

PRESIDENT'S REPORT
AMERICAN INSTITUTE FOR SRI LANKAN STUDIES
October 2014 – September 2015

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This is my first official report since becoming AISLS President in December 2014, taking over from Jonathan Spencer, who had been Acting President since September 2014. I would like to thank Jonathan for making the transition so smooth, and for his continued advice and support.

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 diligent efforts continue to enable the work of AISLS to proceed effectively and smoothly on a day-to-day basis.

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 September, Don Keller, who provided able administrative support for AISLS in the United States for over 10 years, retired. I would like to thank him for his long service, and welcome his replacement, Kevin Mullen. I would also like to thank Selma Omerefendic, who continues to provide accounting services for AISLS in the United States.

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, including the executive director, Christopher Tuttle, continue to give AISLS important and critical support.

AISLS also receives core funding from the [US Department of Education's program for American Overseas Research Centers](#), and I would like to thank Cheryl Gibbs at the Department of Education for continuing to give critical support to AISLS.

The AISLS executive committee over most of the past year was comprised of myself (president), Jonathan Spencer (vice president), Christina Davis (secretary), Daniel Bass (treasurer), Charles Hallisey (past president) and Jeanne Marecek (member at large). 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 V.V. Ganeshanathan and Caitrin Lynch for their contributions of time, energy, and wisdom to the workings of the AISLS' fellowship and dissertation 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. It is because of them that we, the members of AISLS, can take such pride in the programs and activities we undertake.

Elections

In the fall of 2015 AISLS is holding an election for Secretary. The election result will be announced at our Annual General Meeting in Madison on October 24, 2015.

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 Anne M. Blackburn (Cornell University), Pia Brancaccio (Drexel University), and Isabelle Clark-Decès (Princeton 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. This year, awards were made to Elizabeth Bittel (University of Colorado at Boulder), Emily Burchfield (Vanderbilt University), Lakshika Senarath Gamage (UCLA), Divya Kumar-Dumas (University of Pennsylvania), and Narmadha Senanayake (Pennsylvania State 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.

Four awards, three for Sinhala and one for Tamil, 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. Seven such awards were made in the past year. AISLS also made an award to a member to support attendance at the Madison dissertation-to-book workshop organized by the American Institute of Indian Studies.

Website, Facebook and Research/Teaching Materials

The AISLS [website](#) not only provides information about AISLS programs and services, but also includes a wide range of resources for scholars and students who study Sri Lanka. Over the course of the past year, AISLS completed two new projects that are available on the website. 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. I would like to thank Theresa McGarry and Liyanage Amarakeerthi for their work on the former, and Benita Stambler for her efforts on the latter. If you have suggestions for other scholarly resources that could be made available on the AISLS website, please contact me or John Rogers.

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

Workshops and Conferences

In the past year, AISLS provided support for seven 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 third countries, particularly Europe; and promoting greater interaction between scholars working on Sri Lanka and those students and scholars concentrating on other regions of Asia.

On 16 October 2014, AISLS co-sponsored a conference on “Extreme Weather, Disasters and Indigenous Practices in South Asia,” which was held as a pre-conference at the Annual Conference on South Asia, Madison, Wisconsin. This conference was organized by the American Institute of Bangladesh Studies, and also received support from the American Institute of Indian Studies, the American Institute of Pakistan Studies, and the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies. Six of the nineteen papers at the conference gave extensive attention to Sri Lanka. Topics included the impact of climate change on water management in agriculture, responses to the 2004 tsunami, and the different types of risk facing fishermen in Sri Lanka.

On 7 – 8 November 2014, AISLS held its 5th Sri Lanka Graduate Student Workshop. This event, titled “Sri Lanka Otherwise? Resituating Topography and Temporality” was held at Stanford University and co-sponsored by Stanford’s Center for South Asia, which also provided administrative support. Like the four previous workshops in the series, it was convened by Sharika Thiranagama. The first day included a dissertation development seminar, where five students discussed their research plans in detail with each other and three faculty mentors (Charles Hallisey, Sharika Thiranagama and Michael Woost). There was also a public session on the life and work of Professor S.J. Tambiah, the distinguished anthropologist who died earlier in 2014. Charles Hallisey, Thomas Blom Hansen and Anne Blackburn served as panelists. Over 25 people attended this session. There was a cultural performance on the evening of the first day, which was attended by around 80 people. The second day was mostly taken up with research presentations by more advanced graduate students. Around 35 people attended. Afterwards, Charles Hallisey led a discussion with all participants, both students and faculty, on directions in Sri Lanka Studies and ways in which researchers on Sri Lanka might bring awareness of intellectual work on Sri Lanka to wider audiences, such as community college teachers. The workshop as a whole, like the earlier ones, also served the purpose of building a sense of community among graduate students working on Sri Lanka. I am grateful to Sharika Thiranagama for her long service in convening these workshops. I would also like to thank the members of her graduate student committee for this workshop: Nethra Samarawickrema, Dilshanie Perera and Lakamali Jayasinghe.

On 10 March 2015, AISLS held a workshop in Colombo on “Climate Change, Water Management, and Agricultural Decision Making in the Dry Zone of Sri Lanka.” Twenty-four persons attended, including 5 Americans, 17 Sri Lankans, and 2 third-country nationals. Jonathan Gilligan and Joshua Bazuin, two members of the Vanderbilt University research team that is working on this subject, presented

findings from their ongoing research. There were also presentations by the heads of government departments working on this issue, and by Sri Lankan university faculty. Some of the participants were previously unaware of the work being carried out by others. Thus the workshop served to form new links between the US researchers and Sri Lankans, and among Sri Lankans themselves.

On 10 – 11 July 2015, AISLS held a workshop in Colombo on “Political Parties in Sri Lanka: Change and Continuity.” This event, convened by Amita Shastri and Jayadeva Uyangoda, brought together 17 Sri Lankans and 8 foreigners, including 6 Americans, for two days of intensive discussion. Most of the presentations covered the various political parties or coalitions of political parties, but the program also covered the electoral system and the role of women in political parties. The topic was quite timely given that the workshop was held between the presidential election in January 2015 and the parliamentary election in August 2015.

On 27 July 2015, AISLS held a workshop in Colombo on “Developing Perspectives on the Art Histories of Sri Lanka.” The workshop, convened by Janet Leoshko and Sujatha Meegama, included four presentations by American scholars who have worked on other regions of South Asia in the past, and who have now begun to work on Sri Lanka. Altogether, twenty-one persons participated. Those from Sri Lanka were drawn from four universities, the Department of Archaeology, and the Department of National Museums. Presentations, which were split evenly between local and foreign scholars, covered both premodern and modern art. I would like to thank Sujatha Meegama for arranging for some financial support from Nanyang Technological University for this event.

On 3 – 4 August 2015, AISLS welcomed Sanchita Saxena, the University of California at Berkeley’s representative on the AISLS board, to Sri Lanka to make two presentations on her research on the factors that shape labor conditions in the garment industry in Bangladesh, Cambodia and Sri Lanka. The first event, on 3 August, was a public lecture held at the American Center in Colombo, and organized by the Public Affairs Section of the US Embassy. About 40 persons attended the lecture. The second event, which was also organized by the US Embassy, was an invitation-only roundtable with 15 participants. It brought together International Labor Organization staff, trade union officials, business executives, a representative from the apparel trade organization, non-governmental organization staff, and staff from the Economics Section of the US Embassy.

On 4 – 5 September 2015, AISLS held a workshop in Kandy on “Rethinking Kinship and Marriage in Sri Lanka: Gender, Intimacy and Change.” This event, convened by Jonathan Spencer, Asha Abeyasekera, and Isabelle Clark-Decès, included 13 research presentations, eight by Sri Lanka-based scholars and 5 based elsewhere. Around 30 persons, including a dozen based outside the country, attended the workshop. Collectively, the papers showed there has been a great deal of local variation in how the war and other recent developments have shaped changes in family life and marriage across the island. Sri Lanka has historically been

a key site in the global study of kinship and marriage, and the workshop succeeded in drawing attention to the importance of this topic among younger researchers in anthropology and related fields. I would like to thank Sidharthan Maunaguru for arranging some additional financial support from the Newton International Fellowships Scheme administered by the Royal Society, UK.

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 assist us in this valuable service by posting the information on the listserv or by informing John Rogers of such meetings.

Upcoming Workshops

On 22 October 2015, AISLS will hold a pre-conference workshop on fieldwork-based research in Sri Lanka at the annual Conference on South Asia in Madison, WI. Five graduate students at different stages of their projects, and representing a variety of disciplines, will discuss practical aspects of their fieldwork in Sri Lanka, and they will receive constructive feedback from three social science mentors who have experience in Sri Lanka: Mythri Jegathesan, Jeanne Marecek, and Dennis McGilvray.

AISLS has two more Colombo workshops planned in 2015. The first, scheduled for 3 December 2015, will explore recent research on the Sri Lankan Muslim community. The second workshop, scheduled for 7 – 9 December 2015, will focus on historical research and the teaching of history in Sri Lankan universities.

Planning for future AISLS workshops in 2016 is just getting underway. 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.

Colombo Center

In the past year, the Colombo Center of the American Institute for Lankan Studies' (or AILS – the legal entity for AISLS in Sri Lanka) 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 available at <http://catalog.crl.edu/search~S14/X>. However, the online catalog does not include books added in the past three years, for which the onsite catalog needs to be consulted. 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 the scholarly access that JSTOR provides.

In September 2015, we signed a new lease for our Colombo Center premises at 5/22 Sulaiman Terrace for the calendar year 2016. 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 members of the AISLS executive committee, Jonathan Spencer, Jeanne Marecek and myself visited the Colombo Center in the past year. John Rogers also visited the Center.

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 four years, federal government spending cuts in international education have reduced AISLS revenues to a significant degree, almost

twenty percent in fact. Looking ahead, the four-year cycle for our US Department of Education grant through the American Overseas Research Centers (AORC) competition ends on September 30, 2016. We hope that a new competition will be held in the spring of 2016, but this will be dependent upon Congressional appropriations for international education and upon the priorities of the US Department of Education. AISLS is supporting CAORC's lobbying efforts in favor of the continuation of the AORC program, and I urge all members and friends of AISLS to contact their congressional representatives. A convenient web-based petition prepared by CAORC is available at: <http://p2a.co/YAw6Vds>

Changes to the Companies Act in Sri Lanka and other new government regulations of non-profit companies have led to more 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.

AISLS currently has 24 institutional and 117 individual members. Obviously, we want to add to our institutional and individual membership, and any suggestions on how we might do so are 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. Please contact John Rogers or myself to discuss any ideas you may have.

It has been my privilege and pleasure to serve as AISLS President over the past year, and I look forward to further AISLS achievements in 2016.