

PRESIDENT'S REPORT
AMERICAN INSTITUTE FOR SRI LANKAN STUDIES
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The past year has been one of transition at our Colombo Center. Our new Executive Director, Vagisha Gunasekara, began on October 1, 2016. I am extremely grateful for her hard work and thoughtful advice over the past year. We are lucky to have her.

I would also like to thank Deepthi Guneratne, our Associate Director for Administration at the Colombo Center, who has served the Center for over ten years; and Ramla Wahab-Salman, our Associate Director for Programming, who was hired earlier this year.

Mr. de S. Weerasooriya, who served the Colombo Center as Administrative Officer since it was founded in 2000, retired on November 15, 2016. We wish him all the best, and miss his steady presence.

I would like to thank John Rogers for his work as AISLS US Director based in Boston, especially for his efforts supporting the transition at the Colombo Center. John is the day-to-day operations manager of AISLS as well as an essential counselor to the President, to the members of the Board, and to the Executive Committee.

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 Acting Executive Director, Rick Spees, and the Deputy Director, Heidi Wiederkehr, 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 the past year was comprised of myself (president), Anne Blackburn (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 Harshana Rambukwella 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 2017 AISLS is holding elections for President and three members of the Board of Directors. The election results will be announced at our Annual General Meeting in Madison on October 28, 2017.

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. Fellowships can range between two and six 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 Luke Fleming (University of Montréal) and Sujatha Meegama (Nanyang Technological 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, an award was made to Crystal Whetstone (University of Cincinnati). 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.

AISLS held its inaugural AISLS Curriculum Development Grant competition, which sought proposals for developing online teaching modules in Sri Lankan Studies suitable for use in American community colleges and for introductory courses in four-year institutions. We made two awards, one to Elizabeth Bittel (University of Colorado) for her module on “Teaching about the 2004 Tsunami”, and the other to Cate Strain (Northeast State Community College, TN) and Theresa McGarry (East Tennessee State University) for their module on “Teaching the Ramayana.” These modules are now available on the AISLS website.

Two awards, both 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 the Annual Conference on South Asia through the Ira Unamboowe Graduate Student Grants program. Nine 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 John Rogers.

While our listserv is the primary way AISLS communicates with members, our [Facebook](#) page gives us an opportunity to reach a broader audience with news or announcements of more general interest. The Facebook page now has over 2,000 followers.

Workshops and Conferences

In the past year, AISLS provided financial support for six conferences and workshops 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 November 4—5, 2016, AISLS and the Center for South Asia at Stanford University co-sponsored a Graduate School Workshop, with the theme “Remember? Reconcile? Revise?.” This event was convened by Sharika Thiranagama, who had organized similar events at Stanford and the New School on five earlier occasions (2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014). As with previous years, the aim of the workshop was to provide a high quality academically rigorous atmosphere for graduate students working on Sri Lanka to present work and receive feedback, and, encourage cohort building amongst graduate students across disciplines and help them build networks. We brought together graduate students from the final writing-up stage and pre-research/planning stages from a variety of disciplines and institutions. The first day of the workshop featured a closed dissertation development seminar, where five students presented their work. A public showing of the film *Dheepan* took place that evening. On the second day, seven graduate students presented their work. In addition to thanking Sharika, I would like to thank Jeanne Marecek, Daniel Bass, Mythri Jegathesan, Usha Iyear, and Thomas Blom Hansen for serving as predissertation mentors and as discussants. About 25 students participated in the workshop, and over 50 persons attended the showing of *Dheepan*.

On July 14--15, 2017, AISLS held a workshop in Colombo on “Imaginations of the Rural in Sri Lankan Social Sciences, Politics and Art.” The workshop, which was convened by Jonathan Spencer, focused on discussing the productive friction between the attempt to conduct dispassionate social scientific study of the countryside and the ideological weight that the countryside carries in the wider political culture in Sri Lanka. It brought together some senior social scientists and artists in order to conduct a critical assessment of scholarship on the changing countryside in Sri Lanka over the past century. The workshop also featured the presentation of new work by both established and emerging scholars in order to understand and appreciate new ways in which the countryside is being analyzed from multiple standpoints, including family patterns, gender roles, education, economic and political life. About 25 persons participated in the workshop.

On July 16-18, 2017, AISLS and the Postgraduate Institute of Archaeology (PGIAR) at the University of Kelaniya co-sponsored a workshop and symposium at PGIAR on “Framing the Ways of Seeing.” This event, convened by Janice Leoshko and Jagath Weerasinghe, was the third in an annual series of summer workshops on art history held in Colombo. The main objective of this workshop and the symposium was to hold a collective discussion on the directions that Sri Lankan art history can take by investing the field’s intellectual and critical energies in wider cultural and social issues that inform and define the making and reception of visual objects from ancient to modern times. Five American art historians, three of whose previous work has been primarily on India, interacted with Sri Lankan scholars and students. The first day consisted of a field trip for a small group of participants to view five Buddhist temples in Galle and Matara

districts. The second and third days provided opportunities for wide ranging discussions. Altogether, about 40 persons participated in the workshop and symposium. In September, PGIAR held a one-day follow up event, where the language of the proceedings was Sinhala.

On 24—25 July, 2017, AISLS sponsored a workshop in Colombo on “Families, Kin and the State in Sri Lanka.” In the first part of this two-day workshop, participants examined the existing scholarship on kinship in Sri Lanka, and assessed how this scholarship has framed our understanding of gender and reproduction both in the past and present. They then proceeded to revisit classic topics such as marriage and family in the light of more recent theoretical debates about gender and relatedness. At this point the workshop turned to the findings of recent research. Participants discussed how people in particular social locations negotiate decisions concerning having children. They also explored how changing social norms, aspirations, life course trajectories and economic conditions give way to a reworking of decisions regarding fertility. Finally, workshop participants examined how state policies and laws have reconfigured people’s plans and decisions about reproduction and reproductive work. About 20 persons attended the workshop, which was convened by Michele Gamburd and Vagisha Gunasekara.

On 9 August, 2017, AISLS and the Department of History, University of Colombo, co-sponsored the “International Workshop and Conference for Young Historians: Phase 2.” The workshop, which was held in Colombo, was a follow up to Phase 1, which was held in December 2015. The full-day event provided four Sri Lankan graduate students (from the University of Colombo and from Rajarata University) an opportunity to present their work and receive detailed feedback from more experienced researchers. Janaki Jayawardena and John Rogers convened the event. I would like to thank P. Ahilan, Kalyani Ramnath, and Ramla Wahab-Salman, who served as resource persons, and Thiyagaraja Waradas, who translated the proceedings from English to Sinhala, and from Sinhala to English.

On 10—11 August, 2017, AISLS sponsored a workshop on “Untangling the Present and Past in Historical Writing.” The two-day workshop featured 8 research papers and two shorter research topic presentations by graduate students. A general theme was the search for ways to write about the past in ways that are relevant to the present, but which do not impose present-day categories and assumptions upon the past. About 20 persons attended the workshop, which covered the period from the late eighteenth century to the late twentieth century. John Rogers convened the event.

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 Ira Unamboowe Travel Grants program for graduate students, AISLS continues to encourage scholarly participation at various conference settings including the Annual Conference on South Asia at Madison, 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.

Colombo Center

The new Executive Director of the Colombo Center, Vagisha Gunasekara, began 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) launched a new and regularly updated online library catalog, which can be found at <https://www.librarycat.org/lib/AISLS-Colombo>. In addition, one of the reading rooms was provided with new furniture and lighting. All books in the library are catalogued according to the Library of Congress system. 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. There are no fees for library use for persons based in Sri Lanka or for AISLS members.

In August 2017, we signed a new lease for our Colombo Center premises at 5/22 Sulaiman Terrace for the calendar year 2018. 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, Daniel Bass, Jeanne Marecek and myself visited the Colombo Center in the past year. John Rogers also spent time at 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 six years ago. There continues to be uncertainty about long-term federal funding.

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 22 institutional and 115 individual members. This past year, we welcomed Bucknell University as a new institutional member. 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 three years, and I look forward to welcoming the next President of AISLS who will assume office on October 28, 2017. Our organization is now more than twenty years old, and scholarly interest in Sri Lanka continues to grow as new students and younger scholars enter the field. AISLS continues to be a key part of the academic infrastructure of Sri Lankan studies, and we can all be proud of its achievements.