

Break the cinnamon branch; a footnote

- Jagath Dheersekara, 2020

*"But the biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against that collective defiance is the cultural bomb. The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves."*¹ - Ngugi Wa Thiong'o

*"The real aim of colonialism was to control the people's wealth ... But its most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonised, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world."*² - Ngugi Wa Thiong'o

It was his play *I will marry when I want* that opened up the literary world of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o to me in the early 90s. For a considerable period of time, I was confined to a small room filled with books at a buddhist temple, which doubled as a safe house for me, in the southern province of Sri Lanka. I enjoyed being exposed to writers that I had never heard of before, and reading one book after another kept the effects of isolation at bay. Perhaps I took an extra interest in his work because he was a persecuted writer.

The Sri Lankan state had ruthlessly crushed the 1988/89 rebellion of the South and was engaged, by this time, in its mopping-up operation. A year or so later I managed to flee the island and ended up crossing multiple European borders to seek political asylum in France.

Ngugi's work which I came to know in my mid twenties back in Sri Lanka, probably was better understood by me in my forties, after migrating to Australia and settling in Campbelltown in New South Wales.

*The first violence occurred in May 1814 on the farms of Milehouse and Bucher at Appin. Three members of the Veteran Company militia fired on a group of Aborigines gathering corn, killing a boy ... Seeking vengeance they (Europeans) murdered Bitugally's wife and two children while they slept - the woman's arm was cut off and her head scalped, the skull of one child smashed with the butt of a musket and their bodies left unburied for their families to find.*³ - Carol Liston

2020 marks two hundred years since the establishment of Campbelltown by Governor Lachlan Macquarie on unceded Dharawal land. The town was named in honour of his wife, Elizabeth Campbell. This was some four years after the murder of fourteen Dharawal people in what has come to be known as the Appin Massacre - a massacre sanctioned by Governor Macquarie himself. The Appin Massacre is one brutal incident of many that took place across the Australian continent as part of a concerted project of subjecting First Nations People to colonial subjugation, dispossession and genocide. Therefore, this early colonial period was also necessarily the birthing ground for First Nations' resistance and struggle for survival and self-determination.

¹ Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, East African Educational Publishers, Nairobi p. 3.

² Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, East African Educational Publishers, Nairobi p. 16.

³ Carol Liston, *History of Campbelltown: The Bicentennial History*, Allen & Unwin Australia Pty Ltd., Sydney, p. 19.

" ... the imprint of race and hate remains, if not indelible then difficult to erase. The ideal of White Australia was seminal and for all the success of Australian multiculturalism, we remain conditioned by its cultural power." ⁴ - Tim Soutphommasane

" ... Whiteness in Australia involves a hierarchy of belonging. It's what explains why too often, white Anglo-Celtic and European Australians feel entitled to determine who truly counts as Australian. Whiteness, thus understood, is systemic and institutional. " ⁵ - Tim Soutphommasane

There were many tasks at hand when we began our life here. First and foremost, settling in. My day-to-day challenge was to find ways to navigate - resist, survive or compromise with - both the casual as well as uninhibited racism that I was met with. It was a new paradigm for me with a young family, as I'm sure is the case for many others who have arrived here 'recently'. Up until this point, I had spent most of my life in Sri Lanka where, being Sinhalese, I did not have to grapple with the dynamics of being from an ethnic minority in a multi-ethnic society. My ongoing efforts to ward off the colonial ghost that has been passed down to me through the generations since 1505 has always been an added load. *Break the Cinnamon Branch*, a performance on video, may be considered a footnote to my efforts.

It had not even been an year since moving here when my younger son, who was in kindergarten at the time, told us that he was not invited to his classmate's birthday party because he was not white. Around the same time, my daughter's year six teacher remarked that her faith was heretical. It took me a while to understand that this was an attack on the culture in which I grew up and within which I now raise my children. Though at the time my immediate feeling was one of undefined outrage, with the passage of time I came to realise that these instances were direct attacks on the culture. Three years ago, as we walked into a clothing store in Campbelltown, a salesperson politely told my younger son and I that the store only sells expensive brands. While I was cognisant of the racist undertones at play in these particular instances, there have been others where similar interactions were given the benefit of the doubt despite the situation suggesting otherwise. However, the behaviour at the highest level of government give credence to the understanding that these instances are expressions of a thought pattern that pervades through the many layers of this society.

Presenting Australia as the most successful multicultural country in the world, whilst white political, economic and cultural control of society is well and truly alive, is not uncommon in the mainstream. Most of the senior politicians have intensified the use of the term 'multicultural' in recent years. Prime Minister Malcom Turnbull used it quite frequently during his tenure and a further amplified version has become a toy in the hands of Prime Minister Scott Morrison who among other things is very public about his indulgence in curries. It is interesting to delve in to what drives this compulsion of politicians to 'harp' on multiculturalism of Australia. Is it an expression of an attempt to overcome guilt of incarcerating asylum seekers who most often represent the nonwhite component of multiculturalism the politicians expound? Or is it linked to the guilt of knowingly running a system that has become a boulder on First Nations peoples and migrants of colour? Or, is it perhaps linked to the guilt of the original sin – the colonisation of Australia that inflicted genocide and dispossession on First Nations peoples and subsequent continuation of policies of disempowerment?

⁴ Tim Soutphommasane, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/why-being-an-australian-citizen-doesn-t-mean-others-will-believe-you-truly-belong-20190205-p50vus.html> (last accessed on 02/04/2019)

⁵ Tim Soutphommasane, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/why-being-an-australian-citizen-doesn-t-mean-others-will-believe-you-truly-belong-20190205-p50vus.html> (last accessed on 02/04/2019)

The encounters I have recollected are manifestations of a well-settled system of racial domination that deny my story and my cultural existence. They dismisses my experience and like experiences, my world view and like world views. While driving me from my hotel to Bendigo Art Gallery, a taxi driver said to me that multiculturalism worked with the migrants who came in '50s and '60s, but that it ceased to exist with the arrival of 'certain' migrants in recent times - it has instead created a palpable disquiet within communities. Perhaps he did not even realise that he was referring to the likes of myself when talking about recently-arrived migrants, and perhaps he was unaware of his connection to the control and domination of non-white people in Australia.

" ... When you back a group's collective bias with legal authority and institutional control it is transformed into a far reaching system. It becomes automatic. It becomes default. It is infused in everything ... " ⁶ Robin DiAngelo

" ... it (racism) is a system not an event; nothing could and nothing did exempt any person in this room from the force of the system, friendliness or smiling doesn't impact the system." ⁷ Robin DiAngelo

The social power – or lack thereof, rather - achieved by Australia's First Nations people and people of colour over the years indicates that white control of politics, economics and culture in this country is still the dominant pattern. A study of 2500 senior leaders in business, politics, government and higher education shows that almost 95 per cent of senior leaders at the chief executive levels have an Anglo-Celtic or European background.⁸ The same study highlights that within the ASX 200 companies, only eight chief executives are of non-European background. Ninety nine per cent of the heads of federal and state government departments have an Anglo-Celtic or European background. Out of the 39 vice-chancellors of Australian universities only one has non-European heritage. It is interesting to consider what ends Australia's multiculturalism is seeking to achieve against this backdrop.

Multiculturalism seems a hollow term when one hears what many members of the executive government as well as other law-makers exhorting multiculturalism say in the same breath: "people have the right to be bigots"⁹; "Sudanese gangs are a real concern"¹⁰, "former prime minister Malcolm Fraser did make mistakes in bringing some people in as part of his immigration policies in the 1970s "¹¹. All the opinions and observations I just quoted have come from decent, respectable white men who happen to be making laws under which the people of Australia are expected to live their lives peacefully and harmoniously with dignity.

⁶ Robin DiAngelo, White Fragility, Sydney Ideas <https://sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/sydney-ideas/2018/white-fragility.html> (last accessed on 02/04/19)

⁷ Robin DiAngelo, White Fragility, Sydney Ideas <https://sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/sydney-ideas/2018/white-fragility.html> (last accessed on 02/04/19)

⁸ Tim Soutphommasane, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/why-we-should-look-at-targets-to-get-more-non-europeans-into-top-jobs-20180410-p4z8pd.html> (last accessed on 02/04/19)

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/24/george-brandis-people-have-the-right-to-be-bigots> (last accessed on 02/04/19)

¹⁰ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-07-17/sudanese-gangs-real-concern-in-melbourne-malcolm-turnbull-says/10002556> (last accessed on 02/04/19)

¹¹ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-11-21/peter-dutton-fraser-made-mistake-resettling-lebanese-refugees/8043624> (last accessed on 02/04/19)

If these were instances of 'dog whistling', as some may call them, then there are sirens blaring as well: "Islam is a disease Australia needs to vaccinate"¹², Australia must "return to the predominately European immigration policy of the pre-Whitlam consensus"¹³. Far-right Senator Fraser Anning, in delivering his maiden speech called for Australia to return to White Australia Policy¹⁴. Many of his senate colleagues lined up to shake hands with him following his address.

The country's First Law Officer, Attorney General George Brandis, defended bigots when presenting his case against Section 18(c) of the *Racial Discrimination Act of 1975* which made it illegal to offend, insult, humiliate or intimidate another person or group of people on the basis of their race, colour or national or ethnic origin. Who is this bigotry primarily aimed at?

Heather Cook, Deputy Director General of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) told Parliament's Joint Intelligence and Security Committee that far-right violent extremism constitutes up to 40% of the agency's counter-terrorism caseload.¹⁵ ASIO told the committee that right-wing extremists are using tactics similar to those that ISIS was known to use.¹⁶ Are we to believe that the executive government was not privy to the rise of the far-right prior to hearing Heather Cook's testimony? Why is it that we have never heard members of the executive government or other parliamentarians bringing this threat to a public discussion?

Cultures are dissimilar with myriad degrees of variance, Cultures defer from each other in a myriad of ways. But is this what the former Prime Minister Tony Abbott was implying when he observed that "cultures are not all equal"?¹⁷ I think not. If one says that all cultures are not qualitatively equal, this implies that some cultures are qualitatively better. Who are the lesser beings? Was he talking about people who, broadly speaking, have inherited similar cultural heritages to mine and my family's?

*The destruction of a cinnamon plant, the un authorised peeling of its bark, private trade in cinnamon, and the transport of cinnamon were all placed in the category of offences for which the death penalty could be imposed. To enforce these draconian measures the jungles were systematically patrolled.*¹⁸ - K M De Silva

The spices that brown people use in their cuisine are directly linked to the exotic notions that are associated with their food and culture. Invariably, one must refer back to the colonial conquest of Sri Lanka, and the subcontinent and many other parts of the world more broadly: "if the vagaries of wind and wave first brought the Portuguese to Ceylon¹⁹, the lure of cinnamon kept them there".²⁰

¹² <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/pauline-hanson-says-islam-is-a-disease-australia-needs-to-vaccinate-20170324-gv5w7z.html> (last accessed on 02/04/19)

¹³ <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/full-text-senator-fraser-anning-s-maiden-speech> (last accessed on 02/04/19)

¹⁴ <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/full-text-senator-fraser-annings-maiden-speech/8shbk54k6> (last accessed on 02/04/20)

¹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/sep/22/asio-reveals-up-to-40-of-its-counter-terrorism-cases-involve-far-right-violent-extremism> (last accessed on 22/09/20)

¹⁶ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-09-22/right-wing-extremists-asio-islamic-state-tactics/12690002> (last accessed on 22/09/20)

¹⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/dec/11/alan-jones-says-tony-abbotts-cultures-are-not-equal-belief-is-echoed-in-pubs> (last accessed on 22/09/20)

¹⁸ KM De Silva, KM, *A History of Sri Lanka*, C Hurst and Company, London, p. 162.

¹⁹ Sri Lanka's name before the 1972 republic constitution

²⁰ De Silva, CR 1953, *Ceylon under the British Occupation - 1795 - 1833*, The Colombo Apothecaries' Co., Ltd, Colombo, p. 1.

The Dutch, the second colonial power to rule maritime Ceylon were brutal when it came to monopolising the trade of spices and served cinnamon-related 'offences' with capital punishment. In 1815, going beyond the maritime regions, the British conquered the Kingdom of Kandy, bringing the whole island under colonial rule for the first time.

The Uva-Wellassa Rebellion takes a significant place in Sri Lanka's history of resistance against colonisation. The rebellion began in 1817 and reached its last phase just over an year later, after being ruthlessly suppressed by Governor Robert Brownrigg. Across the seas, the the Dharawal were massacred at Appin in 1816, and Campbelltown was established on their land by Governor Macquarie four years later in 1820.

In reprisal against the Uva-Wellassa rebellion, the British sentenced 49 men to death and declared another 32 to be traitors and expelled them to Mauritius.²¹ British soldiers went on a rampage after the colonial government declared martial law: entire villages were wiped out, crops and livestock destroyed, barns plundered, the homes of rebels burnt down and their lands confiscated.²² The London Times of 07.10.1818 reported: "the plan of destroying all the grains and fruit trees in the neighbourhood of Badulla seems to have been completely carried out in to effect, a dreadful measure."²³ The British adopted a scorched-earth policy and drove Uva-Wellassa, a once agriculturally rich region, to famine and starvation. Herbert White, a British Government Agent in Badulla later noted in the Journal of Uva that "the new rulers are unable to come to any conclusion on the exact situation of Uva before the rebellion as there is no trace of evidence left behind to come to such conclusions. If thousands died in the battle they were all fearless and clever fighters. If one considers the remaining population of 4/5 after the battle to be children, women and the aged the havoc caused is unlimited. In short the people have lost their lives and all other belongings."²⁴

Alongside such direct violence, the establishment of military, archival and formalised education institutions have proven to be the most potent and lasting weapons of British colonial occupation in Ceylon (Sri Lanka). On the note of formalised Western education, Thomas Babington Macaulay's remarks about the implementation of similar policies in India are applicable to the Sri Lankan situation as well: "I feel with them, that it is impossible for us, with our limited means, to attempt to educate the body of the people. We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect."²⁵ To this day, the people of Sri Lanka, myself included, carry the weight of such contorted self-perceptions - "how people [perceive] themselves and their relationship to the world," as Ngugi puts it²⁶ - within their minds to varying degrees.

The cultures of brown people are often viewed by the West as a monolith. This attitude is common towards other non-European cultures as well. Food culture, in particular, is one area that is heavily subject to this view. The phenomena of exoticisation is nothing new and has been occurring for centuries. Today it manifests in a comparatively more subtle and benign way; at times it occurs as celebration or even appreciation. Brown people's food, as done with other aspects of their cultures, are lumped into a simple category - curry. Different cultures may use the same ingredients to make dishes, but the preparation and outcome of these dishes can be very different. It is hard to find the word 'curry' in any language spoken on the sub-continent. It is widely believed to be a British invention for the foods that occur across a population of over one billion people.

²¹ <http://www.dailymirror.lk/article/-leaders-in-freedom-struggle-declared-as-national-heroes-136503.html> (last accessed on 22/09/20)

²² <http://archives.sundayobserver.lk/2006/11/26/fea08.asp> (last accessed 22/09/20)

²³ <http://archives.sundayobserver.lk/2006/11/26/fea08.asp> (last accessed 22/09/20)

²⁴ <http://www.infolanka.com/org/srilanka/hist/30.htm> (last accessed on 23/09/20)

²⁵ <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1833macaulay-india.asp> (last accessed 22.09.20)

²⁶ Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, East African Educational Publishers, Nairobi p. 16.

The disturbing truth remains that the peoples who grow, cook and feed their families with these foods, along with their cultural practices and beliefs, are frequently stigmatised. Terms such as 'curry' and 'curry muncher' are examples of this incongruity. My family and I are often asked some interesting questions: are you from India? do you go to mosque every Friday? do you speak Sri Lankan at home? isn't eating with your hands unhygienic? did you come to Australia by boat? Certain comments even come in the shape of compliment: you speak such good English, when did you come here? These dialogues, conversations and interactions with white people invariably form a series of Frequently Answered Questions or metaphorical monologues. They are mundane and yet visceral.