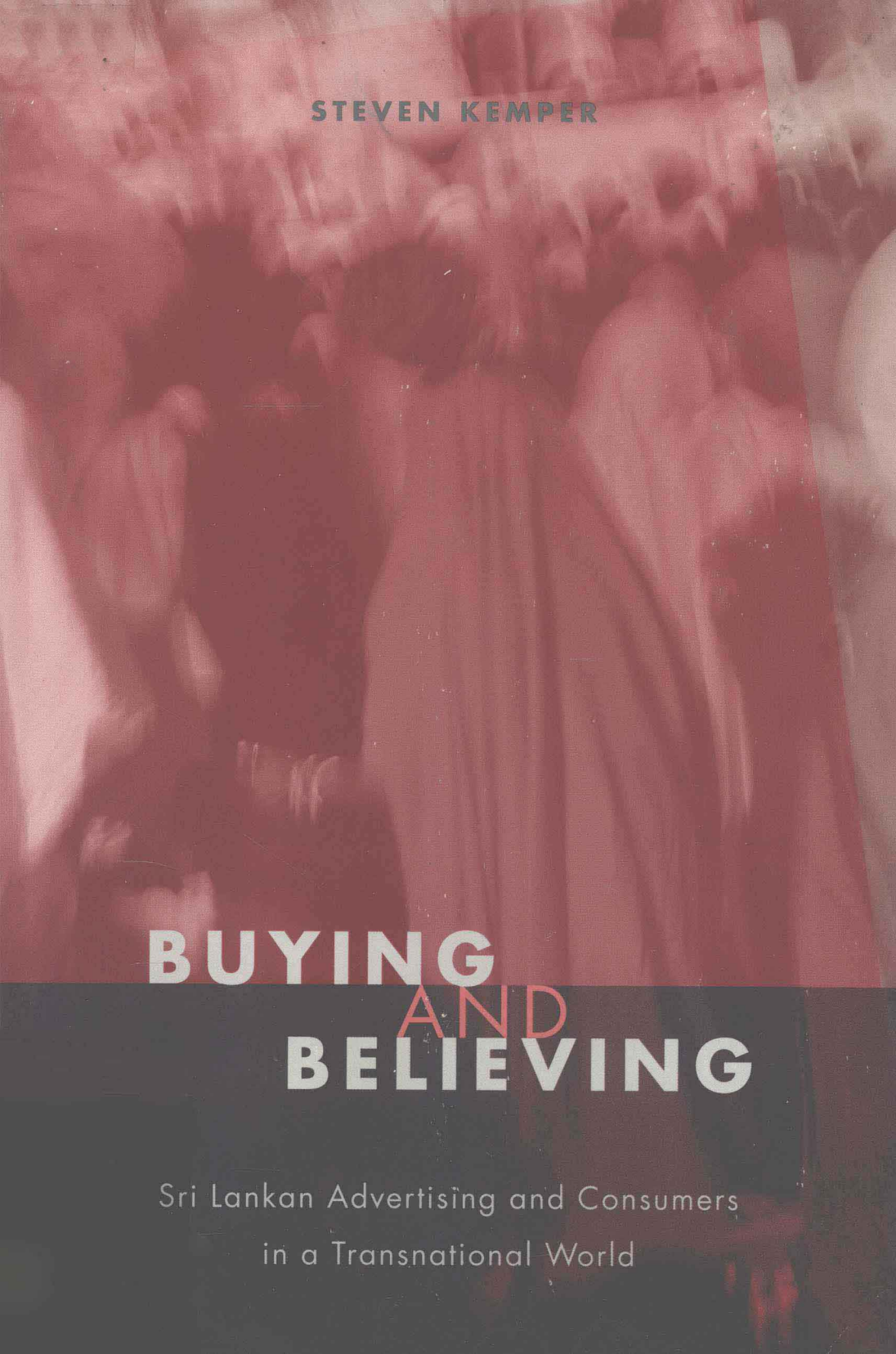

STEVEN KEMPER

BUYING AND BELIEVING

Sri Lankan Advertising and Consumers in a Transnational World

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PREFACE

I started this project in the late 1980s just before I finished *The Presence of the Past.* That book considered the relationship between contemporary Sri Lanka and its past; this one considers the relationship between Sri Lanka—as a society, an economy, and a locality—and the rest of the world. Moving from a concern with temporality to one with spatiality is also a transition from exchanges framed in a primarily religious idiom to talk that is largely commercial. Even in retrospect I am not entirely sure how I moved from the temple to the bazaar. One day I was walking to monasteries, hoping to meet the village monk; the next I was telephoning multinational firms, scheduling appointments with executives.

It is hard to imagine two localities less similar, and moving from monasteries to advertising agencies forced a change in my intellectual identity. Talking with monks requires Sinhala, lots of waiting, and deference (easy enough for a beginner with sketchy language skills and great respect for Buddhism). Talking with advertising executives requires English, watching the clock, and bursts of sociability (is this an ethnographic project or my life?). I started across the bridge between these two venues as I tried to make sense of the *Mahavamsa, Nutana Yugaya,* the most recent updating of a tradition of historical writing that began in the sixth century. That chronicle recounts the relationship between Buddhism and the Sri Lankan state. Its most recent installment celebrated the inauguration of an elected government committed to free-market capitalism. It was overseen by a committee and modeled on the *Cambridge History of India.* As the project languished I discovered that carrying on the tradition was more important than producing the text, celebrating the government's virtue on television more important than anything that the history might say. I began to think about advertising, media, and a society adapting itself to new circumstances.

This book is the result. It approaches Sri Lankan society as part of a global system of culture and commerce, working not so much across

expanses of time, but synchronically across the world. Advertising functions as a second-order business, serving the interests of firms that produce goods and services. Unlike legal services and accountancy, advertising plays a public and highly political role in linking together far-flung parts of the planet—connecting Western sources of production with consumers around the world, converting commodities into libidinal images of themselves, and reimagining products and services for local consumption. To this extent advertising produces culture (which is what makes it anthropologically interesting). Unlike other businesses that also depend on print and electronic media—the book, magazine, movie, and music industries are obvious examples—advertising is parasitic on something else, the daily ration of commodities that enter human lives. To this extent, advertising has an everydayness and a materiality that makes advertising culture even more consequential.

What follows is a transnational ethnography. It begins by approaching advertising as a modern practice, tied to Western centers of material and symbolic production, dependent on media, and implicated in the interests of nation-states, multinational corporations, and nongovernmental organizations. When the J. R. Jayewardene government came to power in 1977, I expected an explosion of capitalist activity, advertising, and consumption. And there have been signs of all three. But Sri Lankans have become ever more skillful savers, and I have concentrated on banking as a conduit that links Sri Lanka to the larger world, a source of legitimacy and economic support for the state, and a critical link between global forces and ordinary people living lives dependent on values and long-term strategies that often work at cross-purposes with the interests of capitalist institutions. By focusing on two families, I have tried to bring the global system to ground, for it is by scrutinizing lives of local design that the transnational becomes the ethnographic. My hope is that the transnational character of the project—its focus on how forces that originate far away bear on people living in Sri Lanka—provides a better sense of just how they are "us" while remaining distinctively themselves.

In pursuing this project, I have accumulated a set of debts to the institutions that helped me along the way. Several sources of support allowed me to carry out five periods of fieldwork in Sri Lanka and Malaysia. Early on in the project, the Social Science Research Council supported two periods of fieldwork in 1987 and 1991; the National Endowment for the Humanities made possible two longer periods of fieldwork in 1990 and 1995. The American Institute for Sri Lankan Studies underwrote summer fieldwork in 1997. Bates College has been consistently generous in sup-

porting my research. I thank them all and acknowledge Sylvia Hawks who skillfully oversaw the manuscript.

Many practitioners took time from their hectic days to talk to an outsider whose questions ranged from the irrelevant to the vexatious. Guy Halpe in particular gave more of himself than I had any right to ask. To a person who stopped to talk to me rather than return home to be with his family, there is little I can say but to make public my debt. Over the last decade, a large number of people in the advertising, television, and newsprint industries have shared their knowledge with me. In particular I want to thank Kenneth Abeywickrama, Sanjiva Ahangama, Mel Assauw, Angelo Assauw, Reggie Candappa, Stanley Carvalho, Shaan Corea, D. S. Dayaratne, Anandatissa de Alwis, Tissa de Alwis, Felicia Dean, Nishamani de Mel, Nihal de Silva, Ranil de Silva, Ruwan de Silva, Stephen de Silva, Lilamani Dias, Victor Gunewardena, Upali Herath, Laddie Hettiaratchy, Suresh Jayawickrama, Podma Pathirane, Cyril Perera, M. J. Perera, Chandini Rajaratnam, Sandya Salgado, Ajit Samaranayaka, Jayantha Sittampalam, Caryll de Silva Tozzer, Ananda Wedaarachchy, and Irwin Weerackody. In Thailand and Malaysia I owe thanks to Chris Baker, K. C. Lee, S. P. Lee, Tony Lee, J. Matthews, Richard McDonough, Harmandar Singh, and Roziah Osman.

A number of people not directly involved in the advertising and media business have also helped me with the project in Sri Lanka. They include Kumar Abayanaike, Nate Bowditch, Chandra, Indira, and Dinusha Corea, C. R. de Silva, Ven. Ampitiya Dhammakitti, H. D. C. Dissanayake, Tissa Jayatilaka, Stanley Jayawardena, Talbot Penner, I. G. Sumanasena, and Abhaya Weerakoon.

At home I have received intellectual reinforcement from Arjun Appadurai, Carol Breckenridge, Loring Danforth, Val Daniel, Nick Dirks, Ulf Hannerz, David Kolb, and Dennis McGilvray. My wife, Anne, soldiered on while I was away in Asia. I appreciate her many gifts—love, character adjustment, and publicity, but especially love—and thank her and my daughters, Jordan, Shannon, and Jessica, for being who they are. When I was in the seventh grade, I had an English teacher who I did not fully appreciate. I doubt that anyone ever thanked Helen Wingfield. I remember her laughing over a critic's review of Katharine Hepburn's first stage performance—"her emotions ran the gamut from A to B"—which went past most of us students. But she also asked us to think about advertising as an imaginative literature. It all makes sense to me now, and I happily acknowledge her distant influence. Miss Wingfield will not read this note, but some of the people who never get recognized will.

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INTRODUCTION

Domesticating the Imagination

> Superficially, the world has become small and known. . . . Yet the more we know, superficially, the less we penetrate. . . . We, bowling along in a rickshaw in Ceylon, say to ourselves: "It's very much what you'd expect." We really know it all. We are mistaken.
>
> D. H. Lawrence, *Phoenix*

This book concerns the economic and cultural connections that tie the world together. It is also a book about consumption, advertising, the production of a public culture in a postcolonial nation-state, and the way people make use of modern institutions. These issues—which, to cut to the heart of the matter, are organized by the practices and passions of buying and believing—confront all societies. They are especially contentious in postcolonial places. Here the distinction between that which is local and that which is foreign weighs on issues that at first seem remote. What one consumes becomes a matter of national identity, or modernity, or decency. How commodities are advertised poses a political dilemma, forcing the state to protect local values and interests while also encouraging development and other connections to transnational forces. Between the allure of the foreign and sentiments that derive from more proximate forms of community, postcolonial societies find their way.

The nation-state is the venue for the interaction of these competing forces, but in most cases not itself an object of powerful feeling. When people defend the local, they speak less for the nation-state than for other

forms of association (an ethnic group, religion, caste, or linguistic community), which are clearly more compelling. At the same time, the people who defend the local may favor foreign goods over their local equivalents, linking them to forms of community that transcend the nation. Participation in virtual communities of consumption depends on advertising, electronic media, and patterns of living that link individuals to the deterritorialized world of commodities. In these circumstances, advertising threatens not only the postcolonial state but also local tradition, morality, and the relationship between young people and old.

All that said, we are mistaken if we think that a global culture will soon dominate the planet or that advertising will soon destroy local traditions. Advertising has its effects, and they are real and deep, if not always what the advertiser intended. But those effects need to be accounted for along with other forces—from media in general to local credit arrangements—that confront people in postcolonial societies. The very fact that consumption is so widely seen as bearing on local tradition or morality suggests that consumers do not consume passively or read advertisements without resistance. A globalized economy and culture are not overwhelming the societies of the world, but distant forces are causing the people of Africa, Asia, and Latin America to act on new sources of desire, fear, and possibility.

Where capitalism goes, advertising goes. That affinity means that advertising is as much a part of commercial life in Colombo and Port Moresby as New York and Tokyo. In transferring commodities and ideas between places all across the planet, the advertising business functions alongside a number of other transnational institutions. Like media companies, public relations firms, wire services, the music, movie, and telecommunications industries, nongovernmental organizations, accountancy and legal firms, multinational corporations, press and broadcast services, and development agencies, it links persons in far-flung parts of the globe in a way increasingly less constrained by distance. Advertising's role as a site of cultural production in a network that links every place with every other place makes it the transnational profession par excellence, a site where the relationship between things and their meanings is always under construction, always responding to imagination and economic interest.

Advertising people—account managers, copywriters, and graphic artists as well as executives—are part of a global class of people concerned with symbol work. In this sense, the advertising business is bound to those other transnational businesses in a second way. They all produce, manipulate, interpret, and traffic in forms of signification. As a site of cultural production, advertising is a primary channel through which the blandish-

ments of the modern enter Sri Lankan life, but it is even more a cutoff point where the modern is domesticated by being translated into a vocabulary that makes sense to local consumers. To that extent, advertising influences Sri Lankan understandings of what is modern and what is traditional, constantly readjusting local definitions of each. This process is interesting in itself, the more so for an anthropologist because of its resonance. The disciplinary language of the advertising profession parallels and sometimes converges with the disciplinary language of anthropology.

Advertising Knowledge and Ethnographic Knowledge

My interest in the advertising business grew initially from the idea that I could learn something new about Sri Lankan society by asking people who have a professional interest in understanding that society just what they know about it. To the extent that advertising copywriting and artwork requires and produces knowledge of local life, advertising executives are ethnographers.[1] Anthropologists interested in Sri Lanka fix their professional gaze on matters as various as ritual behavior, kinship, caste, and land tenure. More recently, they have turned to new expressions of Buddhism, ethnic violence, and the historical memory. These research interests produce a view of Sri Lanka that is not so much narrow as distinctive. Advertising people are interested in the same society. They simply picture it in different terms. For them, Sri Lanka is a society of consumers. It fans out from Colombo and divides neatly into two groups—the middle class, typically English-speaking and living in Colombo, and a provincial city and village Sri Lanka.

Ethnographic interest in the island's peoples began with the Seligmanns' 1911 account of Sri Lanka's only aboriginal people, the Veddas,[2] and that focus on the primitive, the traditional, and the unspoiled is instructive. By the 1950s and 1960s ethnographic interest had settled on village life. Only recently—and then haltingly—have anthropologists looked to urban settings, modernity, and transnational processes in the island. The focus of advertising practice, by contrast, fell first on a small, Westernized elite living mainly in Colombo and spread to the majority of Sri Lanka's people living in villages and towns only in the 1960s and 1970s. For the first two-thirds of the last century, advertisements were framed in English, ignoring the great majority of the island's peoples. Where the direction of ethnographic interest spread from village to town and city, advertising moved in the opposite direction.

Ask anyone to reflect on his or her own society, and they will

produce a folk ethnography. But advertising executives are folk ethnographers with a critical difference, for they are professional observers who make a living by convincing clients that they understand how the natives think. Agencies compete with one another by claiming better knowledge of how that thinking will affect a particular product or service. Having a stake in knowing what Sri Lankan society is like does not guarantee the reliability of that knowledge, but it surely increases the knower's self-awareness and interest. As the demographics evolve, as businesses seek to know what is going on right now, advertising executives try to keep pace with a society changing rapidly. They should have ethnographic knowledge, perhaps more than professional ethnographers, that is not only sophisticated but less prone to essentialism and ahistoricism.

When advertising executives use the word *segment,* they employ it not as a noun but as a verb. To segment a market is to create a market segment, not merely respond to an existing one.[3] As in the expression *young urban professionals,* segmenting a market begins with an act of demographic phrase-making, but it does not end there. Advertising cannot create that segment without inventing tropes of gender, ethnicity, class, and locality that cause consumers to identify with the people and places depicted in advertisements. Independent of whether advertising executives are well informed about what their public is like, they create new and often startling images of the people who read advertisements and watch commercials. They are hardly the only source of images of Sri Lankan society, and they are themselves reinterpreted by consumers.[4] But once in the public domain, advertising representations of Sri Lankan society become one way in which the people of that society acquire a sense of locality and thus of themselves. Whether it sells commodities or not, advertising creates culture, and that second function has great importance apart from the role advertising plays in the economy.[5]

Whatever part the representations of garment factory workers and paddy farmers play in the production of culture, ordinary people lack the mechanical power and distributional range of electronic and print media. Academic interpretations of Sri Lankan society have their own disadvantages. Occasionally an academic will write something that riles up popular feelings—Romila Thapar's work on ancient India and S. J. Tambiah's *Buddhism Betrayed* accomplished that much—but most academic work, even when the focus falls on issues of great importance, never receives public discussion. Academic hopes for critique and social renewal duly noted, it is hard to imagine any book—this one included—producing culture. Creative directors, graphic artists, copywriters, and television production people produce a relentless, ever-growing flow of it.

When I started this project in the late 1980s, I expected that the street smarts—from an intuitive sense of what makes people laugh or cry to the ability to exploit popular culture in inventive ways—that characterize the American advertising profession would have a Sri Lankan equivalent. This book is the product of my testing those assumptions. Some distinctions that advertising executives and marketing people impose on Sri Lankan life do not come to much. What to make of the fact that scent companies in Sri Lanka sell their strong fragrances in village markets and their subtle ones in more urban ones? The truth of the assertion aside, I do not learn anything substantive about either village or town by having discovered the distinction. By contrast, knowing that Sri Lankans spend large percentages of their income (relative to places such as the Philippines and Indonesia) on products associated with children and health forces me to think about domestic life and kinship in unfamiliar ways.

Approaching Sri Lankan society from an advertising executive's point of view has allowed me to think about Sri Lankan society itself as a distinctive kind of theoretical object. On the one hand, I have been led to think of that society as a single entity. Sri Lanka, so conceived, is something different from Sri Lanka understood as local ethnographers do—as the longest reach to which their assertions apply, the national entity that is the nominal context of their work (even when the focus falls on a single village). It is instead a market for commodities and advertising.[6] And Sri Lankans under this description are a community of people known for what and how they consume. On the other hand, when I have thought about Sri Lankan society in terms of its internal differences, thinking about Sri Lankans as a community of consumption leaves the ubiquitous distinction between Sinhala and Tamil behind. The distinction that counts more in this context falls between middle-class people and the generality of Sri Lankans. And once I begin to approach Sri Lankans as people who own cell phones and VCRs, people with whom I communicate by e-mail, it becomes difficult to imagine their living in a historical moment different from my own.[7]

In some ways advertising executives are not the ethnographers I had anticipated. Advertising accounts move between one agency and another for all manner of reasons, but the explicit rationale that agencies employ to pitch some other agency's client is often some version of this argument: "We can sell your products because we can think in the same terms as most of Sri Lanka's people." I have heard some advertising people make quite a lot of the "local idiom" notion and others dismiss it out of hand. Its natural venue is local advertising agencies, which seek to compete against multinational agencies by claiming to share more in common with

the average Sri Lankan consumer. When executives claim the ability to understand Sri Lanka's peoples, their knowledge of how the natives think is anecdotal, unsystematic, and motivated by rhetorical figures. The same words, of course, have been used to critique ethnographic knowledge.

Whether they claim to have mastered the "local idiom" or to be able to exploit strategic thinking from the home office in New York for the sake of selling things in Sri Lanka, advertising executives work with real disadvantages. As part of an urban-dwelling middle class, they have negligible contact with people who live in villages. Executives invariably speak English as their first language and transact business in English. Most Sri Lankans do neither. Disproportionate numbers of advertising executives come from minority communities. Some are Burghers, that is, European and Eurasian descendants of Dutch colonists, and others are Sinhala or Tamil Christians. And whatever their ethnic origins, advertising executives are cosmopolitan people, putting them at a remove from most Sri Lankans. The social distance that separates the people of the advertising profession from their public is probably no greater than the situation in many postcolonial countries, but that distance reinscribes in their own lives the distinction between foreign and local, the modern and the traditional that figures prominently in advertising copy.

The people who work in the Sri Lankan advertising industry are heirs to a class of colonial middlemen, the "brown Englishmen" found all across South Asia. I will use their interstitial position as a vehicle for thinking about how they link ordinary Sri Lankans to commodity exchange, their government, and the world beyond. The island's position in the larger scheme of things is suggested by the fact that this linkage works in only one direction. The Sri Lankan advertising business plays no part in representing exports—tea, rubber, coconut, and clothing—to the larger world. Its usual function is to represent local and imported commodities to the Sri Lankan people. Doing so puts advertising people in the position of ventriloquists—in order to speak to the people of Sri Lanka they have to speak for them. To repeat a point I made previously: advertising executives are not only middlemen to the national imagination, they are sources of it, producing new images, to name the categories most relevant here, of what it is to be a woman, a man, a parent, a responsible person, a Sri Lankan, and, naturally, a consumer.

However much advertising people claim to speak the local idiom or to understand conditions at the point of sale, their fundamental dilemma is selling things to a society where many people get by on very little. When I first lived in Sri Lanka, I spent an afternoon with my friend Razik in his *kade* (shop) in a town in Sabaragamuva province. A small boy ran in

and bought half of a bar of soap. Razik told me that sometimes people buy a quarter of a bar. Then as now, over half of the shelf space—itself a notion alien to stores built of rough-hewn wood and lighted by petromax lamps—in village shops was taken up with dried milk powder—Nestlé, Lakspray, and Anchor milk—and Unilever products, which are largely food items (soap and toothpaste are the leading exceptions). Sri Lankans spend some 60 percent of their income on food. For many people in one of the world's twenty poorest nations, the high proportion of income spent on food means that deciding how to spend one's money is typically a matter of splurging on a bar of Lux soap or a choice between buying the local milk powder or the foreign equivalent, which people think is more nutritious.

Marketing people trying to introduce consumers to toothpaste and shampoo put their products in small packets known as sachets. They know that the price of the ordinary-sized container is beyond the reach of many Sri Lankans. At the same time, some village families that would otherwise face these conditions have a daughter, son, wife, or husband working in the Middle East who sends home money in amounts sufficient to put up a new house or purchase a television. Other young women work in a growing number of free-trade zones, and, living with their parents, they often have discretionary income. Business people in Colombo move about in expensive cars and talk to one another on cellular telephones. When human circumstances range from subsistence to serious wealth, when some people in the neighborhood are suddenly doing very well and others are not, when new consumer items appear in shops that earlier offered far less dazzling fare, talk centers on who is getting what.

A second problem with characterizing advertising people as ethnographers comes from their being professionals trained in a Western practice. Advertising the world over is produced by a profession that has its own disciplinary practices and vocabulary. This is a language practitioners speak with one another and their clients, and they spend much more time interacting with each other than thinking about consumption or Sri Lankan life. In the late 1980s I heard an advertising executive address the Sri Lanka marketing institute on what advertisers had to keep in mind during a time of civil war and ethnic crisis. My assumption was that her remarks would reveal what she knew about how consumers were coping with years of terrorist bombings and growing estrangement between Sinhalas and Tamils. Here I thought I would hear an ethnographic account organized in terms of the language of a kindred profession.

She talked instead about maintaining brand identity, working cooperatively with clients, resisting the temptation to cut prices. All matters important to marketing people during an economic downturn—they are

just nothing that speaks to the troubles that confront Sri Lankan consumers themselves. Her audience thought her remarks were pertinent, and that is a point worth emphasizing. Advertising is a profession. Having an agreed-on set of assumptions, a disciplinary language, and everyday practices makes the advertising business a community as well as a profession. That community is worldwide and in many ways stronger than the ties that join the advertising profession to its public. But the extent to which advertising people can communicate with local society is an open question. When it succeeds, the advertising business becomes an interactive site that links people of all types—executives who are chauffeured about as they talk on cell phones and the little boy whose family sends him to the *kade* to buy half a bar of soap—to the world beyond.

Long-Distance Forces and Local Societies

The circulation of things around the globe itself is hardly new. Eric Wolf's account of the world in 1400 shows the complex interconnection of faraway places long before European trading companies appeared in Asia.[8] A millennium earlier there were Arab traders doing business in China. At a time when Europeans were counting wealth in terms of cattle, Arab traders could write a check on a bank in Baghdad and have it honored in Canton. With time the "subtle play of indigenous trajectories of desire and fear with global flows of people and things" grows in intensity and magnitude.[9] Nowadays a list of leading transnational forces includes electronic media, development projects, labor migration, and tourism. Advertising is a phenomenon centrally implicated in all of these other transnational forces, but I begin from the assumption that the new in this case emerges from something old: long-distance trade and the allure of the foreign.

As Marshall Sahlins puts it, the Western rush of the last two decades to sell things to the Chinese is today's installment "of a dream that has been playing in Europe for three centuries now—all those hundreds of millions of customers just waiting for British woolens, then cotton textiles, steel cutlery, guns, and ships, and latterly jeeps, perfume, and TV sets."[10] The long-distance character of the trade has not changed, yet the appeal of foreign things depends in altogether unprecedented ways on advertising. Until the recent collapse of Asian currencies, 40 percent of French luxury production in watches, liquor, and scent was sold in Asia. The premium prices attached to such goods makes advertising, marketing, and packaging possible. They also make those exercises of the imagination necessary.

When European societies began to enjoy high levels of consump-

tion in the eighteenth century, commodities flowed to Europe from many directions. And these commodities—not local ones, however expensive—were fundamental to the transformation of European societies; they were "conspicuous components" in the construction of a particular kind of society, a society of consumers.[11] It was the appeal of sugar, tea, coffee, porcelain, and Indian and Chinese textiles that led to the emergence of this new social order. Speaking of the growing English fondness for sugar after the sixteenth century, Sidney Mintz writes that a change in taste brought with it "profound alterations in people's images of themselves, their notions of the contrasting notions of tradition and change, the fabric of their daily social life."[12]

To this extent, the rise of a European consumer society depended on the presence of commodities that were foreign and carried irresistible symbolic loads. The growth of consumer societies in Asia involves similarly high stakes, but the imaginative forces working on consumption nowadays are many times more powerful. "Subtle play" has become heavy traffic. This time around, Europe and the United States (and Japan) supply the commodities, while newly prosperous Asians provide the discretionary income that drives trade. And now foreign commodities carry symbolic loads skillfully constructed and widely advertised.

The speed with which things circulate, the volume of foreign things in the hands of ordinary people, the variety of things that show up in odd places—all define a new world order. The conventional wisdom is that the source of cultural production is the West, and it is true that entertainment is the United States's second largest export. In the late 1980s, a Chinese student from Shanghai, Zhou Zou-Ren, won a trip to the Grand Ole Opry for his essay "What Country Music Means to Me."[13] I think I know what *native land* or *family* means to people who speak in those terms; I have no idea what country music could mean to a Chinese student, but it obviously means something. As commentators have said in a variety of ways, the West is everywhere.

But the transnational phenomenon is more interesting because it is more complicated. Japanese musicians play Cuban music so convincingly that a Japanese *salsa* band, *Orquesta de la Luz,* has acquired a following in New York, Puerto Rico, Panama, Venezuela, and Madrid. Americans now consume more *salsa*—to move from the musical to the culinary—than ketchup. Parisians go out to eat in some thirty Tex-Mex restaurants, although neither Texans nor Mexicans would recognize the cuisine. It is not so much that the West is everywhere; everywhere is everywhere.

Asia has become a large consumer of Western music, and sales of music are still growing despite the economic downturn of 1997. Western

performers—from Elton John to Michael Jackson—perform regularly before large crowds in Asian venues. But the Western things that appear in non-Western places are not necessarily what they seem—Asia has created its own transnational system of production and distribution for Western music. English is the language of pop music in Asia, and Asians want Western music to be sung by Westerners. But they disdain the "in-your-face" quality of some Western music in favor of romance and soft melodies. Some British and Danish pop singers—Alex E, Aqua, and Michael Learns to Rock, for example—produce music exclusively for the Asian market.[14] They perform in Asia, and their music companies promote them only there. This is Western music sung by Westerners not intended to be heard in the West.

Amidst the rising tide of everything being everywhere, Western music created by Asian taste recalls Marshall Sahlins's insistence on agency in the interaction of local societies and the world beyond. Societies shape their encounter with the larger world, at the level of both national governments and individual taste. As local trajectories of desire and fear meet new commodities, they oscillate between the adoption of Western ways (which happens when desire is realized or fear forestalled) or resistance (which follows desire rejected or fear enacted). What makes it harder to detect local agency is the frequent asymmetry between a powerful outside world and overmatched local societies, and economic and political advantage have their effects, to be sure. But we can surely do better than reduce the intercultural encounter to materiality on one side and an "unrelieved chronicle of cultural corruption" on the other, a kind of physics supplied by the West and a teleology that determines the course of local people.[15]

Sahlins's point is less a humanistic claim than an epistemological one. The force of the Western intrusion into non-Western places and the blandishments of foreign things—clothes, liquor, guns—is undeniable. But to leave matters there is to underestimate both sides of the encounter. Along with markets and commodities, capitalism brings with it a set of values—individualism and material gusto are two—as well as a set of material interests, and local societies enter the intercultural encounter with their own economic and political interests (as well as a distinctive way of life). What follows is a history of juncture in which change is balanced by continuity, and foreign forces by local ones. When Certeau argues that the future enters the present in the mode of alterities, he emphasizes the reciprocal strangeness that initiates the encounter between the local and the foreign.[16] But difference is a historical moment, soon gone.

As most accounts of nineteenth-century Fiji have it, the establishment of trade in sandalwood and European muskets led to warfare and