

PRESIDENT'S REPORT
AMERICAN INSTITUTE FOR SRI LANKAN STUDIES
October 2015 – September 2016

Dennis McGilvray

After a highly successful season of academic workshops and outreach activities at the Colombo Center in the preceding months, AISLS suffered a huge blow in December 2015, with the death of Ira Unamboowe, who had served as Executive Director of our Colombo Center since 2005. Ira built the Colombo Center virtually from scratch, and we all mourn her passing. Her shrewd judgment and dedication helped all who visited the Center. On her first death anniversary, AISLS plans to launch a webpage in her memory. We are deeply grateful for her many years of dedicated service.

I would like to thank the Associate Director of the Colombo Center, Deepthi Guneratne, for stepping up and serving as Acting Executive Director from Ira's passing until September 30, 2016. We appreciate the hard work she put in to keep the Center running smoothly and effectively. We are also thankful to have had the services of Ramla Wahab-Salman as Acting Executive Director in June and July 2016, when Deepthi was on leave.

Mr. de S. Weerasooriya has served the Colombo Center as Administrative Officer since it was founded in 2000. He is retiring on November 15, 2016, and we wish him all the best. We will miss his steady presence and good humor. It is hard to think of the Colombo Center without Mr. Weerasooriya.

I would like to thank John Rogers for his work as AISLS US Director based in Boston for his exceptional skill and effort in coordinating interim administration of the Colombo center in the wake of Ira's passing while at the same time drafting the successful application for renewal of US Department of Education funding for AISLS.

I would also like to thank Selma Omerefendic, who has provided accounting services for AISLS in the United States for over ten years.

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, continues 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 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 2016 AISLS is holding elections for President, Vice-President, Treasurer and three members of the Board of Directors. The election result will be announced at our Annual General Meeting in Madison on October 22, 2016.

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, though

because of funding restrictions awards of over six months are made only in exceptional circumstances. 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 Steven Bonta (Penn State Altoona) and Cynthia Caron (Clark 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 Nadia Augustyniak (City University of New York) and Christopher Neubert (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill). 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, two for Tamil and one for Sinhala, 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 the Annual Conference on South Asia through its Travel Stipend Program. Three such awards were made in the past year.

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. 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 October 22, AISLS held an intensive one day Graduate Student Workshop on Field Research for five students working on Sri Lanka. This event took place as a preconference to the Annual Conference on South Asia. The students represented four different disciplines: anthropology, education, geography and literature. The workshop focused on fieldwork methods such as semi-structured interviews, observation or participant-observation, participatory action research, surveys, and visual and other digital technologies. Each student presented his or her project to the group, along with questions or concerns for the group to discuss. Session members helped one another strategize about practical matters –for example, the feasibility of research questions or particular procedures; selecting and gaining access to a research site; locating key informants; and identifying local scholars with shared interests. Three faculty members with extensive experience in Sri Lanka -- Mythri Jegathesan (Santa Clara University), Jeanne Marecek (Swarthmore College) and Dennis McGilvray (University of Colorado at Boulder) -- facilitated the session.

On December 3, AISLS held a workshop in Colombo on Sri Lankan Muslims in Social Science Scholarship. The workshop featured eleven presentations, including two by American scholars. The other presentations were by Sri Lankan scholars and employees of non-governmental organizations. The morning sessions covered work on historical and cultural topics, while the afternoon session concentrated on the recent and contemporary position of Muslims within Sri Lanka's society and polity. Twenty-five persons, including six Americans, attended the workshop. The workshop was convened by Farzana Haniffa and Dennis McGilvray.

One of the attendees at the workshop on scholarship on Muslims in Sri Lanka was S. Anwar, a filmmaker from Chennai, India. AISLS arranged a showing on December 2 at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies in Colombo of his documentary *Yaadhum*, which draws on archaeological excavations, inscriptions, mosque architecture, literature and interviews with scholars to show the origins of the Tamil-speaking Muslim community in south India. About forty persons attended the showing. Dennis McGilvray, moderated the session after the film, when Anwar took questions from the audience. Using contacts made through AISLS, Anwar was also able to arrange additional showings of his film during his visit to Sri Lanka, including at the Eastern University and the Southeastern University.

On December 7—9, AISLS co-sponsored a three day workshop for seventeen junior lecturers in history, who came from seven different Sri Lankan universities. This event, the International Workshop and Conference for Young Historians, was held in conjunction with the Department of History at the University of Colombo and FLICT (a bilateral cooperation program between Sri Lanka and Germany), and took place at the Sri Lanka Foundation Institute in Colombo. The workshop sought to build teaching and research capacity in history in Sri Lankan universities. It also

sought to build connections among historians in different parts of Sri Lanka and between Sri Lankan and foreign scholars. Topics covered included the design of interactive teaching methods; recent trends in international historical research and teaching; and the relationship of history to other disciplines. The proceedings were in English, Sinhala and Tamil. All presentations and comments were translated into the other two languages. The workshop was convened by Janaki Jayawardena of the University of Colombo, and John Rogers, the AISLS US Director. I would like to thank Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri, Harshana Rambukwella, Zoltán Biedermann, Alan Strathern, Kalyani Ramnath, Neilesh Bose, Harini Amarasuriya, and Melia Bose for serving as resource scholars at this workshop.

On January 3—6, AISLS co-sponsored a workshop on “The City in South Asia,” which was held in Karachi, Pakistan. This workshop was organized by the American Institute of Pakistan Studies, and also co-sponsored by the American Institute of Bangladesh Studies and the American Institute of Indian Studies. The workshop had a special focus on the life worlds of the poor in Karachi, Lahore, Mumbai, Chennai, Dhaka and Colombo. Rather than concentrating on perceived failures of the South Asian mega-city—whether in terms of infrastructure, governance, or economic development—the papers emphasized seeing the emerging fabric of urban South Asia as the result of efforts of ordinary people. The Sri Lankan participant in this workshop was Udan Fernando (Centre for Poverty Analysis, Colombo).

On July 22 in Colombo, AISLS sponsored a workshop on the Presence and Absence of the Ramayana in Sri Lanka. About twenty persons participated in the workshop. The program featured seven presentations, which covered both historical and contemporary topics. The workshop promoted a dialog between researchers in humanities (literature, history of religions, Buddhist Studies) and the social sciences. Justin Henry and Sree Padma Holt convened the workshop.

On July 30—August 1, AISLS co-sponsored with the Post Graduate Institute of Archaeology (PGIAR) an intensive three day workshop in Colombo on The Status of Sri Lankan Art Historical Studies and Training in Art History. The workshop promoted a dialog between Sri Lankan scholars and US art historians whose primary focus has not been on Sri Lanka. It was convened by Jagath Weerasinghe and Janice Leoshko.

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 Sri Lanka. 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 November 4—5, 2016, AISLS and the Center for South Asia at Stanford University will co-sponsor a graduate student conference, “Remember? Reconcile? Revise?” This will be the sixth such conference organized by Sharika Thiranaganama (the first two were at the New School, and the rest at Stanford).

Planning for future AISLS workshops in 2017 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

The new Executive Director of the Colombo Center, Vagisha Gunasekara, begins her employment on October 1, 2016. We are very pleased to welcome her to AISLS.

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 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 four years, for which the onsite catalog needs to be consulted. We hope to launch a new online catalog during the upcoming year. 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.

In August 2016, we signed a new lease for our Colombo Center premises at 5/22 Sulaiman Terrace for the calendar year 2017. 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. Because of federal government spending cuts in international education, AISLS revenues have fallen almost twenty percent from their level five years ago. However, funding levels now seem to be stabilizing, and we do not anticipate further cuts in the immediate future.

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 23 institutional and 111 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 2017.