



SOCIOLOGY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CEYLON*

H.L. Seneviratne**

Department of Anthropology, University of Virginia, USA

ABSTRACT

For eight years after its establishment in 1948, the Department of Sociology remained in the ambiguous terrain of being both an independent department and a subordinate partner of the Economics Department. In that role Sociology supplied courses for students in Economics who wished to choose it as their 'Special Subject' within Economics. Sociology also supplied a few courses for the Sinhala and Philosophy departments. This paper narrates the story of how the two major figures to chair the Department of Sociology during this period contributed in their own ways to facilitate the passage of Sociology to the status of a degree-granting department, ending its ambiguous, anomalous, and liminal state.

Key words: Sociology, Economics, Bryce Ryan, Ralph Pieris

This paper is an account of the Department of Sociology of the University of Ceylon in approximately the first decade of its existence. The most significant development during this period was the transition of the department from one that provided courses for other departments, in particular Economics, to one that awarded its own degrees, making it a full-fledged and autonomous entity. The inability to grant its own degrees was not a

plight rooted in any statutory limitation but a limitation of resources, in particular the want of adequate teaching staff. This may partly have been due to the 'late comer' status of Sociology in relation to other disciplines, and a related vicious circle of inadequate resources and low enrollments. Being a subordinate partner of Economics was also a part of the legacy of the department's structural origin in the model of British universities. The oldest

*I wish to thank Bradman Weerakoon, R.S. Perinbanayagam, Ranjini Obeyesekere, Laksiri Jayasuriya, Tissa Fernando, P.A.S.Saram, and P. Weerasekera for sharing with me bits of useful information about the sociology department in its early era. Kitsiri Malalgoda, Amarasiri de Silva, and Tissa Jayatilake made comments that enabled me to vastly improve the paper. Thanks to Philip McEldowney for outstanding bibliographic assistance, and to John Rogers for his extraordinary

generosity in making valuable documents available to me.

**Author e-mail:
hls@virginia.edu

©2017 Social Affairs Journal. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

Department of Sociology in the UK was at the London School of Economics (LSE) and only goes back to the beginning of the 20th century; and it started as a subsidiary of the Economics Department. This paper makes an attempt to assess the relative contribution of the two major figures that strived in their own ways to the progress of the department towards achieving full-fledged status as a department that granted its own degrees.

Sociology began as an academic discipline in Sri Lanka, then Ceylon, in the academic year 1948-49, when it was added to the list of 'Special Subjects' available for students reading Economics (Report¹ 1949, p. 11). According to one of the students in that class, the iconic public servant Bradman Weerakoon (student years 1949-52), the class consisted of approximately 10 students. They were required to take three Sociology courses, one of which was on Methods (Weerakoon, December 2, 2017)². Eight years later, in the academic year 1956-57, 12 students were admitted to a newly crafted programme leading to a degree in Sociology independent of Economics. After taking eight prescribed courses and the final examination they were awarded their degrees, the first ever in Sociology, in 1959. In addition to the eight papers based on the prescribed courses, the final examination included a ninth paper, an essay on a topic selected from the several provided³.

Although by the 1940s several individual Ceylonese had some exposure to the subject in their studies overseas, Sociology in Sri Lanka formally began with the appointment of the American sociologist, Bryce Ryan as Professor of Sociology at the University of Ceylon. The factors involved in bringing about this appointment, including the relative roles played by Ryan and the University are unclear. The enabling broad context however seems to have been 'cultural diplomacy' that began in the World War II years as a way

of unifying the Americas against the Axis Powers, and adopted in the post war era as a general feature of US foreign policy. It is possible that the appointment of Ryan as Professor and Chairman of the Department of Sociology was made financially feasible by his concurrent service as Consultant for the Division of Medicine and Public Health of the Rockefeller Foundation during the same period (1948-52). It is also possible that funds came from the Smith-Mundt programme just established by the US Information and Educational Exchange Act of 1948 (Public Law 80-402). The appointment of C.H. Mac Fadden, Professor of Geography, University of California to the Department of Geography for the academic year 1950-51 gives us a clue. "Application was made [by the University] for his [Mac Fadden's] services through the American Embassy with the Smith-Mundt Act which empowers the State Department to subsidise the employment of American professors as visiting professors in universities, outside the United States. The University pays an ordinary professorial salary, while the cost of transportation and the difference between an American professorial salary and a Ceylon salary are met out of funds provided by the Congress" (Report 1950, p. 3).

While this arrangement may have been a possibility, Ryan's appointment was different in several ways. First, the process described above applied to visiting positions that typically were one-year appointments, whereas Ryan's, with its open tenure, resembled more a permanent appointment. Ryan held the Chair of Sociology since 1948, the year of its inception. His departure in 1952 was due to his resignation rather than any condition of his employment. Second, while the steady stream of American scholars that followed Ryan to the University of Ceylon consisted of recruits to established departments like Economics, History, Geography, Literature, and the Sciences, Ryan's assignment

included the founding of an altogether new department. While I do not at present have any documentary or other verifiable source to support this, incidental evidence suggests that the Vice Chancellor Sir Ivor Jennings was keen to establish Sociology as part of the curriculum of his university. This is a possibility altogether in keeping with Sir Ivor's well-documented dedication to the cause of founding a first rate university. Accordingly, he may have thought it only fitting that the emerging new field of Sociology be represented in the university. As a social scientist, both as well as a university administrator, he would have been familiar with the emergence of Sociology in the academic scene in the UK as represented by its major universities, in particular the London School of Economics.

The exact details of Ryan's assignment are not mentioned in the only publicly available source, the Reports of the Council of the University. These details, if at all, are available only in the minutes and other records of the senior university officials and of the relevant bodies. We can however reasonably assume that Ryan had all the authority and the discretion to carry out the responsibilities of "Professor and Chairman" as he is sometimes referred to in the Council Reports. We can equally reasonably assume that he carried with him the American conception of academic freedom that allowed him substantial leeway to make his own decisions about how much 'administration' he did and how much teaching and research, and how he combined the latter two. Looking at his record of work during his tenure it appears that teaching and research enjoyed priority over administration, which in the existing context included the initiative, and steps towards the achievement of full-fledged status for the Department of Sociology by enabling it to confer its own degrees. As for teaching and research, he also combined the two in ways unfamiliar to the orthodoxy held by both the academic and the administrative establishments of the university. A further

dimension was Ryan's conception of academic work as being tied up with and relevant to the pragmatic needs of society. This again was rooted in the pragmatic manner in which research was intertwined with social utility in the American academe, particularly the land grant universities.

Bryce Ryan, the founder of Sociology at the University of Ceylon, and thereby in the island, was born in Youngstown, Ohio in 1911. Prior to accepting his position at the University of Ceylon he worked in research and teaching positions including that of Assistant Professor at Rutgers University, which was to later publish his major work on Ceylon (Ryan 1953). After his four-year tenure at the University of Ceylon, he worked for two years (1952-54) at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Cornell University as Visiting Professor specializing in non-Western cultures. He did one more stint in this migratory career, a brief one-year tenure at Wayne State University, Detroit, before settling down at the University of Miami at Coral Gables, where he was Professor and Chairman of the Department of Sociology until his retirement in 1977. He rose to national prominence with the publication in January 1950, jointly with Neal C. Gross, a paper titled 'Acceptance and Diffusion of Hybrid Corn Seed in Two Iowa Communities' (Ryan and Gross 1950). (Ryan lists this work in the Eighth Annual Report of the Council of the University of Ceylon, 1949, under its pre-publication title 'Cultural Factors in the Diffusion of Hybrid Seed Corn'). The 'diffusion of innovations paradigm' the paper expounded became highly influential among American scholars of Rural Sociology, leading to some 4000 research publications. Incidentally, this paper illustrates the intimate relation between academic work and socio-economic activity characteristic of the American academe alluded to above.

A second American sociologist, Murray Straus, joined the Department as Lecturer in

1949. At the time he joined the department, Straus was young and inexperienced, and was in the process of meeting the final requirement for his Master's degree, the oral exam on his thesis, which he took on the day he left for Ceylon. He travelled by freighter from New York to Colombo, which took a month. Prior to the offer for the position in Ceylon, Straus had been planning to become a Latin American specialist, and had an informal understanding with one of his professors working in Venezuela that the latter would employ him. But he opted for the job in Ceylon because it "seemed even more interesting" (Straus, Letter to John Rogers, October 26, 2011). He gives profuse credit to Ryan for the quality of guidance and mentorship and the "real education about Ceylon and Sociology" he received at the hands of the latter (ibid). Straus went on to achieve a distinguished career in Sociology including teaching at the Washington State, Wisconsin, Cornell, Minnesota, and New Hampshire universities. At New Hampshire he founded and directed for over 40 years the Family Research Laboratory, the main mission of which was to demonstrate the negative effect of physical punishment in socializing children. His work repetitively demonstrated that children who were not subject to physical punishment grew up to be healthier adults who were less likely to resort to violence in dealing with their own children and spouses, going to the extent of arguing that abused children had lower IQs.

Ralph Pieris, who was to succeed Ryan as Head of Department and later as Professor and Chairman, entered the newly established University of Ceylon in 1942 and graduated in 1945. He read Economics with Banking as his 'special subject', but was disillusioned with its lack of relevance for the social reality that surrounded him, believing that the economics he was taught was the dismal science with scant reference to its human content (Pieris 1988, p. 9). With different strands of thought such as those of Keynes, Sombart, Mandeville,

and Marx as "peripheral entry points [he] stumbled into Sociology" (ibid, p. 15), which he found appealing. Sociology, however, was unavailable in Ceylon, so he persuaded his parents to send him to the London School of Economics (LSE), "the only institution in England teaching sociology, and that as part of the economics degree" (ibid). This meant that he still had to take economics courses with which he was decidedly unimpressed. As he puts it, "The aridity and irrelevance of the economics lectures at LSE by Benham, Hayek, Kaldor and Robbins was not due to their ineptitude as theorists, but rather owing to the self-imposed limitations of the discipline itself, resulting from the zealous yearning to make it an abstract "science", distinct from the humanities" (ibid).

Pieris made another discovery at the London School of Economics, namely that Sociology was saddled with the same problem as Economics; -- its pretense to scientific status. Besides, "... there was no clearly defined subject matter for sociology. Leading sociologists came from other disciplines, W.J.H. Sprott and M. Ginsberg from Philosophy, T.H. Marshall from economic history and D.V. Glass from demography" (ibid, p. 18). In addition, he found quite unacceptable the "dedicated reverence" of M. Ginsberg, Professor and Chairman, to the work of his predecessor, L.T. Hobhouse, in particular Ginsberg's claim that the latter's *Morals in Evolution* (1906) was "not only a treatise on morals but also a comparative sociology underlying which was a belief in the progress of man from "uncivilized" to "civilized", reflecting the Mediaeval dichotomy of man into Christian and Heathen" (as cited in Pieris 1988, p. 16). He however liked the work of T.H. Marshall, and found the lectures by H.L. Beales and T.S. Ashton "stimulating", with Harold J. Laski as the real "draw" (ibid). Thus, despite reservations, there was enough for him to make his peace with the London School of Economics, and he decided to

work under Marshall's supervision, along with Edward Shils as his class tutor. He defended his thesis in late 1949 and was awarded his doctoral degree in early 1950. He recalls that his second examiner, S. H. Frankel of Oxford, remembered his dissertation when he visited the latter fifteen years later.

Pieris' strongly held view that "sociology belongs to the humanities, and not an exact science in any sense of the word" (ibid, p. 18), perhaps explains the considerable effort he invested in the establishment of a degree programme in Sociology at the University of Ceylon. Sociology could have continued as a subject, and a department that did not grant its own degrees, but that would have been at the expense of sacrificing the project of training students to be humanists who alone would be true sociologists. In the plight of the Sociology Department playing second fiddle to Economics, he may have seen a shadow of his personal journey in which his disappointment with Economics led him to 'stumble' into Sociology. Further, in a Sociology degree programme liberated from the hegemony of Economics, he may have seen the prospect of helping students like himself, lost and wandering in search of a meaningful course of study, as indeed Sociology did become for some of the more sensitive students who subsequently took to it.

Pieris' idealized conception of Sociology, which to him, as to his London School of Economics tutor Edward Shils, was a 'calling', was not without problems. Its purism and rigidity led him to denigrate the work of others. It became a narrow perspective that could be used to exclude legitimate practitioners of the discipline whose work could not be easily bundled up into discrete entities labeled 'science' or 'humanities'. It also excluded research projects focused on finding solutions to specific social problems. While certain kinds of sociological studies can be

justifiably considered 'scientific', and certain others 'humanistic', many are in between and are a mixture of the two approaches. This conception of Sociology also made the automatic assumption that those who engaged in 'scientific' or 'utilitarian' Sociology were for that reason averse to or ignorant of history and theory. According to Pieris' memoir, Ryan once told him that he (Ryan) has no interest in history or theory, having studied at a "cow college (Texas)" (ibid). The light-heartedness of the comment and its self-deprecating humour seems to have been lost on Pieris, who later used the comment to disparage the questionnaire based fieldwork Ryan conducted (ibid). In reality, Ryan was at a "cow college" (the University of Texas) only for one year. He spent 11 of his 12 years of university education at The University of Washington, Seattle, and Harvard University, which are hardly "cow colleges". Besides, Ryan was far from indifferent to social theory of which he had a firm grasp that was on display at his inaugural lecture at King George's Hall, University of Ceylon, on February 10, 1949 (Ryan 1949). Given Ryan's encompassing view of Sociology, it is no surprise that his best-known work on Sri Lanka is a work of humanistic scholarship with no pretense to 'science', nor any immediately applicable social utility, but he did accomplish significant work in the area of socio-economic relevance both before and after this work.

We might note here that Pieris himself made social relevance a key criterion in his crusade for a responsible Sociology. Indeed, looked at objectively, there are many areas where Pieris' ideas converged with Ryan's. Both were open to blending with other disciplines, history in particular in the case of Pieris, and several Social Science fields in Ryan's. One of Pieris' major works is a historical study, and he approvingly mentions Louis Dumont's labelling it as a work in "historical sociology"; and Ryan readily grants that "much excellent sociology is written by historians, economists,

geographers, psychologists, [and] political scientists" (ibid, p. 82). Both were admirers of Bernard Mandeville, and both had a cosmopolitan view of social theory that credited non-Western thought. "In a completely literal sense", wrote Ryan, "the writings of an obscure English wit, Bernard Mandeville, at the beginning of the 18th century, are "better" sociology in modern terms than most of that which Spencer produced in his voluminous studies" (ibid, p. 11). Pieris pays similar homage to Mandeville, placing him alongside Malthus, Marx and J.A. Hobson, the "heretics" who enabled Keynes to launch a "frontal attack" on the "dismal science" of classical economics and spearhead a more humanistic discipline (1988, p. 11). The following sentence of Ryan's could as well have been written by Pieris: "I would contend that recent sociology in method as in theoretic content has more in common with Ibn Khaldun, a 14th century Arabian, Montesquieu, Confucius, Hegel, Marx, Bayle, Hume, LePlay and Buckle than with the formal science of sociology developed by Comte and Spencer" (Ryan 1949, p. 75). Both advocated an indigenous Sociology, Pieris making a criticism of the 'Implantation of sociology in Asia' (1969) and Ryan saying the same thing, even using the same arboreal metaphor: "Sociology is not a hot house plant, a speculative discipline. It bears its best fruit in the open and close to the earth" (1949, p. 83). The courses of the programme Pieris designed for the degree in Sociology independent of Economics, into which he put in considerable effort, and of which he could justly be proud, are a healthy mix of "science" and "humanities" (Pieris 1988, p. 25). He mentions that one of these courses, "Social Administration", "was specially devised to give the degree a "practical" orientation" (ibid). Not content with that, he "prevailed on the Secretaries of the relevant government departments -- social services, rural development, probation and child care -- to recruit sociology graduates

to their staff, going on to mention that "[t]he subject was subsequently adopted for the Civil Service examination" (ibid). It would appear that what came in between Ryan and Pieris were not significant differences of deeply held ideas, but – we can only guess – trivialities of one kind or another.

Whatever these were, collegiality seemed to have fallen victim to the idealized notion of Sociology as the humanistic discipline par excellence. In his memoir, Pieris is candid about his views on the work of his colleagues, starting with Ryan. He considers Ryan's field expeditions with students a "naïve empiricism" (ibid, p. 18). He goes to the extent of accusing Ryan of "peevish opposition" to his (Pieris') appointment to the position of Assistant Lecturer in 1951 (ibid). He devalues, not without justification, the anthropological idea of the 'isolated village community'. Taking his critique further, he makes light of, and challenges the supposed discoveries by both his colleagues and foreign anthropologists, regarding relations between social phenomena, for example, that between kinship and land holding. In addition to denigrating the kind of questionnaire based fieldwork that Ryan and his students conducted, Pieris is denigrating the entire foundation of fieldwork in 'participant observation' generally held to be fundamental to anthropological research since Malinowski's detainment in the Trobriands.

Ryan resigned his position as Professor and Head of the Department of Sociology, University of Ceylon, in 1952 "while on long leave" (Report 1952, p. 6). Straus left the Department in March the same year. Thus, within four years of the Department's founding, the founder and his assistant, the first and the second members of the Sociology faculty in the history of the University of Ceylon left their positions, as if foreboding a phenomenon that was to become the emblem of the Department in its early decades, the flight of its faculty.

It is remarkable that Ralph Pieris who did yeoman's service for instituting the degree programme in Sociology, and who seemed firmly committed to the further advancement of the Department, resigned and returned twice before his third and final resignation. It appears that the broadly common factor in the resignations of the local scholars that followed those of Ryan and Straus was the invasion of the University by social forces within which these scholars felt marginalized, continuing in a different guise the marginality and ambiguity of the Ryan and Straus era.

As mentioned above, at his departure from the University of Ceylon, Ryan joined the faculty of Cornell University, where he served as Visiting Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology during the years 1952-54. S.J. Tambiah was Ryan's student at the University of Ceylon, and it is likely that he (Tambiah) went to Cornell for his graduate studies because of Ryan's presence there. Indeed, Ryan may have mentioned to Tambiah the availability of scholarships through the Smith-Mundt programme, and supported his candidacy. He also may have played a role in selecting Tambiah as a student of the Cornell graduate programme, although clearly Tambiah would have made it on his own. As reported by Professor R.S. Perinbanayagam, Ryan once remarked that Tambiah was his best student.

On September 3, 1951, just months prior to the departure of Ryan and Straus, three appointments were made to the Department of Sociology, all three as Assistant Lecturers. These were Ralph Pieris, Stanley J. Tambiah, and L.C. Arulpragasam. The last named "declined the position" (Report 1951, p. 5) and ten months later, on July 31, 1952, Miss S. Saparamadu was appointed Assistant Lecturer (Report 1952, p. 8), presumably to fill the vacancy resulting from Arulpragasam's non-acceptance of the position. (Saparamadu herself resigned at the end of the academic

year 1954-55 and D.L. Jayasuriya was appointed to fill her vacancy in Social Anthropology [Report 1955, p. 67]). These appointments, which presumably Ryan pushed for, bear silent witness to some of the 'administrative work' he did, and to his interest in the institutional growth and welfare of the Department. These also bear witness to the prospect, latent at the time, that he would not be at the service of the University of Ceylon indefinitely. The promise of his student in particular, the newly graduated Tambiah, must have impressed him and he may have seen in him, and in the already prolific Ralph Pieris, capable hands in which he could entrust the Department. Ralph Pieris was promoted to Lecturer Grade II on December 8, 1953 (Report 1953, p. 20), presumably to also act as Head of Department without being formally appointed to that position. In the interim between Ryan's departure and the promotion of Ralph Pieris, the Department was administered by the Dean of the Faculty of Arts.

The Annual Reports of the Council of the University of Ceylon (referred to in this paper simply as "Reports") are the main source of information we have for understanding how the University was organized, and how it functioned and evolved. It would appear that Heads of Department were expected to send a report of the activities of their respective departments (a 'Departmental Report') to the Council that then would collate and publish these, often in an Appendix to the Annual Report. The Heads of Departments vary widely in the extent to which they responded to this expectation. Most of these departmental reports are very sparse and often we see none at all from certain departments for certain years. The consistently detailed reports came from the Department of Education, and the Science and Medical Faculties in general. Most of these, however, report nothing more than the publications of the relevant department's faculty, which perhaps was the

main purpose of the reports, but as some show, they sometimes did have other matters to report about. The Departmental Report of Sociology for 1949, that is, for the first year of its existence, presumably written by Bryce Ryan, is skeletal. It merely lists six papers of Ryan's, four of which are published and two unpublished, with one of the unpublished, the paper on hybrid corn seed mentioned above, authored jointly with Neal C. Gross.

The next year's Report (1950) is even briefer, reporting three publications (Report 1950, p. 57-58). Then it dries up completely. There are no reports for the next two years, 1951 and 1952. Indeed, in the next report to appear (1953), the writer Ralph Pieris stops short of explicitly accusing Ryan of not caring to write the reports. Making no secret of the brevity and sometimes total absence of the reports, he mentions that since there have been no previous accounts of research by members of the Department, he is annexing "a list of publications of the staff since the institution of the Department of Sociology in 1949" (Report 1953, p. 66). It would appear that reporting was not one of the administrative duties Ryan cherished. What he did cherish was not far to seek. He was absorbed in his research, both on American material, and more relevant for our present purposes, on his field and archival work in Ceylon based on which he was to publish a masterly volume (Ryan 1953).

This is by no means to suggest that Ryan had no interest in 'administration', but rather to point out that he was working within the framework of the American academic culture marked by a close and pragmatic association between teaching and research. In the case of Sociology and Anthropology and in the broader social sciences, Both in general, fieldwork was a particularly significant component. Thus Ryan placed emphasis on fieldwork as part of the training of students, and organized fieldwork expeditions during weekends and vacations. This was unfamiliar

to both the British tradition within which the University was historically rooted, and the indigenous tradition from which, however 'Westernized', the majority of the faculty and senior administrative staff originated. Fieldwork was contrary to Two basic ideas about teaching subscribed to by the university establishment: (1) intra-murality, that teaching was an exercise to be carried out in the classroom, and (2) that there is, however subtle, a status distance between teacher and student, expressed in the term 'pupil'. Fieldwork violated the first and posed a threat to the second. As Ryan started his teaching career at the University of Ceylon, he was either oblivious to this, or chose to ignore it, leading to a mild sense of wonder and curiosity, even a touch of amusement in the establishment:

A special feature of these [sociology] courses is that during vacations students are assigned to villages in various parts of the Island to make enquiries along lines laid down by the Professor of Sociology. The Professor (Ryan) and the Lecturer (Straus) travel around to make certain that a scientific method is being followed. This device is being used not only in order to teach sociological technique but also to acquire the detailed knowledge of social conditions necessary for teaching (Report 1949, p. 11).

Fieldwork however seems to have been welcomed by the students as much for its non-conformity, as for its utility as a research tool. As John Rogers informs us:

Stanley Tambiah was an undergraduate at the time, and remembers Ryan for his genial and friendly attitude towards students, which marked him off from most other faculty of that era. On weekends, Ryan took undergraduates with him on his trips into the countryside, where he asked villagers about caste.

For Tambiah, these excursions were an eye opener -- they provided him with his first impression of the potential of fieldwork as an intellectual pursuit" (Memo on Bryce Ryan circulated among the membership of American Institute of Sri Lanka Studies (AISLS), October 29, 2011).

It would appear that the origin and inspiration for the fieldwork on which Tambiah's renowned ethnographies are based are in Ryan's class.

The basic problem of the Department of Sociology was that it was a department without a degree programme, thus anomalous, liminal, and incomplete. To all appearances it came into being due to a confluence of fortuitous circumstances including the rise of 'cultural diplomacy' as a feature American foreign policy. Whatever these were, when the opportunity arose to found a department, the University seems to have looked upon it as a beginning and welcomed it. The fact that Strauss was recruited soon after shows that this was a serious and potentially continuing effort at establishing a full-fledged department. Without access to the relevant documents, if indeed such documents do exist at all, we do not know what Ryan did, if anything at all, to further that effort by exploring ways of recruiting more teaching staff that would equip the Department with the ability to teach enough courses to constitute a degree programme. However, the fact that Ryan resigned in 1952 gives us reason to think that any interest he may have had in building up departmental manpower early in his tenure had evaporated at some point. The appointments he did make, a sociologist (Pieris), an anthropologist (Saparamadu), and a mix of the two (Tambiah) seem to indicate that his plans, while they lasted, were sound and farsighted.

In contrast to Ryan's diffuse interests, building up the Department of Sociology as a full-fledged, degree granting department

seems to have been the preeminent goal of Ralph Pieris, Ryan's successor as Head of Department. In his very first report as the real or acting Head of the Department, Pieris makes clear almost with a sense of grievance, that his department's role has been one of providing courses for other departments, especially Economics, where Sociology is reduced to a specialization within the Economics degree, like Banking, Statistics, Accountancy and so forth. He lists the courses the Sociology Department provided during the year the report covered: two for the Economics Department, two for the Sinhala Department (one of which was on 'Sinhalese Culture'), and one for the Philosophy Department⁴. He mentions that courses were also provided for a student registered for a MA degree in Sociology (Report 1953, p. 66). By mentioning this, he is pointing out that the only impediment to preparing students for the BA degree, which is more important for a university department than higher degrees, was the shortage of teaching staff. He specifically mentions the need for a social psychologist and a statistician, complaining that the University is not doing its part in making these appointments. "It was not possible to begin courses for a special Sociology Degree", he wrote, "although a scheme for a special degree in Sociology independently of Economics had appeared in successive Calendars" (Report 1953, p. 66). Most importantly, from the point of view of the evolution of the Department towards granting its own degrees, he complains that the enrollment policy of the Economics Department hurt enrollments in Sociology, making it clear that an autonomous Sociology degree is the only answer: "So long as Sociology remains a special subject in the Economics Degree, the number of students specializing in Sociology depends on the policy of the Economics Department in enrolling students for the special degrees. There has been a decline in the number of students

taking Sociology on account of the restricted admissions to the special Economics course” (Report 1954, p. 94).

While thus emphasizing that the enrollments for Sociology are at the mercy of the Economics Department, Pieris also promises to take what action he could at the time to increase enrollment by introducing Sociology as a subject for the General Degree. It is clear that he used every opportunity he got to highlight the unsatisfactory nature of the existing set up and the need to equip the Department with the personnel adequate to teach the courses leading up to a BA degree and, more broadly, a productive and thriving Department. He ends the report by announcing “a series of field-studies this year” (ibid, p. 94), and a paper on the study of kinship systems to be published (in Sinhalese) in the University Review (ibid). The paper in Sinhalese on kinship systems is untraceable, but the field studies mentioned are probably those of Tambiah in Pata Dumbara.

A note on the Pata Dumbara study is appropriate here considering the significance of its findings for Anthropology. One of its major findings was that kinship cannot be meaningfully understood except in relation to residence and land ownership. In his *Pul Eliya, a Village in Ceylon*, Edmund Leach came to the same conclusion. This contradicts a foundational idea in British Anthropology, that kinship is ‘a thing in itself’, with which Leach was not in agreement. Thus, Tambiah’s findings may have strengthened Leach’s hand or altogether enabled him to launch a critique of the autonomy of kinship, held in particular by Leach’s Cambridge colleague Meyer Fortes. Leach did his fieldwork in June-December 1954 (followed up with a short stay in August 1956), and Tambiah six months later, in July-August 1955, but since Tambiah acknowledges Leach’s editorial comments on his 1958 paper in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, we know that he

(Leach) read it in that year, or possibly even the year before (1957). Leach’s book was not published until 1961, at least three years after he read Tambiah’s paper. Thus it is possible that the idea that kinship is ‘not a thing in itself’ was triggered or strengthened in Leach as a consequence of reading Tambiah’s article in 1958 (or 1957). This is not to suggest that Leach needed any external stimuli to combat the British anthropological establishment. His colourful skepticism and spirit of rebellion are well known to anthropologists and other readers of his work. To cite one example, his *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (1954) is a critique of another central tenet of British Anthropology, namely, that societies exist in a state of ‘equilibrium’. The fieldwork of Leach’s student and younger Cambridge colleague, Nur Yalman, overlapped with his own, and he acknowledges with satisfaction that Yalman’s findings, though in a very different ecology, broadly agreed with his own. The anthropological impact of Leach’s study is also reflected in the interest the subject sparked in G. Obeyesekere who postponed his nearly completed study of the cult of the goddess Pattini to undertake a study of kinship and land tenure in an ecology, like Yalman’s, radically different from Pul Eliya (Obeyesekere 1967; Report 1958, p. 82).

Given the commitment to which the statements and actions mentioned above bear witness, it cannot but be that Pieris worked assiduously at the task both formally and informally by using his formidable networks, until an independent Sociology degree programme came into being, consummating the task that Ryan began. Although Pieris is not the founder of Sociology at the University of Ceylon in a strict sense, he is certainly the founder of its degree programme without which Sociology would have remained the handmaiden of Economics. Both resigning to the existing fate and expressing hope for a better future, he wrote that, “The courses have had to be organized within limitations of available

staff, and until the appointment of a social psychologist and a statistician, the present arrangement must be continued" (Report 1953, p. 66). The "present arrangement" was of course playing second fiddle to Economics. Knowing as he did the traumatic emergence of Sociology under a similar dominance of Economics in England, especially the London School of Economics where he was a student, he may have been able to summon both the confidence and the objectivity to hold on and stay the course steadfastly.

The next report (1954), though brief, is even more emphatic in its understated push for a Sociology degree independent of Economics, and thereby to elevate the Department to a stage beyond servicing other departments. Pieris is also beginning to assert himself as the Head of the Department, and for the first time, signs the report as both Lecturer and Head of the Department. He reports the return of Tambiah from Cornell after working with the sociologist Robin Williams, the social psychologist William Lambert, and the anthropologist Morris Opler, and on his way back from the US, spending a term at the London School of Economics working with the anthropologist Raymond Firth. He lists the subject of Tambiah's dissertation as *The Process of Secularization in Three Ceylonese Peasant Communities*. He announces the resignation of Miss S. Saparamadu, and his intention to appoint a social anthropologist to fill the vacancy (Report 1954, p. 93-94).

1955 comes through as a triumphant and vibrant year. Pieris was promoted to Lecturer Grade I, and elevated to membership of the Senate by virtue of his being appointed Head of the Department (Report 1955, p. 1). D.L. Jayasuriya was appointed Assistant Lecturer in Social Anthropology on September 1, 1955 (ibid, p. 5), filling the vacancy created by the departure of Miss S.Saparamadu (ibid, p. 67). Tambiah was awarded his PhD (ibid, p. 10), and was promoted to Lecturer

on January 13, 1955 (ibid, p. 6). Pieris' book *Sinhalese Social Organisation* was published by the Ceylon University Press. In addition, a collection of conference papers titled *Traditional Sinhalese Culture, A Symposium* edited by Pieris was published. Tambiah listed three publications one of which, co-authored by Bryce Ryan, was to be published in the *American Sociological Review*. And in a reminiscence of the field orientation of Bryce Ryan, and an illustration of the still close relation with Economics, a socio-economic survey of nine villages in the Pata Dumbura District was conducted jointly by Tambiah and N. K. Sarkar, the statistician of the Economics Department, with the participation of 30 students from the two departments. This is the study mentioned above that yielded Tambiah's paper on kinship and land holding (Tambiah 1958). While Sarkar was concerned with the economics of paddy and other types of peasant agriculture, land ownership, land utilization, and employment, Tambiah's interests were in inheritance and kinship. The report also lists a study by Tambiah of living conditions, social relationships, and crime among 110 poor households in Maradana.

The key decision to recruit an anthropologist rather than a statistician or a social psychologist that Pieris had previously identified as the need, was the immediate factor that enabled the long fought for beginning of a course of studies that would take students to a degree in Sociology independently of Economics. It also illustrates the formal acceptance of a place for Anthropology in the curriculum of Sociology. In an economy of language that belied the extraordinary effort leading to this consummation, one that he probably had set his sights on going back to his original appointment to the Department on September 3, 1951, Pieris' report announced that, "Courses for a Special Sociology Degree were begun this session, for the first time since the institution of the Department in 1948" (Report 1956, p. 72). With two Senior

Lecturers (Pieris and Tambiah) in addition to an Assistant Lecturer (Jayasuriya), the Department now had the capability to teach the courses necessary for a degree in Sociology independent of Economics. Still the condition for making possible the independent Sociology degree, namely the need for the services of a statistician and a social psychologist, remained. But with far sightedness, Pieris had conveyed to the Economics Department that it was payback time, and that it was now their turn to help out by allowing the Sociology Special students to take, not one but two, of their courses: (1) Political and Social Theory and (2) Statistics. As for Social Psychology, Pieris persuaded J.E. Jayasuriya, Senior Lecturer at the Department of Education to teach the course. For a fourth course outside the Department of Sociology, Pieris turned to the History Department, persuading them of the need for students of Sociology to have a background in the island's history. Thus four out of the eight courses needed for a degree in Sociology came from outside the Department. But the remaining four (1) Elements of Social Structure (2) Social Administration (3) Comparative Social Institutions, and (4) Theories and Methods of Sociology were hardcore enough to give the cobbled together totality a convincing stamp of Sociology.

Within two years this fragile achievement was to crumble, but not so disastrously as to revert to the days of serving the Economics Department. In September 1958 Pieris resigned from the service of the University of Ceylon to join the UNESCO Research Centre in Calcutta (Report 1958, p. 3). In his memoir written 20 years later, he cites the "inadequacy of salaries paid to university academic staff" as the reason that compelled him to accept the UNESCO position (1988, p. 25). But the degree programme he helped build was to survive and thrive, though with periodic setbacks, especially in the form of resignations of the most prominent members of the faculty. In September 1957

D.L. Jayasuriya left for the London School of Economics on study leave (Report 1957, p. 10), leaving a lone Tambiah to carry on the work of the Department, when in October that year, G. Obeyesekere, Probationary Lecturer in the Department of English, was appointed Probationary Assistant Lecturer in Sociology (Report 1958, p. 81). Tambiah was to resign in the early 1960s, followed by G. Obeyesekere not too long afterwards. In the familiar sign of the absence of a Head of Department, the Departmental Report for 1958 was signed by the Dean of the Faculty of Arts, T. Nadaraja (Report 1958, p. 82).

In October 1961, after two years of work in India, Pieris returned to the University of Ceylon, having accepted the Chair of Sociology. But six years later, disillusioned with the Higher Education Act of 1967 that abolished university autonomy, he retired under the provisions of the Act, and returned to the UNESCO as an expert in regional development (Pieris 1988, p. 26). This involved extensive travel in the Asian region enabling him, especially in his encounter with Thailand and Japan, to experience different "styles of development", stimulating him to contribute substantially to the literature on development (Pieris 1969; 1976a; 1976b; 1977). He was to accept the Chair of Sociology once more in 1972, only to resign again later that year, to accept a consultancy at the UN Asian Development Institute in Bangkok. This was his third resignation, which makes him perhaps the most resigned person in the University's history. On his return to Sri Lanka in 1976 he accepted the position of Research Professor, University of Colombo, which he held until his retirement in 1978.

In addition to his outstanding contribution to the Department through his successful institution of the independent degree programme in Sociology, Pieris brought international recognition to the Department through his numerous publications, on

subjects ranging from mediaeval Sinhalese social organization to the alienation of the intellectual, transforming his own alienation into an inspiration for creativity. Among the unlikely expressions of this impulse are his sophisticated and convincing advocacy of an Asian cultural approach to development and an Asian Sociology. In a different province of creativity, he contributed to the cultural life of the University through his active involvement with the Arts Council as its Chairman. Along with Ian Goonetilleke, he organized a highly successful exhibition of the paintings of George Keyt, and pioneered the move towards building the Sarachchandra Open Air Theatre. As mentioned already, he organized a symposium on Traditional Sinhalese Culture that led to a publication of the symposium's papers under the same title. He founded the *Journal of Historical and Social Studies* and coedited it with S. Arsaratnam until his departure for overseas employment. The University could perhaps have prevented his first resignation had they had the wisdom to appoint him to the Chair, which has been kept vacant since Ryan's resignation in 1952. It was to take up the Chair that he returned to the University in 1961.

It is outside the scope of this paper to track the evolution of the Department of Sociology beyond its watershed achievement as a full-fledged, degree granting department. However, one cannot but be struck by the fact that, since the days of Ryan and Pieris, the Department has grown exponentially, from 3-4 staff personnel and about ten students per year, to over 20 staff personnel and over 600 students per year (excluding external, graduate, and diploma students). Despite its besetting problem of resignations, the Department has obviously prospered as a functioning institution. It has supplied personnel to newer departments within the country, and even those who secured employment overseas have continued to contribute to Sri Lanka studies. And, from the

patently sociological orientation of Ryan and Pieris, the Department has moved towards Anthropology, starting with the Pata Dumbara study of the sociologist cum anthropologist S.J. Tambiah, and the research and chairmanship of the anthropologist G. Obeyesekere. The fact that these two renowned anthropological thinkers were closely associated with the Department has added to its anthropological complexion. The large number of foreign anthropologists the country has attracted since the 1950s, and the rise of an extensive anthropological literature on the society and culture of Sri Lanka must also have had some influence on this development.

NOTES

1. "Report" in all instances refers to the Annual Report of the Council of the University of Ceylon, for the year mentioned along with it.
2. Weerakoon remembers two of his classmates: Herbert Cooray, the founder of Jetwing Hotels, and K.H.M. Sumatipala, educationist.
3. This class consisted of the following students: L.P.M. Wijedoru, K.P. Wimaladharma, R.S. Perinbanayagam, K.A.D. Perera, T. Mutuvelu, Maxwell Isaacs, N. de Silva, L. Fernando, P. Weerasekera, H.L. Seneviratne, R. Satkunam, Kanakaraja (initials/first name not available).
4. The Report of the Sinhala Department lists the course on 'Sinhalese Culture' taught by Miss S. Saparamadu as one in "Social Anthropology" (Report 1953, p. 57). This is probably an attempt on the part of the Sinhala Department to continue the course on 'Culture' (Samskritiya) that Professor M.D. Ratnasuriya introduced to the Sinhala degree curriculum.

REFERENCES

- Eighth Annual Report of the Council of the University of Ceylon.* (1949). Colombo: University of Ceylon Press
- Eleventh Annual Report of the Council of the University of Ceylon.* (1952). Colombo: University of Ceylon Press

- Fifteenth Annual Report of the Council of the University of Ceylon.* (1956). Colombo: University of Ceylon Press
- Fourteenth Annual Report of the Council of the University of Ceylon.* (1955). Colombo: University of Ceylon Press
- Leach, E.R. (1954). *Political Systems of Highland Burma.* London: G. Bell & Sons for the London School of Economics
- Leach, E.R. (1961). *Pul Eliya, a Village in Ceylon.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Ninth Annual Report of the Council of the University of Ceylon.* (1950). Colombo: University of Ceylon Press
- Obeyesekere, G. (1967). *Land Tenure in Village Ceylon.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Peiris, R. (1956). *Sinhalese Social Organization: the Kandyan Period.* Colombo: Ceylon University Press Board
- Pieris, R. (1969). Implantations of Sociology in Asia. *International Social Science Journal*, XXI(3), pp. 433-444
- Pieris, R. (1976a). *Social Development and Planning in Asia.* New Delhi: Abhinav
- Pieris, R. (1976b). *Asian Rethinking on Development: A Symposium.* Y. Atal & R. Pieris (Eds.). Bangkok: UN Asian Development Institute
- Pieris, R. (1977). *Asian Development Styles.* New Delhi: Abhinav
- Pieris, R. (1988). Sociology as a "Calling": A Desultory Memoir. *Modern Sri Lanka Studies*, III(2), pp. 1-33
- Ryan, B. & N. Gross. (1950). Acceptance and Diffusion of Hybrid Corn Seed in Two Iowa Communities. *Research Bulletin* 372, pp. 663-708
- Ryan, B. (1949). Sociology and its Development in the United States. *University of Ceylon Review*, VII(2), pp.71-83
- Ryan, B. (1953). *Caste in Modern Ceylon.* New Jersey: Rutgers University Press
- Seventeenth Annual Report of the Council of the University of Ceylon.* (1958). Colombo: University of Ceylon Press
- Sixteenth Annual Report of the Council of the University of Ceylon.* (1957). Colombo: University of Ceylon Press
- Tambiah, S.J. & B. Ryan. (1957). Secularization of Family Values in Ceylon. *American Sociological Review*, 22(3), pp. 292-299
- Tambiah, S.J. (1954). *The Process of Secularization in Three Ceylonese Peasant Communities* (Doctoral dissertation). Cornell University
- Tambiah, S.J. (1958). The Structure of Kinship and its Relationship to Land Possession and Residence, in Pata Dumbara, Central Ceylon. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 88(part 1), pp. 21-44
- Tenth Annual Report of the Council of the University of Ceylon.* (1951). Colombo: University of Ceylon Press
- Thirteenth Annual Report of the Council of the University of Ceylon.* (1954). Colombo: University of Ceylon Press
- Twelfth Annual Report of the Council of the University of Ceylon.* (1953). Colombo: University of Ceylon Press
- Yalman, N. (1967). *Under the Bo Tree. Studies in Caste, Kinship and Marriage in the Interior of Ceylon.* Berkeley: California University Press