

PRESIDENT'S REPORT  
AMERICAN INSTITUTE FOR SRI LANKAN STUDIES  
October 2011 – September 2012

Charles Hallisey

As I look back at all of the activities of AISLS the past year, I am very mindful of how the work of AISLS as a scholarly organization depends on the generosity, imagination, initiative, and energy of many people and thus, in this challenging year just as in past years, I would like to begin this year's president's report with an acknowledgement and expression of gratitude to 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, M. de S. Weerasuriya, and Lorette Weeraratne--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.

We sleep well at night knowing that we can rely on them.

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.

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

I am also grateful to Jeanne Marecek, as Past President of AISLS, for her counsel on many issues that have come up 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 Presta, Monica Clark 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.

For eleven years, from 2000 to 2011, AISLS received generous funding from the US Department of Education, which covered many of the costs of our Center in Colombo. The US Department of Education suspended support for American Overseas Research Centers from October 2011 through September 2012, but I am very pleased that the program was restored in October 2012, and that AISLS was successful in obtaining a grant under this program. I would like to thank Cheryl Gibbs, the program officer with whom we have worked over this entire period, for her assistance.

In addition to myself as president, the AISLS executive committee over the past year was comprised of Jonathan Spencer (vice president), Jeffrey Samuels (secretary), Daniel Bass (treasurer), and Jeanne Marecek (past president). I would like to thank all executive committee members for volunteering their service, but I would especially like to note my appreciation of the contribution that our outgoing treasurer, Jeffrey Samuels, has made in his six years of service.

Finally 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.

## **Elections**

To continue with the report on elections, AISLS held an election for secretary in the fall of 2012. The results were announced at our Annual General Meeting on October 13, 2012 at the annual South Asia Conference in Madison, WI and the new elected secretary is Christina Davis.

## **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, the US State Department, only US citizens are eligible for our fellowship program, although we wish it were otherwise.

This past year fellowships were granted to Yvonne Everett (Environmental Studies, Humboldt State University), Patrick Ireland (Political Science, Illinois Institute of Technology), Arun Rasiah (Education, Holy Names University), and Ahalya Satkunaratnam (Dance Studies, Northeastern Illinois University).

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. Award were made this year to Aimée Douglas (Anthropology, Cornell University), Justin Henry (Religious Studies, University of Chicago), and Melissa Langworthy (Development Studies, Tulane University). Most funding for this program comes from the US State Department, and these funds can only be used for US citizens. However, this competition is also open to non-US citizens studying in US universities. Non-US citizen awards are supported by AISLS discretionary funds and by donations designated for non-US citizen student awards.

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. Two 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.

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 an English-language publication.

AISLS was also supportive of efforts by the Digital Dictionaries of South Asia Project (<http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/>) to include Sinhala in this invaluable online project, and we are happy that memorandums of understanding have been signed to realize this. We are also optimistic that digital copies of the unique reference collection of the Sinhala Dictionary in Colombo will be made and also made available more widely.

## **Workshops and Conferences**

In the past year, AISLS gave support to seven conferences, workshops and panels 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 triangulated 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 October 13-14 2011, AISLS convened a symposium on “Sufism as a Mediating Force in South Asia”. Nine scholars participated in the program. The symposium was geared not only to providing scholars an opportunity to exchange information and ideas, but also towards outreach to the Connecticut College community, which is in the process of establishing an Islamic Studies major. It was funded through a

grant from Carnegie Foundation of New York to CAORC and by Connecticut College. The event was organized by Frank Korom (Boston University) and Sufia Uddin (Connecticut College) A symposium report is available at <[aisls.org/pdfs/Sufism\\_symposium.pdf](http://aisls.org/pdfs/Sufism_symposium.pdf)>

On 20 October 2011, AISLS sponsored a small workshop as a preconference at the Annual Conference on South Asia, Madison, WI, on “Meghaduta and Sandesa Poetry in South Asia”. Ten scholars, seven from the United States, two from Israel, and one from Canada, participated.

The Madison event was followed up with a one day AILS workshop held in Colombo on August 13 2012, which focused on questions of how we might read Sinhala *sandesa* poetry most profitably as literature but also in ways that yield better understandings of the tradition of *sandesa* poetry within the broader contours of Sinhala literary culture. Issues discussed ranged from preserving performance traditions for *sandesa* poetry to patterns of dense intertextual references in *sandesa kāvya* and the modern reception of messenger poetry. The workshop was organized by Charles Hallisey and had fifteen participants, with scholars from the University of Peradeniya, the University of Colombo, the University of Kelaniya, and the Open University in attendance, Yigal Bronner who works on *sandesa kāvya* in Sanskrit and is from the University of Chicago and Hebrew University in Jerusalem also participated.

On January 11-13 2012, AISLS and the Center for Khmer Studies (CKS) sponsored a workshop on “Colonial Legacies and Contemporary Scholarship in Sri Lanka and Cambodia”. This event was held in Siem Reap, Cambodia. The structure of the workshop was underpinned by the premise that the twentieth century histories of Sri Lanka and Cambodia were similar enough to warrant comparison, but different enough to promote interesting contrasts. The workshop was broken up into three components: 1) colonial constructions of Sri Lanka and Cambodia, 2) the role of colonialism in contemporary public culture in Sri Lanka and Cambodia, and 3) globalization and contemporary “colonizations” of Sri Lanka and Cambodia. Around 15 scholars participated, including 4 scholars from Sri Lanka. The workshop was co-chaired by Jonathan Spencer (AISLS) and Michael Sullivan (CKS). It was funded by CKS and by a special projects grant from CAORC to AISLS.

On 16 March 2012, AISLS sponsored a symposium at the Annual Meeting of the Association of Asian Studies, which was held in Toronto. The topic was “Tamil Toronto: Today and Tomorrow”. The panel gave AAS members attending the meeting an opportunity to hear the views of leading Canadian scholars and community activists on issues of identity, politics, and gender in the largest Sri Lankan community outside Sri Lanka itself. The symposium was organized by Daniel Bass.

On 28--29 April 2012, AILS organized in Colombo a workshop “The Sri Lankan Bhikkhuni Revival”. This event was organized by AISLS Fellow Susanne Mrozik. The 15 attendees included Sri Lankan, US and Taiwanese scholars, as well as Sri Lankan nuns, who provided their perspectives on the presentations and discussed their legal and

social status in a roundtable. The presentations by the two Taiwanese scholars attracted considerable discussion, and there is now a possibility that this workshop will be followed up by one in Taiwan that would focus on monastic ties between Sri Lanka and Taiwan.

On 26-27 July 2012, AISLS held a workshop in Colombo on “Historical Interpretation”. This event was part of the series of workshops held as part of the AISLS historiography initiative, which began in 2009. About 30 persons attended the workshop, including scholars from the University of Colombo, the University of Kelaniya, Sabaragamuwa University, University of Peradeniya, and University of Jaffna. Other attendees came from the US, the UK, the Netherlands, and Singapore. One theme of the workshop was to begin a dialogue on the role art history and visual culture might play in “mainstream” historical interpretations of Sri Lanka. This workshop was organized by John Rogers.

AISLS plans to sponsor a preconference organized by Nalin Jayasena on “Sri Lankan Cinema and its Diaspora” at the Annual Conference on South Asia on 11 October 2012. It will also be providing some support for the preconference on “Dandin in the Modern World”, which will also take place on 11 October 2012. Another forthcoming event is the graduate student conference organized by Sharika Thiranagama on “Sri Lanka: Intersections”, which will be co-sponsored with Center for South Asia, Stanford University and take place in Palo Alto on 8–9 November 2012.

AISLS is, at present, working on a workshop program for 2013. We also plan to hold a forum at the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies in San Diego on 22 March, 2013.

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.

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. This is something that we would like to become more effective at arranging in the future. 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 at one of the universities 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 listserve. Again, I hope that members of AISLS will facilitate us in this valuable service by informing John Rogers or myself of such meetings that they become aware of them.

## **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 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 March 2012, AILS provided 28 Sri Lankan university and research institute libraries with copies of the electronic Social Science Library, which was compiled and donated by the Global Development and Environment Institute at Tufts University. This library, in the form of CDs and pin drives, includes 3,500 full text articles and 10,000 abstracts. Ira Unamboowe visited seven of the recipients in order to provide training in the library's use.

AILS is working with Professor Sirima Kiribamune on a project to digitize her collection of images of women in Sri Lankan art, and make these images freely available through DLIR.

In August 2012, we signed a new lease for our Center premises for the calendar year 2013. We are especially grateful to our landlord, Mr. H. Rodrigo, for the intangible support that he gives each year to our Center.

The 2011 issue of the Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities was shipped from Sri Lanka to the US and distributed to interested AISLS members in 2012. This service is no longer supplied as part of AISLS membership, but we are investigating the possibility of supplying interested members with future issues on an at-cost basis.

The center staff continues to be willing to try to meet requests from members for specific publications. These will 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, the Past President of AISLS, Jonathan Spencer, the Vice President, and myself visited the Colombo Center in the past year. John Rogers, the US Director, also visited the Colombo Center.

### **Organizational Developments**

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 Brandeis University to AISLS during the past year as an institutional member. This brings the total number of institutional members to twenty-one. There are also 104 individual AISLS members. Obviously, we are always on the look-out for ways to add to our institutional and individual membership, and any suggestions will be appreciated.