

PRESIDENT'S REPORT
AMERICAN INSTITUTE FOR SRI LANKAN STUDIES
October 2012 – September 2013

Charles Hallisey

This year as in years past, I am very mindful that the work of AISLS as a scholarly organization depends on the generosity, imagination, initiative, and energy of so many people. Once again, I would like to begin this year's president's report with an acknowledgement of these individuals.

Above all, I would like to thank John Rogers for his work as AISLS' US Director and Ira Unamboowe for her work as AISLS' Overseas Director and as Executive Director of our Colombo center. Their initiative, their sense of responsibility, and their efforts continue to enable the work of AISLS to proceed effectively and smoothly. As I have said in previous years, it is no exaggeration to say that John Rogers and Ira Unamboowe are the *sine qua non* of AISLS.

The staff of our Colombo Center--Deepthi Gunaratne and M. de S. Weerasuriya, - have continued, as in years past, to work effectively and independently to ensure the excellent functioning of our Center in Colombo, and they have also continued to work creatively to make our services as accessible as possible in Sri Lanka. Another valued and long-time member of our staff, Lorette Weeraratne, retired in December 2012. We are grateful for her contribution to our Colombo Center for several years; she will be missed.

In the United States, Don Keller (administrative support) and Selma Omerefendic (accounting) continued in essential roles that allow AISLS to function smoothly and to meet its organizational responsibilities.

The work of all of these individuals may not be immediately visible to the members of AISLS, but everything that AISLS does depends on their efforts and we owe them both gratitude and loyalty. We can sleep well at night knowing that we can rely on them and AISLS continues to thrive because of them.

The work of AISLS in building connections between scholars also depends on its listserv in many key ways, and I would like to thank Michele Gamburd—once again-- for her steady hand as our listserv director for the past year.

AISLS continues to receive core funding from the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), US Department of State. The ECA funds are a subgrant from the Council of American Overseas Research Centers (CAORC). Mary Ellen Lane, Heidi Massaro, Robin Boone, Monica Clark, Karen Park and the other CAORC staff have continued to give AISLS important and critical support. I would like to thank these institutions and individuals for their support of AISLS, support that may often be invisible to the membership of AISLS itself.

CAORC will have a major transition in 2014, since Mary Ellen Lane, Executive Director of CAORC, will retire in June, 2014, after 28 years of leadership at CAORC. Mary Ellen Lane has been a crucial supporter of AISLS from its very beginnings and AISLS is very much in her debt. I am happy to especially thank her for all she has done for AISLS over the years.

AISLS also receives core funding from the US Department of Education and I would like to thank Cheryl Gibbs at the Department of Education for continuing to give critical support to AISLS.

In addition to myself as president, the AISLS executive committee over the past year was comprised of Jonathan Spencer (vice president), Christina Davis (secretary), Daniel Bass (treasurer), and Jeanne Marecek (past president). I would like to thank all executive committee members for volunteering their service to AISLS and for their counsel and leadership over the past year.

I would also like to thank all of the members of the Board of Directors, both elected representatives and institutional representatives for volunteering their service to AISLS.

In the past year, AISLS gave support to seven conferences, workshops and panels. I will review each of these events below, but here I want to thank Nalin Jayasena, Sharika Thiranagama, Jeanne Marecek, Daniel Bass, Sujatha Meegama, Garrett Field, Dennis McGilvray, and Ari Ariyaratne for all that they each did to make these events possible.

I would like to thank Daniel Bass and Caitrin Lynch for their contributions of time, energy, and wisdom to the workings of the AISLS' fellowship and grant programs.

Finally, I would like to thank those members of AISLS who have made donations to AISLS over the past year. Your generosity allows AISLS to expand its efforts in many different areas, and we are particularly grateful for your financial contributions to the work of AISLS.

It is indeed a happy occasion for me to thank so many people for all that they have done for AISLS over the past year and it is because of them that we, the members of AISLS, do have a lot to be thankful for.

Elections

In the fall of 2013 AISLS is holding an election for president, vice-president, treasurer and two elected members of the Board of Directors. The election results will be announced at our Annual General Meeting on October 19, 2013.

Awards and Grants

AISLS continued its established fellowship competition for scholars who already have the Ph.D. or equivalent by the beginning of their fellowship tenure. As our guidelines specify, fellowships can range between two and nine months. Because of restrictions set by our funder for this program-- the US Department of State--, only US citizens are eligible for our fellowship program.

This past year fellowships were granted to Vivian Choi (Anthropology, Cornell University), Melanie Dean (Religious Studies, New York University), Sandya Hewamanne (Anthropology, Wake Forest University), and James Nye (Bibliography, University of Chicago).

AISLS also continued its dissertation planning grants program, designed to enable graduate students to spend six to eight weeks in Sri Lanka to improve their dissertation proposals. Awards were made this year to Philip Friedrich (Religious Studies, University of Pennsylvania), Devaka Gunawardena (Anthropology, UCLA), Hans Harmsen (Anthropology, University of Buffalo), and Dian Shah (Law, Duke University). Most funding for this program comes from the US Department of State, and these funds can only be used for US citizens. However, the AISLS dissertation planning grants program is also open to non-US citizens studying in US universities. When awards are made to non-US citizens, they are supported by AISLS discretionary funds and by donations designated for non-US citizen student awards. We are grateful to those members who made donations to AISLS over the past year specifically for this purpose.

Five awards were made during the year under the AISLS program to support language instruction in Sri Lanka.

AISLS continues to offer its graduate student members support to attend selected scholarly conferences in North America through its Travel Stipend Program. Three such awards were made in the past year. AISLS also made two awards to members to support their attendance at the Madison dissertation-to-book workshop organized by the American Institute of Indian Studies.

AISLS also directly supported two efforts to preserve and disseminate research materials. The Cornell Language Acquisition Lab is converting unique linguistic data on Sinhala into digital form and expects to make this material available freely on the Internet. The International Centre for Ethnic Studies, in a program directed by Gananath Obeyesekere, is working to locate, copy, and publish transcripts of early modern palm-leaf manuscripts found in various libraries in Sri Lanka. Some texts are being translated for the first time for English-language publication.

In the past year, we updated our directory of research centers in Sri Lanka, which is available at <http://aisls.org/directory.html> We are presently working to expand the

research resources on our website and we hope you will be able to see the results of these efforts very soon.

Workshops and Conferences

In the past year, AISLS gave support to eight conferences, workshops, panels and lectures that in a variety of ways sought to promote international connections in the study of Sri Lanka, including our continuing aim to promote scholarly interaction between American scholars working on Sri Lanka and our colleagues in Sri Lanka; encouraging tri-angulated relations among American scholars, Sri Lankan scholars and those working in Europe; and promoting greater interaction between scholars working on Sri Lanka and those students and scholars concentrating on other regions of South Asia and also on Southeast Asia.

On 11 October 2012, AISLS supported as a preconference at the Annual Conference on South Asia a workshop on “Sri Lankan Cinema and its Diaspora”. It featured the most recent manifestations of a film movement called the “third revolution”, whose concerns have revolved around the socio-political transformations brought about by three decades of civil war. The workshop included the showing of films by Pradeepan Ravindran, Suba Sivakumaran, and Sanjeewa Pushpakumara. Around 20 persons attended the event. Nalin Jayasena planned and convened the event.

Also on 11 October 2012, and again as a preference to the Annual Conference on South Asia, AISLS supported a workshop on “Dandin in the World.” This event on Sri Lankan and South Asian literature focused on the reception and translation of Dandin’s *Mirror of Poetry* (Kavyadarsa). About 15 persons participated in this workshop.

On 8—9 November 2012, AISLS held a graduate student workshop at Stanford University. This workshop, titled “Intersections: 2012 Sri Lanka Graduate Student Conference,” was co-sponsored by the Center for South Asia at Stanford University, one of AISLS’ institutional members. It brought together 20 US graduate students at different stages of study. Some were masters students, others were nearing completion of their doctoral dissertations. Since many students study at universities where there is no faculty member with a research specialty in Sri Lanka, this workshop gave students a chance to have their work critiqued by senior scholars, as well as to meet their peers. A session was devoted to the importance of making connections with Sri Lankan colleagues. This was the third in a series of graduate student workshops, all convened by Sharika Thiranagama.

A fourth Sri Lanka Graduate Conference will be held at Stanford University on December 6-7. It is co-sponsored again by AISLS and Stanford’s Center for South Asia and is convened again by Sharika Thiranagama.

On 20 December 2012, AISLS sponsored a workshop in Colombo on “Changing Gender Orders in Sri Lanka”. The workshop brought together 20 Sri Lankan, American and third-country scholars, students and NGO workers, 14 of whom reported

on their recent research. One theme that emerged from the discussion was the variety of ways in which young women are working to “become modern”. Several researchers documented hybrid practices and discourses by which women move across “traditional” and “modern” ideas. They also documented the inter-generational and inter-personal conflicts such movements entail. Another theme was the way in which the Sinhala majoritarian discourses of wartime and post-war Sri Lanka have influenced both the experiences and identities of women, and the practices and activities of civil society and humanitarian organizations. Jeanne Marecek convened this workshop.

On 11 May 2013, AISLS sponsored a workshop in Kandy on “Up-country Tamils in the twenty-first century”. Daniel Bass convened the workshop. There were fifteen participants, including three Americans and Sri Lankan scholars from three Sri Lankan universities (Colombo, Peradeniya, and the Open University). The first session began with a discussion of various community names, including Up-country Tamil, Plantation Tamil, Indian Tamil and Indian Origin Tamil. Participants analyzed the situational nature of these identifications, the ways that they have changed over time, and how they interplay with class, gender and caste. During the second session, participants examined citizenship, and the various ways that Up-country Tamils are not fully equal citizens of Sri Lanka, for example during a lengthy debate over local governance. After a lunch break, the final session concerned the many ways that one is Sri Lankan, from national identity cards to cricket team support to senses of belonging.

On 19–20 July 2013, AISLS co-sponsored with Nanyang Technological University a workshop in Colombo on “War and Peace: Visual Narratives from Contemporary Sri Lanka.” The workshop brought together nine scholars from four different countries and diverse disciplines for academic presentations to specifically examine responses to the various conflicts of the 1980s and 1990s, as well as to the dawn of peace in Sri Lanka, through various forms of visual culture. Held in conjunction with an exhibition of contemporary art at the Lionel Wendt Arts Center, the workshop addressed how visual images gave us access to unheard voices about the past three decades of violence in Sri Lanka as well as about reconciliation and rebuilding. Panelists addressed the ways in which different communities have responded to such issues by examining various material and performative landscapes: three panels address these themes, while narrating stories from the perspectives of the fields of anthropology, dance studies, sociology, film studies, and art history. Sujatha Meegama organized this workshop.

On 3 August 2013, AISLS held in Colombo a workshop on "Sinhala Light-Classical Song, Sociopolitical Change, and Sinhala Literary Culture in 20th Century Sri Lanka." This Sinhala-language workshop comprised two panels of presentations, each followed by a round table discussion. Participants included scholars from the University of Colombo, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, University of the Visual and Performing Arts, and independent scholars who have written extensively on the relationship between Sinhala music, politics, and literature. Garrett Field convened the workshop.

As part of AISLS efforts to reach students and faculty at institutions that do not currently have strong international connections, on September 26th we sponsored a public lecture at Heartland Community College (Normal, IL) by former AISLS/ECA fellow Dennis McGilvray (University of Colorado—Boulder), on “A House for Every Daughter: Tamil and Muslim Marriage in Sri Lanka Today”. About 80 persons attended this event, mostly students enrolled in anthropology, sociology and journalism courses at Heartland Community College. The college also organized a reception and dinner to enable McGilvray to interact informally with students and faculty. I would like to thank Ari Ariyaratne for making this event possible.

AISLS is, at present, working on its workshop program for 2014. We also plan to hold a forum at the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies in Philadelphia on 28 March, 2014.

It is important for AISLS to continue to receive new ideas for possible workshops and I invite members of AISLS to contact John Rogers or myself with ideas for future workshops that might be convened by AISLS.

As I noted above, one of the purposes of AISLS’ workshop program is to promote greater interaction between scholars working on Sri Lanka and those students and scholars concentrating on other regions of South Asia and also on Southeast Asia and I would like to mention how some earlier efforts on the part of AISLS have continued to encourage greater interaction between scholars working on Sri Lanka and those students and scholars concentrating on other regions of South Asia. In 2011, AISLS was a sponsor of a preconference on sandesa (messenger poetry) in South Asia at the Annual Conference on South Asia and this preconference was then followed by a workshop in Colombo in August, 2012 on sandesa poetry in Sinhala. Yigal Bronner from Hebrew University was a participant in both of these events. These two AISLS-sponsored events were followed in 2013 by a two week workshop at Hebrew University on messenger poetry, “Mapping the World through Courier Poetry,” (http://www.as.huji.ac.il/sanskrit_III), and P.B. Meegaskumbura (professor of Sinhala emeritus at the University of Peradeniya) and myself were participants; this workshop at Hebrew University was organized by Yigal Bronner and David Shulman.

In addition to holding workshops in Sri Lanka and elsewhere as well as making library resources available to Sri Lankan scholars, we encourage and facilitate visiting American scholars to give lectures at Sri Lankan universities or at other venues in Colombo. This is something that we would like to become more effective at arranging in the future. On 2 July 2013, AISLS fellow Yvonne Everett gave a public lecture at the American Center on “Gradients in Space, Time and Scale: A Resilience Based Analysis of Forest Gardens in Central Highlands Landscapes”.

Please let John Rogers or myself know if you will be visiting Sri Lanka for any reason and would like to lecture or present material in Sri Lanka.

Beyond the support it lends through its Travel Stipend program for graduate students, AISLS continues to encourage scholarly participation at various conference settings including the Annual South Asia Conference at Madison, the Tamil Studies Conference in Toronto, and the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies. In “unofficial” ways, AISLS also has aided the identification of Sri Lankan scholars to be invited to other academic meetings in the United States and I hope that all members of AISLS will provide us with suggestions on how we can both expand and become more effective in such efforts.

Information about scholarly conferences relevant to the study of Sri Lanka is also regularly disseminated through our listserv. Again, I hope that members of AISLS will facilitate us in this valuable service by informing John Rogers or myself of such meetings.

Colombo Center

In the past year, the American Institute for Lankan Studies’ (or AILS-- AISLS’ legal entity in Sri Lanka) Colombo Center has served an increasing number of US-based, Sri Lankan, and third-country scholars. All books in the library, except the most recent acquisitions, are catalogued according to the Library of Congress system, and the catalog is now available at <http://catalog.crl.edu/search~S14/X>, which is part of the Digital Library for International Research (DLIR). The collection includes recent academic books on Sri Lanka published in Europe and the United States, many of which are not available in other libraries in Sri Lanka.

The library also offers access to JSTOR and some other electronic resources. Ira Unamboowe, the Executive Director of AILS, has been especially energetic in outreach regarding our facilities in JSTOR, traveling to different universities and institutes in Sri Lanka to provide an introduction to scholarly access that JSTOR affords scholars and students.

In September 2013, we signed a new lease for our Center premises for the calendar year 2014. We are especially grateful to our landlord, Mr. H. Rodrigo, for the intangible support that he gives each year to our Center.

The center staff continues to be willing to try to meet requests from members for specific publications from Sri Lanka. These will continue to be supplied on an at-cost basis.

The center staff also continues to offer general advice and support for AISLS members visiting Sri Lanka.

Among the officers of AISLS, Jeanne Marecek, Past President of AISLS, Jonathan Spencer, Vice President, and Daniel Bass, AISLS Treasurer, all visited the Colombo Center in the past year.

Institutional Developments

AISLS receives most of its funding from the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), US Department of State, and from the US Department of Education. Over the past two years, federal government spending cuts in international education have reduced AISLS revenues to a significant degree, almost twenty percent in fact. Looking ahead in the short term, decreases in our funding seem more likely than increases, though it is possible we will keep level funding. The medium term outlook is extremely difficult to foresee, and the long term funding outlook impossible to gauge.

Significant changes to the Companies Act in Sri Lanka have led to increased reporting requirements by the Colombo Center. AISLS's procedures are periodically adjusted to ensure that the organization complies with relevant legislation and regulations from the Government of Sri Lanka.

We welcomed Miami University (Ohio) and Wake Forest University to AISLS during the past year as institutional members. This brings the total number of institutional members to twenty-three. There are also 116 individual AISLS members. Both these numbers represent record highs.

Obviously, we want to add to our institutional and individual membership, and any suggestions on how we might do so will be appreciated.

But most importantly, we are especially eager for suggestions on how AISLS can better support the study of Sri Lanka in the United States especially, but also internationally.