
Role of Colonial Gaze in the Construction of Present-day Cultural Practices Related to the Elephant in Sri Lanka

Vidura Prabath Munasinghe

Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Colombo

Abstract

Diverse discursive practices related to the elephant have created diverse emotions such as respect, fear, empathy, hate, devotion, and joy among the people of Sri Lanka. Often, it is being said that these discursive practices have been in operation since antiquity. It is a common fact that the most of present day discursive practices and their manifestations are heavily influenced by our colonial legacy. Therefore, the objective of this study is to explore the impact of colonial legacy on the nuances of the representations of elephants in contemporary Sri Lankan culture. With this objective in mind, a genealogy of representation of elephants in Sri Lankan culture from colonial period to this date is explored using secondary qualitative data. Colonial representations of elephants are explored using official colonial documents, documents published by colonial officers, Western travelogues, and colonial iconography (symbols, architecture and artifacts). Representations of elephants in contemporary Sri Lankan culture (beliefs, imagery, art, iconography and every-day-practices embedded in rituals, beliefs, media, public speeches and religious sermons) are also explored. A genealogy of representation of elephants in Sri Lankan culture reveals how the colonial knowledge production has shaped our understanding of the elephant. Many contemporary cultural practices related to the elephant clearly portray the legacy of the colonial gaze towards the orient, although today they are often perceived as traditions which have evolved for thousands of years in this land.

Keywords: *Colonialism, Culture, Gaze, Iconography, Society*

***Corresponding Author:** viduramunasinghe@yahoo.com