

PRESIDENT'S REPORT
AMERICAN INSTITUTE FOR SRI LANKAN STUDIES
October 2013 – September 2014

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This report has been prepared a few weeks after Charles Hallisey stepped down as President of AISLS. I present it in my role as acting President.

First and foremost, I would like to thank Charles Hallisey for seven years of dedicated service to AISLS. Under his leadership, AISLS' institutional and individual membership has grown significantly. He has also presided over a host of new programs and initiatives. His accomplishments are too great to list in full, but special mention should be made of the periodic graduate student conferences held in the United States, the strengthening of the Sri Lanka presence at the Madison conference, the expansion of workshops and JSTOR outreach in Sri Lanka, the series of workshops on literary cultures in South Asia, and improvements to the AISLS website. We look forward to his continued participation in AISLS programs in the future.

I would also 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.

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

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). CAORC staff continues 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.

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 Charles Hallisey as president, the AISLS executive committee over most of the past year was comprised of myself (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 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.

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.

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 2014 AISLS is holding an election for four elected members of the Board of Directors. The election results will be announced at our Annual General Meeting on October 18, 2014.

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 Catherine Becker (University of Illinois at Chicago), Mythri Jegathesan (Santa Clara University), Janice Leoshko (University of Texas at Austin) and Scott Paauw (University of Rochester). Sadly, Scott Paauw fell ill soon after receiving notification of his fellowship, and died on June 9, 2014. His [obituary](#) is available on the University of Rochester website:

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. An award this year was made to Kalyani Ramnath (Princeton 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.

Three 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.

Website, Facebook and Research/Teaching Materials

In May 2004, AISLS released a radically redesigned [website](#). In addition to making the site easier to use, we plan to add more resources useful for scholars and students who study Sri Lanka. In the past year, we updated our directory of research centers in Sri Lanka, which is available at <http://www.aisls.org/resources/directory-of-research-centers-in-sri-lanka/>. We welcome corrections and other suggestions to improve this directory. Work was also carried out on two projects that we expect to add to the website in Fall 2014. These are an appendix to James Gair and W.S. Karunatilaka's textbook *Literary Sinhala*, and a guide to collections of photographs of Ceylon from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In May 2004, AISLS also established a [Facebook](#) page. While we expect our listserv and website to remain the primary ways AISLS communicates with members, Facebook gives us an opportunity to reach a broader audience or news and announcements of more general interest.

Workshops and Conferences

In the past year, AISLS gave support to five 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 6--7 December 2013, AISLS co-sponsored with the Center for South Asia a graduate student workshop entitled "The Politics of the Public." The workshop, which took place at Stanford University, brought together graduate students both in the final writing up and pre-research/planning stages from a variety of disciplines and institutions. Attendance at the public sessions varied between 35 and 45. The conference aimed to enhance intellectual exchange on Sri Lanka; to emphasize the production of empirical and non-sectarian knowledge; and to build a new cohort of researchers (and research) across disciplines and institutions. It also sought to emphasize the importance of links with Sri Lankan scholars and universities.

AISLS would like to thank Sharika Thiranagama for organizing the graduate student workshop, which was the fourth in a series, all organized by her. We would also like to thank the graduate student committee, which consisted of Nethra Samarawickrema, Dilshanie Perera and Lakmali Jayasinghe. The faculty members in attendance -- Anne Blackburn, Jeanne Marecek and Dennis McGilvray -- played a central role in the dissertation development seminar and made valuable contributions to the other proceedings. We were also privileged to have Saikat Majumdar and Thomas Blom Hansen as panel discussants. In addition, Nishan De Mel attended and provided feedback to panelists.

On March 28 March 2014, AISLS sponsored a forum at the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, which was held in Philadelphia. The title of the forum was "A Sri Lankan Sufi Community in Philadelphia: The Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship." The Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship is a transnational Sufi order established in Philadelphia in 1971. The Fellowship is based on the teachings of Muhammad Raheem Bawa Muhaiyaddeen (d. 1986), a Sufi saint from Sri Lanka, whose final resting place is in a shrine outside of Philadelphia. This forum placed Bawa Muhaiyaddeen in the context of South Asian Sufism and examined his legacy in Sri Lanka and in North America. AISLS would like to thank Dennis McGilvray, Frank Korom and Merin Shobhana Xavier for acting as discussant, and Daniel Bass for organizing the event.

On 14 July 2014, AISLS held a full day workshop in Colombo on the Sidat Sangara, a medieval Sri Lankan scholastic work written as a guide for the composition of Sinhala poetry. This text had a long-standing influence on Sinhala literature, and it was also the focus of lively literary and cultural debates in the twentieth century. The timing of the workshop was prompted by [the recent publication](#) of a new authoritative English translation of the text, produced by James W. Gair, Professor Emeritus at Cornell University, and the late Professor W.S. Karunatilake of the University of Kelaniya; the

publication of their translation by the American Oriental Society was the result of [exemplary scholarly cooperation](#) between an American scholar and a Sri Lankan scholar over the course of decades. Workshop sessions included both responses to the translation and the presentation of new original research on the Sidat Sangara and its connections to comparable texts in Sanskrit, Pali, and Tamil. Twenty-two persons, including three Americans, attended the workshop. Sri Lankan participants came from five different universities — Colombo, Jaffna, Kelaniya, Peradeniya and Ruhunu. There was additional international participation with a presenter from Singapore University of Technology and Design. The workshop was also noteworthy for having a range of participants ranging from junior university faculty to very senior and retired scholars.

In July 2014, AISLS President Charles Hallisey convened an informal forum for junior faculty in the humanities at the University of Colombo. AISLS is grateful to Sandagomi Coperahewa for organizing this event.

On 1—4 August 2014, AISLS co-sponsored with five other Overseas Research Centers a workshop on “The Practice, Performance, and Politics of Sufi Shrines in South Asia and Beyond.” The workshop was held near Aurangabad, Maharashtra, and was hosted and organized by the American Institute of Indian Studies. It was convened by Carl Ernst, who in planning the workshop was assisted by Dennis McGilvray and Scott Kugle. Fourteen scholars from eight countries attended the workshop, including past AISLS fellows McGilvray and Frank Korom, and Farzana Hariffa (University of Colombo). Although several presentations invoked Sufism’s rich history and multiple contributions to South Asian and African cultures, the majority had a contemporary focus and drew attention to the often contested nature of Sufi authority and sacred sites, which, despite enduring popularity and patronage, have recently come under attack both by advocates of a puritanical, “reformist Islam” and by firebrand activists of other religious traditions—such as the Bodu Bala Sena in Sri Lanka, whose monks preach hatred of Muslims and seek to demolish shrines and mosques that they claim were built on Buddhist sites. Another recurring theme was of the varied roles of women—at times, either comparatively empowered or disenfranchised—in the Islamic teaching and practice of both Sufis and their critics.

AISLS is, at present, working on its workshop program for 2015. 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 or at other venues in Colombo.

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 posting the information on the listserv or informing John Rogers 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 July 2014, we signed a new lease for our Center premises for the calendar year 2015. 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, Charles Hallisey and myself 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 three years, federal government spending cuts in international education have reduced AISLS revenues to a significant degree, almost twenty percent in fact. Looking ahead the next year or two, level funding is likely. The medium term outlook is extremely difficult to foresee, and the long term funding outlook impossible to gauge.

Changes to the Companies Act in Sri Lanka and other new government regulations of non-profit companies 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 the University of Otago to AISLS during the past year as an institutional member. New York University and Vanderbilt University have joined for 2014-15. This brings the total number of institutional members to twenty-six. There are also 114 individual AISLS members.

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.