distinguished eight types of maps: fragmented, scattered, chain, mosaic, branch and loop, linked, netted and patterned'. Nas and Sluis, in order to reduce the data, have suggested to make a distinction between four types of maps, 'namely scattered (elements or strings), linked (elements or strings), clustered (a number of separated areas or groups of elements) and patterned (one interrelated whole) maps' (ibid.). Some of the mental maps drawn of Colombo did not fall into any of these four categories. Excluded from this typology we found two other types; they were the more pictorial maps, defined as, emotionally-structured mental maps by Luo (2006), because they express the way people feel about their city. Although all mental maps show emotions about the city, it is this pictorial manner of drawing one particular emotion and the clarification of this feeling by the respondent that make some of the mental maps emotional ones. The other category was mental maps solely showing a small part or a single street in the city. These will be defined as locally-focused mental maps.

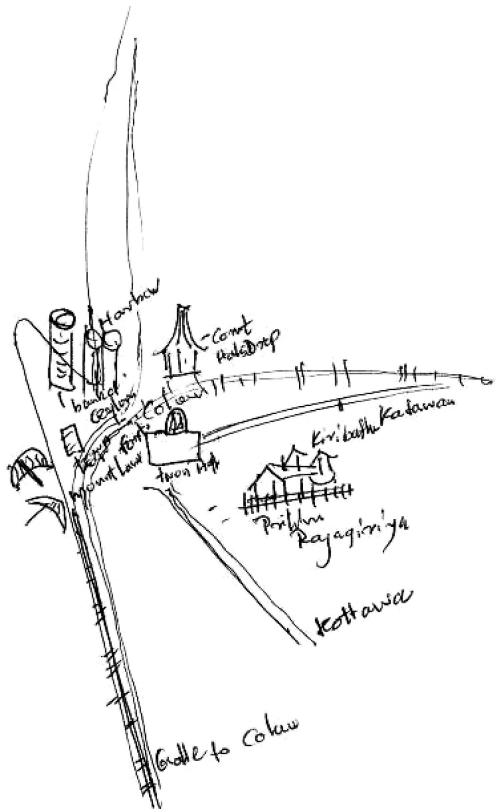


Figure 1: A clustered/emotional mental map expressing content.

The attribution of mental maps to the categories is not always clear as some maps can adhere to two labels. An example is given in Figure 1, which at first could be viewed as a clustered map but considering the drawing as a pictorial map and clarification of the respondent as: ‘Every building is different, with a different purpose. From Colombo, they control and rule over the country; financial, governmental and the transportation’; it could probably also be categorized as emotionally-structured. This map shows different buildings, such as the Bank of Ceylon, World Trade Centre, Railway Station and Court complex, in a photographic manner. These buildings are all situated in the old core of Colombo and drawn as a cluster in this centre. Some of the infrastructure – such as roads and railways – are marked as an indication of the good transport facilities in Colombo.

Emotionally-structured mental mappings are a representation of the areas that are considered to be positive or negative, beautiful or ugly, or safe or unsafe. Figure 2 is an example of an emotionally-structured mental map, as it is drawn in a very pictorial way with indications of feelings. Most of the buildings have to do with the different religions in Colombo and feature tolerance. Other buildings include the World Trade Centre with the Hilton Hotel in front. The rest are houses and buildings in general and implicate ‘the crowdedness of the city’. Some of these houses, namely the little ones lying close to each other, are shanties. The biggest and highest houses are those of high and middle class people.



Figure 2: Emotionally-structured mental map indicating tolerance.

The reason for the drawing of many pictorial mental maps may relate to ways of orientation. A majority of the respondents never use maps themselves; they find their way through town by making use of the landmarks, buildings and infrastructure. Shop signs, shop and street names or house numbers are also used for referencing. Many respondents do not remember road names but refer in their descriptions to particular places and call a street, for example, the 'Uni-street'. This manner of defining bearings is an explanation for the way they draw particular buildings or street naming in their mental maps. None of the respondents has made a patterned map, which is probably also related to ways of orientation.

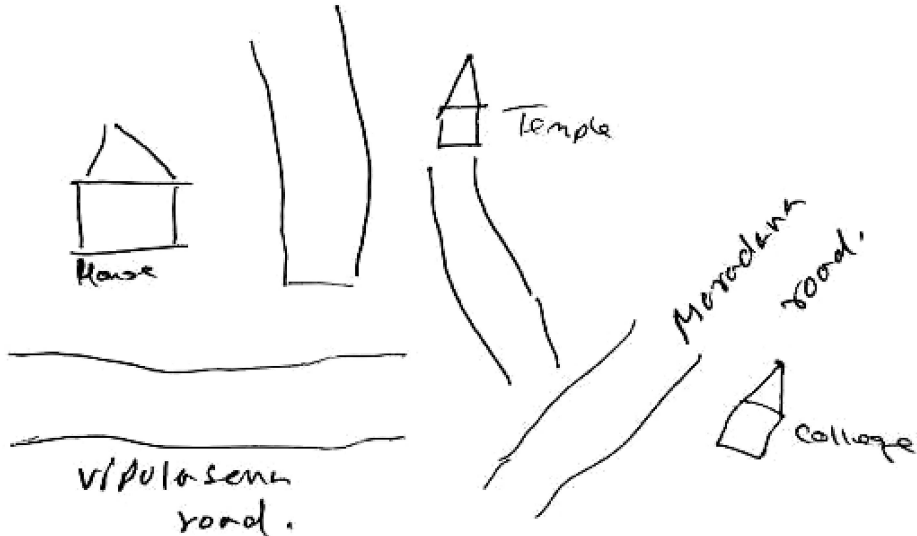


Figure 3: *Locally-focused mental map.*

A collective map (Figure 4) was constructed from the individual mental maps,¹ indicating the importance of the places mentioned most. Galle Road, beginning at Colombo's Galle Face and running 115 km south to Galle, is drawn almost consistently. Other places that are often mentioned are Colombo University, the sea, the National Museum, the Fort (Colombo 1) and Colombo Port. The rest of the noted places include some of the Colombo districts, parks, particular road names, and buildings or facilities such as the General Hospital, World Trade Centre, Public Library and Majestic City, a shopping complex.

¹ The field work for this essay was carried out by Michelle Schut during two months in 2007, with 32 mental maps collected from 20 Buddhists, two Hindus, four Roman Catholics and six Muslims, from who 18 women and 14 men, and 41 interviews conducted among all sorts of inhabitants, especially students and other persons, as lecturers, who are related to the university (13 respondents) and random contacts in the city, with shopkeepers, shop and bank workers, managers, volunteers and unemployed persons. The question asked for mental map collection: 'Can you please draw me a map of the city? Not as it is on a real map, but how it is in your head, with the important places for you.' The interpretation of the map is based on the interviews with respondents who drew the mental maps.

Considering the large proportion of respondents having a connection to the university, it was interesting to observe how their collective mental map differed from that of the rest of the respondents. Although the maps still had their similarities in that the sea, Galle Road and Colombo University were all mentioned, it appeared that in the non-university-related respondents, the mention of Colombo University was somewhat reduced. Instead these respondents placed more importance on landmarks such as the



Figure 4: General collective mental map of Colombo based on 32 individual drawings.

harbour, the Town Hall and various district names (Figure 5). This is in stark contrast with the university-related respondents who primarily mentioned the National Museum, the Art Gallery and the Fort district (Figure 6). It appears that the non-university-related respondents attach more value to the governmental and administrative side of the city, whereas the university-related respondents mention places connected to the exchange of knowledge and commercial trade.

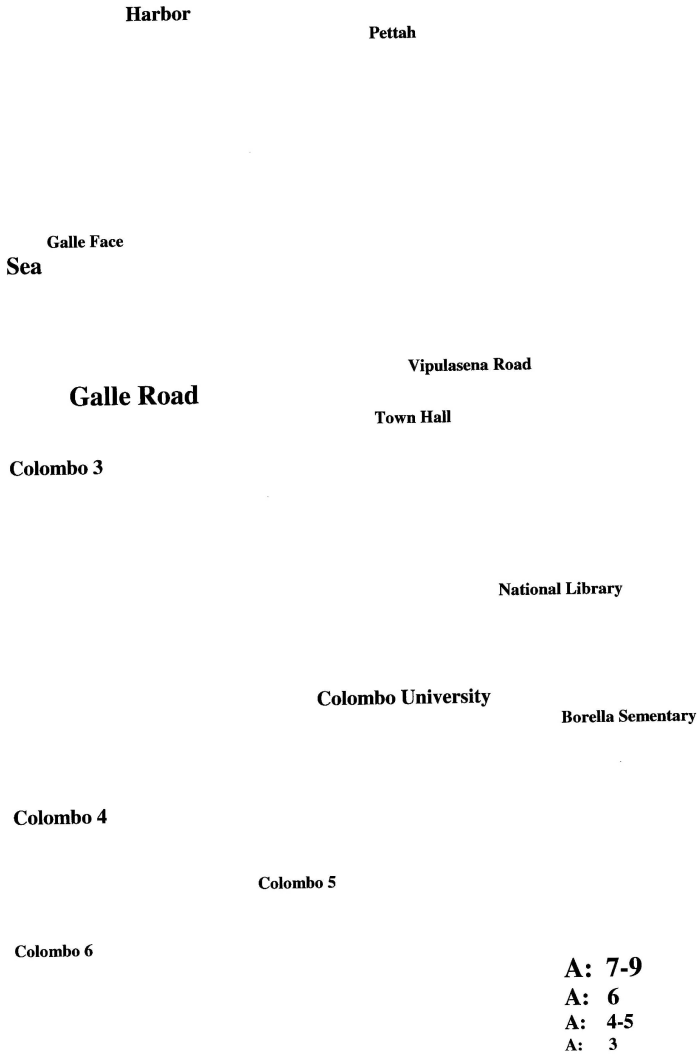


Figure 5: Collective mental map of Colombo based on 18 individual drawings of persons not related to the university.

As is shown, there are different types of mental maps. Mental maps are individual drawings and therefore they can be put in different categories, but each individual mental map is different from one another. This aspect of differences has to be kept in mind when making a collective mental map, as it can differ for each different group.

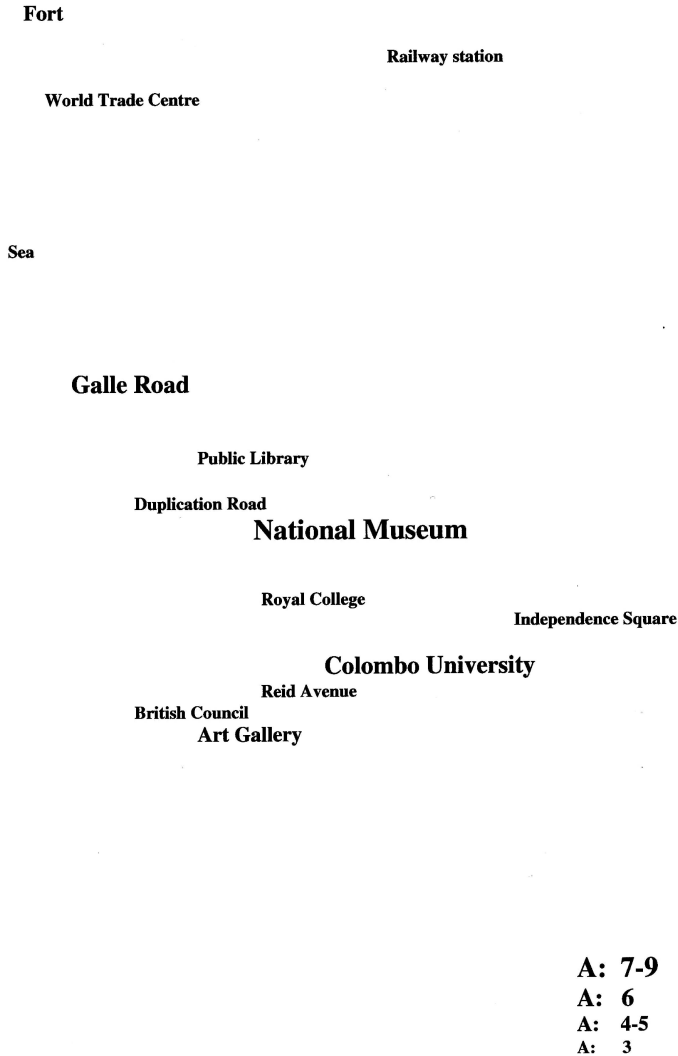


Figure 6: Collective mental map of Colombo based on 18 individual drawings of persons related to, as lecturer or councillor, or studying at the university.

Historically-tiered symbolic systems

Symbolic changes have occurred against the background of political processes related to the colonialization and decolonialization of Ceylon, now known as Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka's history can be described in five stages: the early period (pre-1505), Portuguese (1505–1656), Dutch (1656–1796) and British (1796–1948) colonization, and after independence in 1948, the modern period. The various historical phases are characterized by different and sometimes permanent symbols in line with the concept of a historically-tiered symbolic system.

Colombo has always been a commercial city, which can be traced back to pre-colonial times. The harbour back then was already in use, but the Portuguese constructed the Fort for security reasons. It had a star-like pattern and this shape is still present in Colombo nowadays, due to the surrounding canal. The streets in Pettah, laid out in a grid pattern, date back to colonial times, too. During the Dutch colonial times, there was much rebuilding in the fortification area, once it was captured from the Portuguese. It maintained its original, military purpose until 1869 in the British period. By that time, as Wright points out, only a few guns were 'maintained in positions, commanding the approach to the harbour', while the landward fortifications had disappeared altogether (Wright 1907: 395).

Many colonial structures are still present in Colombo, especially in the Fort area. Examples are the Old Clock Tower (built in 1857) (Figure 7) and Post Office (later half 19th century). Cargills (built in 1896) used to be a department store but it is now no longer in use. The Old Parliament (built in 1929) is still an interesting landmark on the edge of Fort, but has lost its governmental importance, just as Colombo has lost its function as the administrative capital of Sri Lanka, which has been transferred to Sri Jayewardenepura. The President's House, formally Queens' House (18th century) was built by the last Dutch governor of Ceylon and was later rebuilt to now function as the official home of the President of Sri Lanka (Baldwin 1986). These are just a few examples of the many reminders of the colonial period in the Fort area, of which many more can be found in Colombo and in the rest of Sri Lanka.

Particularly after independence there was much change although most of the colonial buildings were left alone. A new liberalization policy, concerned particularly with the economic field, was introduced in 1977. As a result, the government began construction activities in the old Fort district. The private sector rose, featuring shopping malls, banks and so on, creating a collage of both the old and the modern. One striking symbol of this new policy is the World Trade Centre or, as viewed by the inhabitants, the Twin Towers (Figure 8). With its 152 metres and 40 floors, they are the highest buildings in Colombo and even Sri Lanka. It deserves the title of the new landmark of Colombo. The World Trade Centre buildings house multinational companies; they can be seen as another commercial symbol and of course as a sign of modernity.

Other symbols in Colombo are frequently of a political nature. There are many statues of former presidents, which foster nation building. Another important national symbol is Independence Hall, erected by the government of Ceylon to commemorate the independence of Ceylon on 4 February 1948. As a copy of the last king of Kandy's parliament building, it is a referential symbol and thereby a reminder of the culture of Sri Lanka before the colonial period. A related top-down national symbol is Independence

Day; a one-day celebration, which is not a people's event but a large governmental ritual. It is one of the festivities exposing power. Colombo can be seen as a theatre full of these kinds of rituals. The Town Hall of Colombo is sometimes considered a replica of the White House in America, as was pointed out by many respondents (Figure 9).

Another referential symbol, but in this case a general one, is the Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall. The BMICH was a gift from the Republic of China (Taiwan) and was built in 1971. Some of the respondents referred to it as 'the Chinese temple'. All these elements were created after independence and are top-down governmental symbols. But this does not imply that all changes are top-down.

The changing of street names is a mix of top-down and bottom-up symbolism. The English were the first name givers of Colombo streets, as the Dutch and Portuguese were mainly interested in trade near the coast. President Jawerdena (1977), the first president of Sri Lanka, translated the names to Sinhalese. As was pointed out by Andrew Scott, many of the streets in Colombo have names such as Queen's Street, Prince Street, Duke Street, with a royal flavour, eliciting colonial connections.

Other names take our memories back to the names of some famous road builders and their names have become immortalized in the nation's history... Captain William Gregory is remembered by Gregory's road in Colombo... Some other road names in Colombo such as Wolvendhall Street, Korteboam Street, Grandpass and Dam Street take us back to the Dutch period... The Portuguese too left behind some interesting place names as Mattakkuliya and Kollupitiya (Scott 2002).

Although some streets still retain their colonial names, many were changed after 1977. The street names now honour generals, presidents and prime-ministers, national heroes, artists, and notably Buddhism (Dhanna, Dharmasiri and Sri are Buddhist terms). Another significant characteristic of the new names is that most of them have Mawatha (Sinhalese for street) instead of street, road or lane behind it.

Not only the street names, but other place names are changing too. Examples include the Kelani Bridge previously known as the Victoria² Bridge, as well as the Vihara Maha Devi Park, which used to be Victoria Park. An illustration of a place name that remained the same is that of the Beira Lake, one of Colombo's most prominent natural landmarks referring to the Dutch engineer Johann de Beer. Other examples are district names, as already mentioned Fort, but also Pettah, Slave Island and Hulftsdorp.

Prior to this investigation, I was told that changes were initiated by the government and that the inhabitants had little possibility of participation. During the fieldwork period, it turned out to be quite the contrary. There were examples of inhabitants living in a street and asking the government to rename it after a person considered important by them. Stephord Lane (British governor), for example, was changed into Vipolasena Road (Buddhist monk), after a request by the head of the Buddhist temple in that street.

² Former Queen of England.

According to Andrew Scott, there is a preference for old names that have a history and a charm of their own. Nevertheless, it turned out that most of the respondents use both the old and the new names. Many respondents stated that they got confused by the new names. When inquiring about preferences, the answer is frequently: 'I do not mind, they can change it if they like'. Despite the proclaimed impartiality, a small test proved that they appropriate the new names in favour of the old ones.³



Figure 7: The old Clock Tower at Pettah (Michelle Schut 2007).



Figure 8: The modern World Trade Centre at the Fort (Michelle Schut 2007).

³ The test, a list with 48 old and new street names next to each other, questioning which name the respondent uses, was completed by nine respondents.



Figure 9: Vihara Maha Devi Park the Town Hall in the background (Michelle Schut 2007).

Colombo districts: Different purposes, ethnicities and religions

The fieldwork showed that the word Colombo has different meanings. It is the capital city of Sri Lanka but the name is also used for an administrative district in the western province of the country. In this research, the focus is on the city of Colombo, but even that is an indistinct term. Colombo consists of the main city but also the suburbs, which are known together as Greater Colombo. Colombo's city population was 647,100 in 2001 (Department of Census and Statistics – Sri Lanka 2008).

The compartmentalized symbolism of Colombo is important for understanding its non-linear history. Compartmentalized symbolism is a concept used for symbolic systems of cities when they consist of two levels which are so legible that, besides the more general level, strong but subordinate symbolic parts can be distinguished. This compartmentalized symbolism of the districts is related to functionality, ethnicity and religion, but also to history. The city of Colombo has fifteen districts, each with its own name; Fort (Colombo 1), Slave Island (Colombo 2), Kollupitiya (Colombo 3), Bambalapitiya (Colombo 4), Havelock Town (Colombo 5), Wellawatta (Colombo 6), Cinnamon Gardens (Colombo 7), Borella (Colombo 8), Dematagoda (Colombo 9), Maradana (Colombo 10), Pettah (Colombo 11), Hulftsdorp (Colombo 12), Kotahena (Colombo 13), Grandpass (Colombo 14) and Mattakkul (Colombo 15). These districts have their own significant characteristics.

Colombo 1, Fort, is mostly a commercial area as discussed before. It is part of the old core. The concept of non-linear history is essential to this area as an interesting mix of numerous old, even dilapidated colonial buildings and hypermodern constructions can be found here. Due to its commercial connections, it becomes extremely hectic during rush hours as crowds of middle-class people travel to and from work. The presence of numerous roadblocks is due to the fact that the house of the President is located in this area. The rest of the space is non-residential aside from some illegal housing constructions.

Colombo 11, Pettah, can be seen as a totally different world. Here, although there is a lack of numerous high modern buildings, the level of industriousness is the same. Both areas, Fort and Pettah, are focal points for trade. Pettah is known for the bargains, which can be purchased on the streets where the shop owners have installed small markets. Still visible on the map is the regular grid pattern from Dutch times. Most of the little shopping streets are narrow through which only tuktuk's and pedestrians can make their way. The main train station and bus stations of Colombo are also located here. Pettah is a residential place for the lower-class and has a highly concentrated population. As noted by Arnold Wright (1907), Pettah was formerly known as a 'Black Town' because it functioned as a native quarter. The name Pettah also refers to this area as a residential quarter for the natives. In Tamil *pettai* and Singhalese *pita* means 'outside'; outside the quarters of the Europeans the native traders operated their markets. Presently, the traders are mostly Moors and Tamils. Because of this, the main religious buildings in the district are the Jamiul-Alfar Mosque, the Old and New Kathiresan Kovil and the Ganesha Kovil.

Colombo 2, Slave Island, is also part of the old colonial town, as is indicated by its name. It is surrounded partially by a canal and partially by the Beira Lake. In the lake, there is a little Buddhist temple and meditation island, Seema Malakaya, and on Slave Island, the best known Buddhist temple of Colombo, the Gangaramaya Temple, is situated. Considering this, the area of Slave Island closest to the lake is mostly Buddhist (Figure 10).

The differences between this older centre and the other districts, as for example Cinnamon Gardens (Colombo 7), are clear. Fort and Pettah are separated from the other districts by the canals from Beira Lake. As opposed to these areas, the roads in the other sectors are wider, there is more greenery and the buildings are of modest height as well as newer. Cinnamon Gardens accounts for the bulk of the best-known schools of Colombo. It is, therefore, also the home to Colombo's first private school, the Royal College and of the University of Colombo.



Figure 10: Beira Lake with Seema Malakaya Buddhist temple and mediation centre and on the background the WTC (Michelle Schut 2007).

Over the course of time, the residential areas have shifted from the centre of the city towards the periphery. Nowadays, the main residential areas in Colombo are the suburbs and the adjacent districts, to which many rich inhabitants have been and still are relocating (ILO 1979). Bambalapitya (Colombo 4) is a high class residential area with good schools. Other upper-class residential areas are Havelock Town (Colombo 5) and Kollupitya (Colombo 3), whose history is influenced by the cinnamon trade. Most of the residents in Kollupitya are Sinhalese Christians and Burghers.

Wellawatta (Colombo 6) is a residential area, too, but completely different from the ones mentioned before. It is known as a Tamil area. In the other districts, except Wellawatta and Pettah, the Muslims and Tamils form a minority. Although Pettah and Wellawatta both have a majority of Tamil residents, there is a significant functional difference between these areas. Pettah is lower class, which is reflected in the presence of slums. Wellawatta, in contrast, is the residential place of most of the migrants as well as Tamils, some of which are lower class but the housing suggests a dominance of the middle-class

Besides commercial and residential functions as the basis of compartmentalization, religion also seems to be important in this respect. Ethnicity and religion are thought to correspond partially; a case exemplified by Pettah, where mainly Hindu *kovils* and Islamic mosques are found. Another specific phenomenon can be examined when analyzing a map which indicates all the places of worship. It then appears that the larger, religious buildings seem to be concentrated in small clusters, although they need not necessarily be representative of the same religion. Some of these buildings are adjacent to one another, both on a horizontal or vertical axis. The occurrence of only one religious building in an area is seldom seen. In between the clusters, other small places of worship are located. These consist of glass boxes situated at the corners of the road and contain a god, prophet or an image of a holy person. People can burn candles or to have a quick prayer there.

Colombo versus the rest

Tolerance can be seen as one of the features of Colombo, as all kinds of ethnic and religious groups can be found living together peacefully. Regardless of this apparent acceptance, there does seem to be an underlying fear, continuously present. An important aspect of Colombo identity is the migration of Tamils and rural-urban migration. As mentioned before, the majority of Colombo's population is Sinhalese. They are the original inhabitants of Sri Lanka; the other population groups, Moors and Tamils, are migrants. The Tamils are labour migrants from India and the Moors originate from Arabic traders. Since the mid-1980s, tensions between the Sinhalese and Tamils have escalated. This was the beginning of a civil war. The Tamil population in the north-east of Sri Lanka aim at getting their own state. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) are fighting for independence but are resisted by the government. The fighting has given rise to much migration. Many of these migrants, directly or indirectly affected by the conflict in the north-east, live permanently in Colombo now; in fact, they form a majority of the total migrant population.

The confrontation with the Tamil migrants has created an atmosphere of fear amongst the government, both local and national as well as among the population of Colombo. The Tamil population has migrated from the north-east of Sri Lanka to Colombo, scared of being caught in the heat of the war. Most of the migrants already have family or friends living in Colombo. When asked what the most important reason is for living in Colombo, an answer of a Tamil woman was: 'The security you can find here and nowhere else in Sri Lanka.' The motives for the Tamils to migrate to Colombo are the protection there against the Tigers and the safety they feel.

Rural-urban migration is quite common in a country like Sri Lanka, not only because of the security aspect but also because the needs of most people can only be fulfilled in a few big cities; Colombo is one of these. When people are asked what the main importance of their city is or why they are living there, the answers all refer to the needs and services. Examples of answers mainly indicate facilitations such as job opportunities, education, economic opportunities, health system and shopping facilities. Another positive evaluation is the proximity of necessities and the efficient transport system. All these facilities are the main reasons for rural-urban migration. Rural youth come to Colombo to attend both high schools and university. After their studies, they hope to find a good job in Colombo, presuming that they have better opportunities of employment in the city than in the rural areas. Rural-urban migration also partially exists because of temporal migration and commuter traffic from outside Colombo, which forms one of the causes of congestion and crowded public transport.

Once the migrants are able to appreciate the use of facilities and enjoy the increased opportunities, they develop a yearning to become a real Colombo inhabitant too, assuming Colombo identity. People do not want to show that they are from a rural area. Some respondents say there is a conceited mentality in Colombo; others say they are modern, European or Americanized. People speak English, have Western patterns and behave in an urban manner. Though a clear Colombo identity does not exist, the informants are able to tell who is originally from Colombo or in other words, who is born a city person and who a 'wanna-be' from the rural areas. All this has to do with urban identity and image.

The motives for migration have to do with the needs of the migrants, whether it is the search for access to facilities and opportunities and finally a Colombo identity, or the cover of protection and safety. The rural area can be seen as a symbol for uncertainty, in opposition to the urban area. The migrants see Colombo as a safe and pleasant haven. This migration plays a strong role in the emotional structuring of people.

Emotional symbolism

The reflection and symbols of emotions in Colombo can be categorized into national, internal and local ones. The symbols reflecting emotions on the national level are related to the conflict and produced by the government or by its citizens. The international representation of the conflict has to do with the negative effect on tourism. Furthermore, the local symbolic reflection of emotions will be discussed with feelings that the urban conditions bring.

One of the emotions that came forward in the interviews was fear. This fear takes a different shape among various population groups and the terror has become noticeable in the city, seen on both national as local level. One example is the emotionally-structured mental map drawn by one of the respondents. It shows the armed military and their tanks and the feelings of insecurity caused by governmental protection policy (Figure 11). Colombo being the seat of government, as well as residential home to the officials such as the prime minister, exposes one type of fear. They dread the Tiger attacks and not without reason. During the last century, many political leaders have been killed terrorist attacks. One example is the death of President Premadasa, killed on the first of May 1993 by an LTTE suicide bomber on Armour Street, where a memorial statue was erected.

Obvious reminders of the attacks on the government and on Colombo in general are found in various streets. Examples are the ruins of buildings that have been attacked and destroyed (Figure 12). Other places which have been violated by attacks and bomb blasts display symbols of their own. These can be seen as memorials, placed as a tribute for the fatalities that occurred at the time. These symbols manifest themselves in the form of personified statues or sculptures with the name and moment of the attack; street paintings are also abundant. One of these shows doves and the text 'Secure the sanctity of life'. It is painted on Kynsey Road, the scene of a suicide bomb attack on 29 July 1999; Dr. Neelan Tirchelvam, a Tamil scholar was killed by this particular incident. Also in 1999, on 18 December, President Chandrika Kumaratunga was wounded by an assassination attempt at the town hall. This was also commemorated by paintings, but these have faded due to lack of maintenance. These paintings are made by peace activists of the Road Painting Movement, whose aim is 'to promote reconciliation and peace by taking the focus away from hatred and revenge' and 'to reclaim public space, encourage non-vindictive memory and transform sites of violence into sites of beauty and healing' (Neelan Organisation, 2007). They proclaim that life is very valuable and ask why we are destroying it like this.

Signs of fear are not only found in the population and the government, on the local and national level, but also among tourists. Tourism in Sri Lanka is in severe decline. Nonetheless, some brave the risk, believing Sri Lanka to be a paradise. This image is marred as soon as they arrive on Colombo airport where they immediately encounter signs of fear and conflict. Annoyance and frustrations are shared with the locals when they have to show their passports at roadblocks and other checkpoints. The bewilderment among tourists is common and this differs from the ordinary population of Colombo who are, to a certain extent, used to the circumstances.

As protection for the government, as well as for Colombo's population, there are many roadblocks, one way streets and checkpoints. Some of these are at regular places and times, others are at specific occasions; for example, when the president leaves the President's House. Another symbol of fear is the abundance of armed military and policemen. Many people living in Colombo consider these symbols, like roadblocks, checkpoints and military presence, to be power symbols of the government. Although they fear attacks, they find the measures annoying because they lead to many delays and difficulties. For instance, as described by one of the respondents: 'The freedom to travel is now restricted for the civilians by checkpoints and roadblocks.'

In contrast to this view about anti-terror policy, the people themselves also take precautions. These are less visible in Colombo's environment, but not less prominent. Many of the people regularly listen to the radio or watch TV. They talk about the attacks, whether expected or executed. They avoid places mentioned in the media as well as crowded places such as the main bus stops and train stations. People who can afford it avoid using public transport at all. In general, the inhabitants live and travel with more caution. The fear of attacks is also shown in the way people look at the Tamil population and the public consternation regarding the increasing population numbers and densities in Colombo city.

In this sense, ethnicity remains a tense issue. Persons of Tamil origin are discriminated against in different ways. They have fewer opportunities for education and employment (Stokke 1998). Another problem is related to Tamil and Sinhalese language. The late President S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike proclaimed Sinhalese and English as the national languages, denigrating the Tamil language. It is forbidden to write exams and school tests in Tamil and most of the governmental publications are not in Tamil either.



Figure 11: Emotionally-structured mental map showing fear.



Figure 12: Remains after a bomb blast (Michelle Schut 2007).

The power of the government to address the conflict emerges from their policy and is disseminated also through their own media channels. Strong emotions in relation to fear and conflict are presented as the matter of winning or losing. This feeling is expressed in many newspapers and in other media as well. The government uses its media channels to display their victories and triumphs on national and international levels. Another expression of winning is the celebrations in Colombo on Independence Square and its surroundings with the army, politicians and other important persons, whenever an area is regained from the Tigers. This showcasing of governmental success is not always authentic as manipulation of the media does happen. This is highlighted by the contradictory broadcasting that occasionally occurs with the government media showing the winning, whilst other media describe the defeat of the governmental forces or the number casualties outnumbering those of the Tigers.

Aside from trepidation and conflict, there are many other emotions visible in Colombo, such as hope; hope for a better life in the city, hope for more opportunities and hope for peace in the country. Another is ambivalence, the feeling of being proud on Colombo as capital, the nation and independence, as shown in symbols on Independence Square and Independence Day, but also the feeling of shame that the country is in conflict and that since Independence Day still not one clear Sri Lankan symbol has come to the fore in the city. When asked, no respondent could point at one particularly dominant Sri Lankan building or other symbol in Colombo. In contrast, they mostly mentioned the city of Kandy with its Temple of the Tooth and Perahera. Mostly elderly respondents raised the problem that the Sri Lankan government has not attained very much since independence. Some even said they were better off under the colonial rulers.

An important point, as mentioned before, is the many facilities and opportunities in the city. A respondent considers 'the good exchange of knowledge, education and the confidence' to be the main reasons for living in Colombo, that attend to positive feelings about the city. These good opportunities and facilities, as motives for migration and living

in Colombo, can be seen as local symbols for modernity. In contrast, this respondent, as well as others, indicate many negative feelings about the urban conditions as well. Both the positive as the negative feelings about Colombo are exposed in old and new poems and songs. Old poems about Colombo are enthusiastic; one example is *The Races of 1853* by James de Alwis (Roberts et al. 1989). This poem shows the beautiful side of the city, with all the varieties of clothes, restaurants, beautiful houses and mansions and other amazing things. A song *Colompure shriya* describes its appealing sides as well. These aspects are also seen by many inhabitants and migrants. But in Carl Muller's poem *No-Sense City* other characteristics come to light. It pictures an alien place with an abundance of temples and churches, its corruption and the haste. It tells the story of how he escapes from it (Muller 2005). Colombo is also portrayed in poems and songs in opposition to the village: urban versus rural, corruption versus pure, ugly town versus beauty of the village. This is a romanticized vision. The women in the town are thought of as stereotypes, having loose morals and being afraid of relationships. Europeanization, modernization and corruption are seen as the equivalent of the city. An example is the song *Kolamba gihin igena gatta...* translated as *Is that what you learned after going to Colombo*. It is about a village girl who went studying in Colombo and changed both behaviour and style of dressing, which was not appreciated by her boyfriend.

Emotions about Colombo are not only indicated through poems and songs, but also discussed and mentioned in interviews and mental maps. Graphic representations in mental mapping may highlight what is considered safe and unsafe, as the mental maps may also show fear. From other maps, as Figure 13, we may learn what is seen as positive and negative and what is marked as beautiful and ugly.

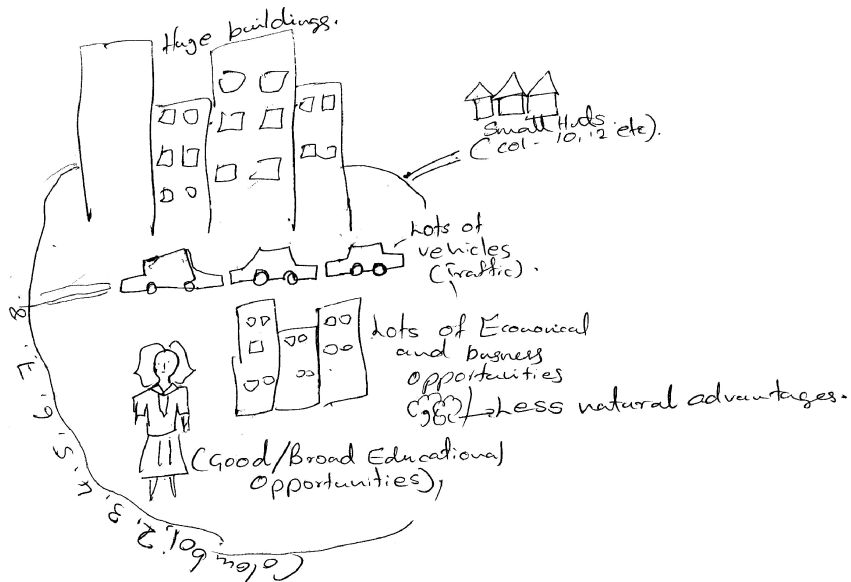


Figure 13: Mental map indicating positive and negative emotions.

As indicated before, only a few of the maps show emotional symbols in the urban ambiance. Negative feelings that are expressed in the mental maps relate to pollution, overpopulation, high density construction and heavy traffic. In some cases, respondents only see the city through this negative feelings; for instance, ‘the whole city is polluted, crowded and everywhere buildings and streets’. The pollution in Colombo is very visible. A particularly large garbage dump is mentioned frequently by respondents when discussing Colombo symbols (Figure 14). Although it is not a dump anymore, the piles of pollution are still visible and it haunts memories.



Figure 14: Mental map with the huge garbage belt on Blomedal Road.

Leeke Reinders (2007) refer to the idea that the social problems of backwardness and exclusion can be undone by physical intervention. As shown in the case of the Tamil population, who hope for inclusion, this argument does not apply to them. Despite the physical intervention and signs of tolerance, they are still excluded and discriminated against. Another example is the case of nature flourishing on the garbage dump; many memories and ideas survive physical interventions. People who live on the dump are still poor and many of the slum dwellers in Colombo have not benefitted from the various forms of intervention.

A final illustration is the intervention by the government through the development of housing schemes for the slum dwellers who were victimised by the 2004 tsunami. These people are unaccustomed to living in a fixed place and having only limited relations with

all the neighbours. They prefer living on the street but reverting to their old street life allows other people to identify them as the backward poor and a helpless class, although they made their own choices. Another prevalent emotion in regard to beggars and slums is that of empathy, although this view is not always shared by all people and tourists as many consider them a problem. This problem is not new, however.

In relation to pollution and crowdedness, the high density, many buildings, traffic jams and the lack of nature is often indicated. In Colombo, there are not that many 'green places'; the few that are known are Vihara Maha Dewi Park and Beira Lake. Galle Face Green used to be a place for rest and play as well, but it was closed in the summer of 2007. Many respondents mark this lack of nature as one of the negative sides of Colombo city and although it is counterbalanced by the positive sides, one of the plans still aims to revive Colombo as the garden city of the east again, as it was during the colonial era. Magnus (2002) supports the 'saving or regaining city areas for breathing space for the population ... Good space, fresh air, but over-crowded, make Colombo the "Garden City of the East"' (Magnus 2002: 7).

Conclusion

The symbolic spectrum of Colombo city is diverse, as are the meanings given by its population. In this essay, the emic vision of the population is explored via mental mapping drawn by respondents. Mental maps show what is important for them and sometimes it is a clear illustration of meaning associated with the city. Some of the mental maps drawn of Colombo did not fall in one of the four categories (scattered, linked, clustered and patterned) defined by Nas and Sluis (2002). This typology is supplemented by emotionally-structured maps (Luo 2006) and locally-focused maps. The emotionally-structured maps are expressions of the feelings about the city and also the meanings given such as positive/negative, safe/unsafe or beautiful/ugly, to particular parts or places in the city. The emotional symbol bearers are various: feelings of pride and nation-building represented on Independence Day, fear and conflict expressed by the abundance of armed military and memorial statues and paintings after attacks, coupled with other negative feelings about pollution and crowdedness are shown all over city. Locally-focused mental maps are an expression of class diversity and the distinctive meanings attached to the city given by Colombo's population groups. These meanings not only vary among different classes, but also among different ethnic groups.

Colombo is divided into districts according to ethnicity, but also differing in function: residential or commercial. A concept that is discussed in this context is compartmentalized symbolism. Religion, in this respect is also deemed to be important. The compartmentalized symbolism of the Colombo districts is also related to history, as it is required for the understanding of Colombo's non-linear history. Sri Lanka's lively history is an important basis for Colombo's varied symbolic spectrum. The historical phases are characterized by transient – the World Trade Centre as symbol of modernity and of the new liberalization policy – and sometimes permanent – the harbour and buildings in Fort such as the Old Parliament – symbols in line with the concept of historically-tiered symbolic system. Some of

these symbols are top-down, representatives of nation and regime, others are bottom-up, such as the places of worship, whilst changes in street and place names are both.

The history and meanings characterizing Colombo as a city with many facilities, opportunities and safety, are related to another important aspect of Colombo's identity, namely the Tamil and rural-urban migration. Though a palpable Colombo identity does not exist, migrants aspire to become real Colombo inhabitants adopting urban identity by speaking English and engaging in Western behaviour patterns.

The cultural character of Colombo is expressed in a layer of rituals and symbols, involving buildings, statues, street names, paintings, festivals and identity as symbol bearers. Other symbol bearers are not that obvious and have to do with sentiments about the city that influence the representation and use of the city. Examples of emotional symbol bearers are the urban ambience of crowdedness, crowds themselves, the garbage dump, and feelings of insecurity in relation to Tamil migration and Tiger attacks. These emotional symbol bearers are accentuated through in-depth research on the emic vision and feelings of the city population.

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POVZETEK

Članek se ukvarja s simboličnim spektrom Colomba, glavnega mesta Šri Lanke, proučevanega s pomočjo mentalnega kartiranja. V skladu s teorijo o urbani simboliki in hiper mestu, ima vsako mesto določeno plast ritualov in simbolike, ki izražata njegov kulturni značaj. Najbolj izrazite značilnosti Colomba so v tem pogledu imena ulic verske zgradbe in rituali, pa tudi poteze konflikta, ki se kaže v prisotnosti vojske in strahu ljudi. Strah, ki prežema mesto, izhaja iz zapletenega procesa, v katerem se singalski prebivalci soočajo s priseljevanjem Tamilcev v prestolnico, vlada pa z grožnjo terorističnih napadov tamilskih tigrov. Ti strahovi se kažejo v obrambnih cestnih zaprekah, ki jih je postavila vlada, v informacijah o nevarnih delih mesta in nevarnih dogodkih ter v izogibanju krajev, kjer je gneča. Ta vidni strah je del skupnega simbolnega konteksta mesta, ki je zelo raznolik.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: hiper mesto, urbano okolje, pomen, čustva, simbolika

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