

## **Ceylon, The Likely Blueprint of Thomas More's Utopia**

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## Abstract

*Thomas More's Utopia published in 1516 was the first discourse on socialism in the modern era, based on a critique of emerging capitalism in England and the description of a well ordered and an egalitarian alternative society in an imaginary Island of Utopia. Utopia is an enigmatic treatise because of its futuristic vision, extremely witty literary style, combining fact and fiction, and numerous unanswered questions. Although written as a semi-fiction, mainly to avoid censorship, like in many other works of this genre, the connection between the description of the island and a travel narrative cannot be denied, and in fact admitted, although the island is not clearly identified, only leaving some clues.*

*This article argues, after examining the clues given and the circumstances under which it was conceived and written, that the likely 'blueprint' of Thomas More's Utopia was Ceylon, either the information directly obtained from a Portuguese traveller, or more likely from a traveller's monograph. This argument is substantiated based on, not only the carefully analysed similarities of the size, the capital city, the rivers, the most natural harbour (i.e. Trincomalee) and historical legend, but also the family institution, social customs, way of life and religious practices. The article also extrapolates, although not investigated in full for lack of space, that More's imagination must have been triggered by the fact that Ceylon at that time was pre-capitalist or 'Asiatic' in a Marxian sense of the word and not commercialized. Perhaps this was one reason for the imbalance of More's discourse, on the one hand socialist and on the other, totalitarian or Asiatic.*

**Key words:** Asiatic, Capitalism, Ceylon, Socialism, Utopia.

## Introduction

Thomas More's *Utopia*, first published in December 1516 in Louvain, Belgium, written in Latin and edited by Erasmus of Rotterdam and Peter Giles at Antwerp, has been a continuous interest to scholars who have been primarily concerned about the socialist thinking and its development. *Utopia* depicts a socialist or a communist (egalitarian) society through an imagined island called Utopia directly to denote 'no-place' (*ou topos* in Greek) as a pun, but actually to mean 'good-place' (*eu topos*) in essence (Schonpflug, 2008, p. 7). Since then the word 'Utopia' has come to stay in the English and other languages to mean an 'ideal society' or an 'ideal condition.' It has also created an adjective, 'utopian,' unfortunately to mean something impractical.

After the communist victory in Russia, Lenin suggested a monument to be dedicated to the names of those who promoted the liberation of humankind from oppression, and it was implemented in 1918 and listed Thomas More as the ninth from the top among the most influential thinkers. The academic importance of *Utopia* was highlighted towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Edward Arber (1869), Associate, King's College, London, in the following words.

*Utopia* is a worthy of multiformed study. Not only from its reflections of the character, principles, and merry wit of its author; from its proposed solutions of such social problems, as the scarcity or overplus of population, the preservation of famines, and the like: but also from its reforms of the conditions of the poor, especially the 'bondmen,' the then dying out 'villenage' of England. (p. 4)

After the first Latin publication in Louvain, More revised it before it was again published in Basel in November 1518. In the meanwhile, Thomas Lupset republished the first version in Paris in March 1518, before the revised edition, and subsequently another edition was published in Vienna in 1519. However, the Basel edition is considered the most authentic as it contains More's own revisions and two of his explanatory letters. All four were in Latin, *lingua franca* of the learned of that time. By a strange fate, no English translation or any publication however appeared during More's life time in England. The first English translation was by Ralph Robinson in 1551 and a revised edition in 1556. The 1556 translation/edition is the text with editorial updates by Henry Morley (1901) that many scholars use for their interpretations, thus the present article, released to the public domain in July 1993. As this article uses the electronic version thus referred to, no separate page numbers are given to the quotations directly from Thomas More's *Utopia*.

Today there are many university centres and scholars to study the life, writings, thinking and vision of Thomas More assessing their contemporary implications, and *The Centre for Thomas More Studies* at the University of Dallas, USA, is one such leading institute. One of the important studies of this Centre is by its Director, Gerard Wegemer (2001). Many other universities also have brought their own translations or republication of old

translations of More's *Utopia* for the benefit of students and researchers. The complete works of Thomas More by the Yale University (1997) is most important in this respect.

## **The Problematique**

*Utopia* is intensely an enigmatic book. It is in two parts, Book I and II. It is primarily a political discourse in the form of a semi-fiction. It followed the example of Plato's *Republic* to a great extent, with dialogues in Book I, and more importantly visualizing and describing an ideal society and a commonwealth in Book II, in supposedly the imagined island called Utopia. On the latter aspect, it differed from Plato and in it rests the creativity and novelty of More's *Utopia*. In Book I, the dialogues are between Thomas More, his friend in Antwerp, Peter Giles, and apparently the fictitious character Raphael Hythloday, meaning 'a speaker of nonsense' in Greek, and More's assistant, John Clement, listening, who in fact later became a Professor of Greek at Oxford. The mixing up of real and fictitious characters was an artistic devise and a novelty in More's work.

The Book II, however, is a socio-political discourse, pure and simple, describing the island of *Utopia*, indicating somewhere in the Indian Ocean. The description of the island is given by the Portuguese traveller, Hythloday. Most of the place and individual names in the described island are invented Greek names for pun. The full title of the book, rarely used these days, signify the two parts of the book, '*Concerning the Best Conditions of the Commonwealth*' in Book I, and '*the New Island of Utopia*' in Book II.

There are many, literary, philosophical and political or even historical questions arising out of the enigma of *Utopia*. After the first edition, probably in late 1517, Thomas More (1997) himself raised and 'answered' the main enigma as raised by some of the alleged critics of the book as follows in a rhetorical wit.

But as he [the critique] doubts whether Utopia is real or imaginary, I in turn demand his real opinion. I do not indeed deny that if I had determined to write about a commonwealth, and the idea of one had formed itself in my mind, I would not perhaps have thought it a sin to add fictitious details so that the truth, thus coated with honey, might be more palatable to my readers. (p. 18)

But he vehemently denied that it is the case in respect of *Utopia* and vouched that everything is real and true, most probably to mean quite the opposite. As many literary critics have commented and even admired, there is considerable artistic play in the presentation of More's political discourse, nevertheless profound and even path breaking. Out of the above and other enigmas, the most relevant questions to this exposition or article are: whether Thomas More actually received information from a third person or a third source, about a suitable island that he could use to explain his imagined and alternative egalitarian society? Whether that island could be identified from the descriptions given and/or based on other information? This article argues that both the

questions can be answered affirmatively, second more than the first, and the island undoubtedly was Ceylon in the early 16<sup>th</sup> Century. This does not mean that the 16<sup>th</sup> century Ceylon was 'socialist' or closer in egalitarian terms but the description of the island came closer to Ceylon in terms of the described size, the shape, its proximity to the (sub) continent, historical legend, its capital, rivers, harbours and even family and some of the social and religious practices.

### **A Preliminary Explanation**

Although *Utopia* was written as a fiction or a semi-fiction, many of the ideas were taken from the actual world not necessarily as they were but by visualizing critically its future possibilities within certain intellectual limitations. This is of course the nature of many fictions especially of the present genre where the author wanted to expound a particular social discourse. This view is shared by many reviewers including Susan Bruce (1999) and in fact some reviewers thought that information for the imaginary island of *Utopia* came from an island in the South Atlantic or Americas.

However, we have to first take the counter arguments seriously and question ourselves whether our endeavour in identifying the imagined Utopia with Ceylon is correct wholly or even in part and what are the benefits that we accrues by doing so. Benedict Anderson (1983), referring to the early modern Utopias, commented that there were efforts for people not only to locate a place for these Utopia's but also to draw maps. Yes, there are of course maps drawn even for More's Utopia and they are quite unlike the shape of Ceylon. Anderson then asked rhetorically "how unimaginable it would be to place Plato's *Republic* on any map, sham or real" (p.68).

However, the question of More's *Utopia* is not like Plato's *Republic*. *Utopia* was less philosophical compared to Plato's *Republic* but more political within that contemporary context with of course relevance even for today. Plato took years to conceptualize and write his *Republic*, but More completed the job within one year, and most importantly the whole work in and out is linked to the booming travel narratives of that period. As Susan Bruce (1999) said "The relations between the early modern utopian and the travel narratives are many, and apparently obvious." She further said,

The writers of such texts felt impelled to offer a plausible explanation for the fact that the imagining lands that described were unknown to the audiences to whom they described them, and to posit an unknown nation in the middle of the Indian Ocean or off the coast of the Americas. (p. xi)

What we know from our own history in Sri Lanka is the connection between Robert Knox's *Ceylon* and Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (Frank, 2011, pp. 1-10). Of course, More's *Utopia* was not like Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. But irrespective of the profound difference in substance, quality and literary expression, nevertheless More took an imagined island into consideration for his discourse and there is nothing wrong or unusual

in taking an available travel narrative for that purpose. Let us consider how that possibly came about.

There are no indications whatsoever that More was contemplating of writing *Utopia* or something similar prior to 1515. He however held immense capacity to do so within few months if the circumstances were ripe. By that time he was aged thirty seven. He had studied Greek and Latin under eminent teachers at Oxford for two years and then moved to Lincoln's Inn (London) to complete his professional qualifications in law. In 1515, More was still holding the position of the Undersheriff of London in addition to his flourishing legal practice. During this period he was working on his 'History of King Richard III' and the translation of a 'Biography' of the 15<sup>th</sup> century Italian philosopher 'Pico della Mirandola.' This is apart from numerous poems that he was writing both in Latin and English with a liberation ideology. Then came the inspiration as Serendipity.

*Utopia* was conceived in the summer of 1515. In May of that year, More left England for Flanders, as a member of a royal trade commission. The negotiations conducted by this commission and its Flemish counterpart at Burges were suspended by 21 July, but More did not return to England until 25 October. In the three months from late July to late October, he enjoyed a rare period of leisure; it was during this period that *Utopia* began to take shape. (Logan & Adams, 1995, p. xx)

The above is an authoritative source for dates and sequence of events. It is quite an unusual thing for a scholar to begin a major literary work, in a foreign land, suddenly after the suspension of his official duties, unless something comes in between. More went to Antwerp to meet Peter Giles on the intimation of Erasmus of Rotterdam, already a close friend of More. Antwerp was a major shipping centre and Giles was a classical scholar quite likeminded to Erasmus and More (as it eventually proved) apart from being the City Clerk of Antwerp, deeply involved in the shipping business and obviously with seamen and travellers. There is a great possibility that Giles had a travel report at hand.

What was completed during More's stay in Antwerp is not Book I, but Book II, the description of the island and of course the Utopian society proper. More wrote Book I, rather as an introduction to Utopia, after returning back to England, taking nearly a year. There is quite an imbalance between the two books, and Book II is quite sketchy at the beginning and then goes into some details as the chapters proceed, perhaps added after the first revision. Raphael Hythloday, the fictitious Portuguese traveller, who supposed to have described the island, is introduced in Book I later.

It has been largely assumed that Utopia is completely an imaginary island created by Thomas More. In that case, Hythloday is utterly a fable and any effort to see similarities between Utopia and an existing island is illusory or coincidental. I came to suspect this general assumption when I started to clearly see similarities between the island description in Book II and Ceylon, prompted by some clues given by More himself in Book I, intentionally or not. But there were other scholars who had suspected the possibility of a travel report, or an actual traveller, behind More's description and Duncan Derrett (1966)

is one who reinforced his view after scrutinizing the so-called Utopian alphabet. He was Professor of Oriental Law, University of London (1965-1982). He said “This writer has already expressed the opinion that a real traveller who had been in India was somewhere at the bottom of the Hythloday fable.” The reason for him to mention India is the similarity between many social practises described in *Utopia* to many South Asian countries, apart from the alphabet that he scrutinized.

### **The Clues Given**

In More’s letter to Peter Giles (which was quoted earlier) after revealing that there is a possibility that he would have added fictitious details ‘to coat the truth with honey’ he also says the following.

But in that case even if I had wished to abuse the ignorance of the unlearned, I should certainly not have omitted to insert indications by which scholars would easily have been able to see through my design. (More, 1997, p. 18)

It was not merely to address palpability or ‘honey’ that fictitious details were given, but to avoid censorship and/or displeasure from his own social milieu as he was advocating a strong critique of the existing society and the political system. It should be noted that *Utopia* was not published in England until 1551, almost sixteen years after More’s execution. He was beheaded in 1535. After all, the whole *Utopia* meant to be ‘utopian.’ It was also an artistic device quite imaginative. What was his design? The travelogue and the dialogue were his main designs with fictitious characters, intriguing place names and personal names.

‘Hythloday,’ a Portuguese by birth from a wealthy family, is supposed to have travelled with Americus Vesputius in his last three voyages not as a seaman but as a traveller and a philosopher. He however did not return with Vesputius in the last voyage to South America and instead ventured into the Pacific and then Asia with some others and travelled over many countries along the equator and “on both sides of it as the sun moves,” describing some of acquired the experiences. If of course this story is true and if they had travelled further north they could have come across two similar islands, Hainan or Taiwan, yet very much smaller than the island described in *Utopia*, near the Chinese mainland. Moreover, both islands were part of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). But Hythloday has travelled mainly along the equator and only New Castile, apparently Luzern in the Philippines is mentioned. Then is the possible clue from Thomas More.

Yet this disposition of mind had cost him dear, if God had not been very gracious to him; for after he, with five Castilians, had travelled over many countries, at last, by strange good-fortune, he got to Ceylon, and from thence to Calicut, where he very happily found some Portuguese ships, and, beyond all men’s expectations, returned to his native country. (Morley, 1901)

It is not the mere mentioning of Ceylon that warrants our speculation that it was More’s ‘dream island.’ When someone is lost in the high seas in the Indian Ocean, according to

More, you get to Ceylon by 'strange good fortune.' This is a clear indication that More knew about Ceylon and its strategic importance at least in sea travel. Let us see the recorded history at least briefly. The Portuguese arrived in Ceylon in November 1505 and two missions visited the king in Kotte. The main fleet sailed away, "leaving a few Portuguese behind in charge of a temporary Factory where they could collect the produce of the Island for export to Europe" and a Chapel (Pieris, 1920, p. 31). In September 1507, King Manuel of Portugal addressed a Letter to Pope Julius II on the discovery of Ceylon (De Silva, 2009, pp. 2-7).

### **The Island**

The Book II begins with a description of the island of Utopia. That description matches more or less with the island of Ceylon; taken into account the exact geography was quite unknown during that time for any traveller. It says, "The island of Utopia is in the middle 200 miles broad, and holds almost at the same breadth over a great part of it; but it grows narrower toward both ends. Its figure is not unlike a crescent: between its horns" (Morely, 1901). The length of the island is given more or less correctly but not the width. The maximum length of Sri Lanka is 268 miles today and the maximum length 139 miles. The two horns mentioned can be the Northern cone (Point Pedro) and the Southern cone (Point Dondra). It is rather imaginative to consider Ceylon like a crescent. The shape of Ceylon had been described differently by different people as an ear drop, a pearl, an egg and even a Westphalian Ham (Baldaeus, 1671, p. 667). It was Moore traders (of Arab descent) who described the shape of Ceylon as a crescent. More importantly, there is a harbour described, very close to Trincomalee. The following is the description in three paragraphs and it tallies with what is given by Walter Hamilton (1820, pp. 523-24). More also says that there are several harbours on the other side of the island.

In this bay there is no great current; the whole coast is, as it were, one continued harbor, which gives all that live in the island great convenience for mutual commerce; but the entry into the bay, occasioned by rocks on the one hand, and shallows on the other, is very dangerous.

In the middle of it there is one single rock which appears above water, and may therefore be easily avoided, and on the top of it there is a tower in which a garrison is kept; the other rocks lie under water, and are very dangerous.

The channel is known only to the natives, so that if any stranger should enter into the bay, without one of their pilots, he would run great danger of shipwreck; for even they themselves could not pass it safe, if some marks that are on the coast did not direct their way; and if these should be but a little shifted, any fleet that might come against them, how great soever it were, would be certainly lost. (Morely, 1901)

Amaurot is the name of the capital of Utopia and its geographical account is very much closer to Kotte, the capital of the kingdom of Kotte (1412-1597), as described follows.



It lies upon the side of a hill, or rather a rising ground: its figure is almost square, for from the one side of it, which shoots up almost to the top of the hill, it runs down in a descent for two miles to the river Anider; but it is a little broader the other way that runs along by the bank of that river. The Anider rises about eighty miles above Amaurot, in a small spring at first, but other brooks falling into it, of which two are more considerable than the rest. (Morely, 1901)

Of course there are some mismatching descriptions. The distance between the city and the sea is greater than the distance between Kotte and the seacoast. The discrepancy can be the result of 'how the Parangi went to Kotte.' It is important to note that it is not exactly a hill that More was talking about but "rather a rising ground" near the city; then the ground "descends for two miles to the river Anider" and most certainly the river Kelani. The traveller or the text that gave the description to More most probably had given or contained a sketch of the city and its location. About the river it says, it "rises about eighty miles above" the city and it is almost exactly the length of the Kelani river. The other descriptions are also matching perhaps common to many rivers in the world. Then comes an interesting depiction of something similar to the Diyawanna Oya and it goes like the following.

There is likewise another river that runs by it, which, though it is not great, yet it runs pleasantly, for it rises out of the same hill on which the town stands, and so runs down through it, and falls into the Anider. (Morely, 1901)

The description of Amaurot closely matches with what Paul E. Pieris (1920) gave about Jayawardhana Kotte, when Payo de Sousa visited the King in 1505 as follows; however, one saying the city was square and the other a triangular shape.

This royal city was built on a triangular tract of elevated land, the apex of which lay to the North. On its two sides it was flanked by the waters of the Diyawanna Oya and its tributary streams, which approached each other so closely at the base that the narrow neck joining the fort to the Pita Kotte or town was a bare fifty paces across. (Pieris, 1920, p. 25)

One could argue that if More at all took a description from what Raphael said about the East Islands, then Utopia could well be in the Philippines archipelago and not Ceylon, because he was reportedly there for a longer period. But there are some clear reasons to discount that assertion. First is the following: "But they report (and there remain good marks of it to make it credible) that this was no island at first, but a part of the continent." There is no continent near the Philippines islands, whether Ceylon was 'first' a part of the Indian (sub) continent or not. It is however believed that Ceylon was well connected to India by land until the 15<sup>th</sup> century or at least the separation was shallow. As the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Dutch traveller Baldaeus (1671) said "In ancient times it was without question was annexed to the Continent (p. 667).

## **The Legend**

Second, the story that Raphael apparently related is also mixed up with the Vijaya story. Vijaya is considered the founder of Lanka or Ceylon. It goes like the following. "Utopus that conquered it (whose name it still carries, for Abraxa was its first name) brought the rude and uncivilized inhabitants into such a good government, and to that measure of politeness, that they now far excel all the rest of mankind; having soon subdued them, he designed to separate them from the continent, and to bring the sea quite round them" (Morely, 1901). There are of course similar stories to Vijaya in many other countries. The legend of William the Conqueror who created modern England is one. Caboja that founded Cambodia is another.

A later socialist thinker, Karl Kautsky (1927), in fact one time Secretary to Karl Marx, expressed the view that the island Thomas More talked about in fact was England. He said, "The island of Utopia is, in fact, England. More designed to show how England would look and what shape her relations with abroad would assume, if she were communistically organized" (p.13). But England itself is not an island and More would not have selected England as his Utopia for the very reason that he wanted to bring lessons to England and other European countries from Utopia. It also should be mentioned that More also noted "many things that were amiss in those new-discovered countries." He didn't consider any country to be perfect including his imaginary Utopia.

Many of the other European commentators perhaps without much attention to details believed that the description of the island came from one in the Atlantic Ocean. The reason for this belief might be the existence of legendary 'Atlantis' since Greek times. This belief or speculation became reinforced after Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* in 1624. Another reason for this speculation was the mentioning of the 'new world' by Thomas More. While the 'new world' was generally considered as (south) Americas after Americus Vesputius' or Columbus' discoveries, there were many instances where authors referred to the newly discovered countries in many continents as the 'new world.' It is clear from Book I, that the countries that were focused on in *Utopia* were the Philippines, Ceylon, Kerala and Persia. There is no mentioning of the islands in the Atlantic. There is a clear indication that when it came to social practices, family and community life, and religion, More expressed very clear admiration for the 'Eastern' ways of life. In this sense, he must be considered one of the first 'Orientalists.' Perhaps he was correct and perhaps he was utopian. The following however are some evidence.

There are two aspects to *Utopia*. On the one hand, it is the first conceptualisation of socialism although the term 'socialism' was not used. In conceptualising socialism, perhaps what was dominant was More's own ideas and theories how the social system should be organized or reorganized. In this respect More was an inventor. On the other hand, it was an admiration of 'another system' which he believed existed, right or wrong, in newly discovered countries primarily in Asia. It is in this sense that he was an Orientalist. If not for this admiration, there was no need for him to bring Raphael into the picture or talk about newly discovered countries. He was basing himself on another person's discoveries. This is the second and more profound aspect.

## Social Aspects

This article does not focus much on the socialist aspects of More's thesis. It focuses on the argument that Ceylon was his imagery as an ideal country particularly in social practices combined with the information he received from Kerala, the Philippines and other Asian countries. When More explained the trades and manner of life, as retold by Raphael, this is what he reported. "Agriculture is that which is so universally understood among them that no person, either man or woman, is ignorant of it; they are instructed in it from their childhood, partly by what they learn at school and partly by practice" (Morley, 1901). Then there were the trades.

"Besides agriculture, which is so common to them all," he said "every man has some peculiar trade to which he applies himself, such as the manufacture of wool, or flax, masonry, smith's work, or carpenter's work; for there is no sort of trade that is not in great esteem among them" (Morely, 1901). It is possible when he talked about trades he wanted to mention trades that are known to the Europeans. Otherwise there were no trades related to 'wool or flax' in Ceylon. His main purpose was to introduce new ideas in terms of social practices. With an indication of a loose caste system, very much peculiar to Ceylon, it was said: "The same trade generally passes down from father to son, inclinations often following descent; but if any man's genius lays another way, he is by adoption translated into a family that deals in the trade to which he is inclined" (Morely, 1901). The flexibility of the caste system was one aspect in Ceylon influenced by Buddhism unlike in India.

The following is what is said about the family life, reminiscent of extended family institution both in Ceylon and Kerala. "Their families are made up of those that are nearly related to one another. Their women, when they grow up, are married out; but all the males, both children and grandchildren, live still in the same house, in great obedience to their common parents" (Morely, 1901). But to return to their manner of living in society, More reported that "the oldest man of every family, as has been already said, is its governor. Wives serve their husbands and children their parents, and always the younger serves the elder." Some of the practices came very closer to what appears in Buddha's Sigalovada Sutta (Rahula, 1959, pp. 119-125). At the same time those were the values of More himself.

The last chapter of Book II of Thomas More is on 'Religions of the Utopians.' This is the chapter very clearly shows that More not only expressed his views through his 'imagined island' and 'imagined people' of that island, but in fact reported what he actually heard, imprecisely though, about the newly discovered Asian societies particularly Ceylon irrespective of his personal views. More was a strong Roman Catholic of that time who was against or very much doubtful of Protestantism and not inclined to religious pluralism. But as a committed intellectual and a man of letters, he was grateful to report what he heard from the person he called Raphael Hythloday of course with his own interpretations. It is extremely possible that the information was sketchy and he opted to brush it up with his own imagination. But other than from Ceylon or other Asian countries, the description could not have emerged as it is recorded. Here he goes.

“There are several sorts of religions, not only in different parts of the island, but even in every town,” “Though there are many different forms of religion among them, yet all these, how various soever, agree in the main point, which is the worshipping of the Divine Essence.” He also said “there are no images for God in their temples,” perhaps referring to a Buddhist temple. He also refers to strong God worshipping, obviously referring to the Hindu or Islamic faith of that time. During this period, in Kerala and also in the Philippines, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam were in existence side by side without rancour or conflict. This is apart from Ceylon. But it is quite possible that he received information about Ceylon going back to the period of Parakramabahu VI (1415-1467) although his informant visited at a much later date by the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The reign of Parakramabahu was a period when peace and prosperity prevailed in Ceylon and the country was well known for literature, scholarship and art. This was apart from religious pluralism.

The most interesting is the description of the ‘common temples.’ As he said,

They have magnificent temples, that are not only nobly built, but extremely spacious; which is the more necessary, as they have so few of them; they are a little dark within, which proceeds not from any error in the architecture, but is done with design; for their priests think that too much light dissipates the thoughts, and that a more moderate degree of it both recollects the mind and raises devotion. (Morley, 1901)

Another reason to speculate that More got some information from Ceylon through Raphael, or any other, is some of the following. “All the people appear in the temples in white garments, but the priest’s vestments are parti-coloured.” This description appears akin to both Hindu and Buddhist practice, perhaps more to Hinduism.

“As soon as the priest appears in those ornaments, they all fall prostrate on the ground, with so much reverence and so deep a silence that such as look on cannot but be struck with it, as if it were the effect of the appearance of a deity.” ‘Falling prostrate on the ground’ is predominantly a South Asian custom. This custom is performed, according to More, not only before priests but also before husbands and parents. This is how it is said.

In the festival which concludes the period, before they go to the temple, both wives and children fall on their knees before their husbands or parents, and confess everything in which they have either erred or failed in their duty, and beg pardon for it. (Morely, 1901)

Perhaps More mixed up this custom with Catholic ‘confession.’ However, the main thrust of the practice is akin to what prevails in Sri Lanka even today or fast disappearing.

## **Conclusion**

This article investigated two major issues (1) whether Thomas More actually received information from a third person or a third source, about a suitable island that he could use to explain his imagined and alternative egalitarian society? And (2) whether that island

could reasonably be identified as Ceylon from the descriptions given and/or based on other information? The first question was answered centred on the evidence available on the conception of the idea to write *Utopia* (Book II) in Antwerp and the circumstances under which this was conducted. The second question was more substantive and answered arguing that the size of the island, its natural harbour, its closeness to the continent and the legend of *Utopus* come very close to Ceylon.

The most interesting perhaps was More's admiration of social practices and customs of the newfound island, common also to the Indian subcontinent, which apparently gave some inspiration for him to visualize a future socialist society. They include, as elaborated, the family system, the respect for parents and elders and most importantly, the religious tolerance and multi-religious practices. These are unfortunately the vanishing or already vanishing practices in Sri Lanka and other Asian countries. There are other indications or evidence left out from the discussion given the lack of space in this article.

This article, however, is only a part of a project to unravel some of the literary, historical, ideological and political dilemmas left by Thomas More in his *Utopia* (Fernando, 2012). It is on a parallel footing that Elton A. Hall (2006) has stated that "Utopia is an Island nation, vaguely reminiscent of Ceylon, constituting of fifty-four cities organized hierarchically in units" (p. 159) in one of his recent studies on Thomas More's *Utopia*.

While Hall has only observed a 'vague resemblance' between Utopia and Ceylon, perhaps without much knowledge about the latter, my argument has always been that More in fact used Ceylon as a blue print for his *Utopia*, nevertheless left the identity hidden for artistic (literary) or unknown reasons.

There are of course other ways of approaching the problematique of this research. One way is to see what particular social formations of Ceylon attracted More's attention or inspired his thinking to visualize a 'socialist' or a 'communist' society. More was strongly critical of the emerging capitalism and the prevailing private property system in England and in greater Europe. Obviously Ceylon at that time was different among some other Asian countries. It was pre-capitalist or Asiatic in the Marxist sense of the term, without major classes. There was greater community cohesion, or even despotism in society, witnessed and recorded by both Robert Knox and Philip Baldaeus who lived in Ceylon for many number years in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, even after a considerable dislocation of these social formations by the penetrating colonialism and commercialism. This was perhaps the roots of Thomas More's 'socialism' and 'despotism,' in addition to other sources, which also became the weaknesses of later socialist thinking and ideology. These are matters to be investigated further in the future.

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