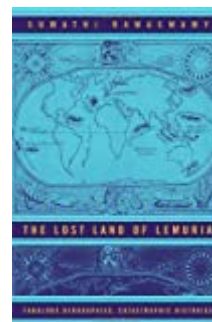


Sumathi Ramaswamy. *The Lost Land of Lemuria: Fabulous Geographies, Catastrophic Histories.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. xvii + 332 pp. ISBN 978-0-520-24032-2; ISBN 978-0-520-24440-5.



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Published on H-HistGeog (June, 2005)

Histories of a Lost Indian Ocean World

Academic books are seldom written to re-enchant our world. Nor are they often on a subject that modern geographers consider a figment of the imagination. Sumathi Ramaswamy's latest book certainly builds on her previous scholarly interests in colonial cartography and Tamil nationalism, but adds a wonderful new ingredient: the history of an ancient Indian Ocean world, now drowned. More precisely, her book is not strictly a history of that lost land, but a history of how it has been imagined and mapped by a remarkable range of people, from nineteenth-century paleo-scientists, to late-nineteenth-century occultists, to American "New Age" believers, to twentieth-century British colonial officials, and Tamil nationalists.

"Lemuria" was coined in 1864 by Philip Sclater, an English zoologist. Sclater was puzzled by the distribution of lemurs around the Indian Ocean, noting that while there are a few species in both Africa and India, there are many more in Madagascar. His explanation for their geographical spread and their concentration in Madagascar was that at some era in the past there must have been a land bridge between Africa and India, which he called

Lemuria. This bridge, he suggested, has since submerged. Although now universally debunked by Western-trained scientists, Sclater's theory about the lost land of Lemuria, originally published as a short essay in a relatively unknown scientific journal, was to find a new existence in the imagination and history of a long list of academics, occultists, colonial geologists, and nationalists.

One of the most interesting aspects of Ramaswamy's book is that she shows how writers have attached a variety of significances to the loss of Lemuria. She begins by explaining how, for many paleo-geographers, Lemuria was displaced by Eduard Suess's "Gondwanaland," but that for other scientists Lemuria continued to be used for different purposes. The biologist Ernst Haeckel, for instance, considered Lemuria the likely "cradle of the human race." Lemurians were the "missing link" between apes and humans, and even though there are (conveniently) no fossil remains, he described them as probably having long, slanting teeth, woolly hair and dark skin. In other words, Lemurians were similar to what he called the "highest man-like apes" (such as the Papuans).

Haeckel was not alone in finding a racial use for

Lemuria. Ramaswamy details how late-nineteenth-century occultists also found the idea of Lemuria intriguing. For Theosophists, the land became an integral part of their theories of human development, since it was the location of the third of seven “Root-Races.” These Lemurians had no mind yet, but were different from previous Root-Races in that they had a material body, could reproduce sexually and had learned to speak, walk, and see (with the help of a third eye).

While many Theosophists placed Lemuria in a lost Indian Ocean world, twentieth-century American New Age devotees thought of it as a Pacific, even California, Paradise. Some were so specific as to point to Mount Shasta as the last refuge of Lemurians, who were forced to flee a disappearing land. Ramaswamy references a 1932 story in the *Los Angeles Times* claiming that the Mount Shasta Lemurians are still alive. “The really incredible thing,” the article says, “is that these staunch descendants of that vanished race have succeeded in secluding themselves in the midst of our teeming State and that they have managed through some marvelous sorcery to keep highways, hot-dog establishments, filling stations and other ugly counterparts of our tourist system out of their sacred precincts.”

Ramaswamy’s history of European and American theories of Lemuria is well researched and elegantly written. But perhaps the most intriguing part of her book is her treatment of Tamil notions of catastrophic deluge,

or “katakol” (without diacritical marks). She explains how Tamil nationalists, educators and politicians seized on colonial scientific uses of Lemuria and transformed their ideas of an Indian Ocean land bridge into the original Tamil homeland. The thrust of this new argument was that Tamils were the first inhabitants of India, but that evidence of an ancient Tamil civilization has been lost in terrible floods that have left only a small part of what was once a great Tamil land, sometimes called “Kumarikkantam” or “Kumarinatu.” Maps of this lost land continue to appear in school textbooks, while a recent television documentary discussed the Tamil Lemuria in detail.

Ramaswamy has written an enchanting book, allowing us to see how, over a century, an idea about a lost land spread from Europe to America and South Asia. In the process, it changed its meaning, eventually becoming a source of ethnic and national pride. Indeed, the great strength and appeal of her book is that she encourages us to think against the grain of modern scientific thought in ways that open up new perspectives on identity. Because modern scientists may discredit Lemuria, it is easy to think of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Lemurian imaginings as failed and marginal ideas, best discarded and forgotten. Ramaswamy’s book, however, shows how these “off-modern” and “eccentric” ideas, to use her terms, have helped to shape paleo-geography, Theosophical and New Age thinking, and a Tamil sense of self and place.

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Citation: Ian Barrow. Review of Ramaswamy, Sumathi, *The Lost Land of Lemuria: Fabulous Geographies, Catastrophic Histories*. H-HistGeog, H-Net Reviews. June, 2005.

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