

## Book Reviews

**K D Somadasa**, *Catalogue of the Sinhalese manuscripts in the library of the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine*, London, Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, 1996, pp. 420, £30.00 (1-86983-581-6).

Mr K D Somadasa and the Wellcome Institute have produced a sumptuous volume in cataloguing the 469 Sinhalese manuscripts in their possession, which cover a wide spectrum of subjects. Only about five of the fifteen pages of the subject index cover medicine, ritual or astrology; most of the rest is Buddhist literature. It would have been of interest to know how and why these manuscripts were acquired by the Institute, though it may well be that such details have not been preserved (just as it seemed impossible in 1981 to discover the source of the 45 Sinhalese manuscripts at that time being catalogued in the India Office Library).

The manuscripts do not seem to be catalogued in any particular order; perhaps they are numbered in order of acquisition. The sequence in which the entries are now printed does not seem to be that in which they were compiled, but the excellent indexes, in both Roman and Sinhala script, when consulted will make the entries clearer in the numerous cases of multiple copies where information is split between various entries.

Mr Somadasa points out in a short introduction some of the interesting highlights of the collection, headed by the magnificent copper grant which figures as entry no. 1. Here the comment "See plate 1 for full text" is distinctly optimistic. It is, however, just possible to see that the photograph of the verso side is printed upside down. Besides those instanced in the Introduction, other items which might repay further study are numbers 69, a polemical letter from one monk to another, not precisely dated: 86.VIII, on a religious debate conducted in 1871: 90, on local history: 258, on a census taken in 1840: 328, which refers to a Buddhist-Christian controversy which the editor implies must have been printed at the time: 388, on the making of fireworks: 406, on a legal dispute of 1871.

Some of the titles under which the manuscripts are listed seem to be the compiler's own, and sometimes presuppose some knowledge of Sinhala. The catalogue text is followed by a fine series of plates, excellently coloured in many cases, and by three indexes.

The descriptive portion of each entry follows very much the same lines as the Nevill catalogue entries from the British Library, admirably published by Mr Somadasa over the last ten years, and includes descriptive notes on the manuscripts themselves, sometimes brief assessments ("useful copy"), and reference to printed versions of the texts in question where they exist. Occasionally a mysterious word probably indicates some sort of lacuna ("indiscretion" on p. 215).

The detailed application necessary to produce a work of this size and calibre deserves high praise: after producing eight volumes of this kind it would seem that Mr Somadasa has still not quite finished. How fortunate for scholars whose interests lie in the direction of Sri Lanka that Mr Somadasa has been able and willing to remain in this country well past retirement age, in order to complete these catalogues. The Wellcome Institute has indeed been fortunate.

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**Paul Brodwin**, *Medicine and morality in Haiti: the contest for healing power*, Cambridge Studies in Medical Anthropology 3, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. xvi, 240, £50.00 (hardback 0-521-57029-8); £17.95 (paperback 0-521-57543-5).

This welcome addition to the literature on medical anthropology will be of interest to historians as well as social scientists and public health specialists. Paul Brodwin argues that in the rural Haitian community of Jeanty sick people set out to depict themselves as upright social actors, because illness can raise disturbing questions about personal guilt.

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When biomedicine cures, illness is perceived in the village as an “illness of God”; when it fails to cure, it is perceived as inflicted by other humans. According to the author, the Jeanty peasantry negotiates between different categories of healer—formal practitioners of Western biomedicine, herbalists, midwives and religious healers—and conflicting religious systems—Vodoun, Roman Catholicism and fundamentalist Protestantism, especially Pentecostalism. Brodwin argues persuasively that Haitians rework their religious identities in order to handle crises of illness and disease. As Haiti has undergone significant changes in the 1990s, notably the consolidation of the presence of international aid agencies and the building of connections between once isolated rural communities and major “advanced” cities like New York where family members have migrated—so religious idioms of suffering and healing mediate between the locality and national/global forces.

The book contains a substantial historical section, outlining the openness of the French colony of Saint Domingue in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to metropolitan medicine, both “official” and “archaic”. One of the presidents of the newly independent republic, Pétion, followed the colonial example by ordering charitable hospitals for the poor to be constructed in every town. For fiscal reasons only one was.

The core of the book addresses the 1990s. Medical pluralism forms part of a broader pattern of ideological and religious pluralism. As part of a contest for authority and healing power local leaders denounce and demonize their rivals. Influenced by a flow of biomedical pharmaceuticals over whose sale there is no effective regulation, by local religious and political institutions and by distinct health systems, villagers are confronted by opportunities to intermix biomedicine and other forms of healing, and combine elements of diverse therapeutic traditions pragmatically. Health workers make weekly visits to remote hamlets; and midwives travel monthly to receive medical supplies at the dispensary. The quality of medical care is claimed to be linked

to religious affiliation: thus Baptists are alleged to receive the best treatment at a first-rank Baptist medical complex, and other groups attending it are subjected to intense and unwelcome proselytization. These conflicts are exacerbated by the distortions introduced to primary health care by the Haitian state during and since the parasitic dictatorships of the Duvalier family. Rhetorically committed to public sector provision, the Haitian state, by sharp contrast with various counterparts in mainland Latin America, neglected the Rural Health Delivery System and then withdrew from it, leaving a vacuum filled in part by a myriad of international development agencies, both religious and secular, that have provided most of the accessible and affordable health care in a biomedical tradition. Thus healing power, one strategy of rule of government in many colonial and post-colonial “Third World” countries, was delegated to overseas agencies.

The new book makes a substantial contribution. This reviewer has some reservations. Brodwin does not delineate the political and economic context with the clarity needed; and at intervals lapses into impenetrable language, which serves to mystify a subject that he is hoping to de-mystify. The author engages in the lively debate (p. 198) about whether West African religious formations were “reinvented” in Haiti, while never discussing whether Catholic religious formations of European origins were similarly “reinvented”. Brodwin also adopts language from Afro-Asian historiography uncritically, like “tool of empire”, a concept perhaps appropriate in discussing strategies of rule by colonial power in much of Africa and Asia, but of less value in approaching Latin American republics and Haiti, where for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries national elites have, owing to formal independence, enjoyed a degree of bargaining leverage seldom encountered in colonies. These small reservations do nothing to detract from a book that is a considerable achievement.

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