

Urban Oases and Oceanic Imaginaries

Two CWGC Cementeries in South Asia

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What is at stake in an ocean-centred imaginary? What are the possible interpretations of the island condition? This paper compares the physical attributes of two Commonwealth War Cemeteries in South Asia – the first in Colombo (Kolamba) Sri Lanka (then Ceylon), and the second in Kohima (Kewhira) Nagaland – that appear as urban oases in densely built-up localities. It explores their physical and territorial exceptionalism using the “island” analogy.

1.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission, “Colombo (Liveramentu) Cemetery,” accessed October 22, 2024, <https://www.cwgc.org/visit-us/find-cemeteries-memorials/cemetery-details/2000316/colombo-liveramentu-cemetery/>

2.

The Portuguese name for the church was *Nossa Senhora do Livramento*.

3.

Sujit Sivasundaram, *Islanded: Britain, Sri Lanka and the Bounds of an Indian Ocean Colony* (University of Chicago Press, 2013).

4.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission, “Kohima War Cemetery,” accessed October 22, 2024, <https://www.cwgc.org/visit-us/find-cemeteries-memorials/cemetery-details/2058100/kohima-war-cemetery/>.

5.

Robert Lyman and Peter Dennis, *Kohima 1944: The Battle That Saved India* (New York: Osprey, 2010).

The Liveramentu Cemetery, Jawatte, bears traces of Colombo’s colonial conflicts between Portuguese and Dutch colonisers as an underlay to British colonial presence during World War II.¹ Only the archaeological remains of a disused well associated with the original Portuguese shrine to Our Lady of Liveramentu (Deliverance) remains.² This building is believed to have fallen to ruins during Dutch rule in Ceylon, when the government proscribed Catholic churches and schools. The cemetery’s war graves, ensconced within the larger Jawatte public cemetery, reflect the “islanded” condition of territorialisation, signalling deaths at both land and sea.³

Conversely, the Kohima War Cemetery rises out of the conurbation that is Nagaland’s capital city, home of the Indigenous Angami, and site of the major and decisive battle of the Burma campaign.⁴ Unrelentingly urban and devoid of parklands, except for this central necropolis, it is nevertheless surrounded by the verdant forests of the Himalayan ranges. The cemetery emulates the surrounding topography, its cascading stone terraces stepping down the steep inclines that characterise the city, each with its manicured lawns and flowering shrubs. The cemetery’s architect, Colin St Clair Oakes, was undoubtedly inspired by the surrounding Naga villages built like fortifications on mountain tops. Unlike at Jawatte, the Kohima cemetery is the actual site of the mid-1944 battle on Garrison Hill, which, along with the Battle of Imphal, is cited as the “turning point” of the Japanese advance into India.⁵

Located in a low-lying area in a southern suburb of Colombo, the Liveramentu Cemetery is surrounded by multiple self-organised urban settlements that define and reinforce its unhomely if sublime intrusion into an affluent residential area. It contains rows of upright head stones, a cremation memorial and a

memorial to Italian prisoners of war. The memorial tablets aptly communicate the networked expanse of the British forces across the Indian Ocean, drawing from Cochin, Madras, Bombay, and Punjab, but also from East Africa – from Uganda, Somaliland, Tanganyika, Nyasaland, and Northern Rhodesia. They lie there alongside their British, Canadian, and Australian counterparts, as comrades in arms; made equal in death. Excepting the Indian forces, their cultural difference are obscured by their designation as United Kingdom forces, forcibly unified in this spatial throwback to an imperial era. The cemetery contains 610 graves; a further 165 on the cremation memorial and 345 on the memorial tablets; 139 in the air- or crash-landings of aircraft; 775 on land, many during attacks on coastal harbours, and as many as 206 at sea.

The Kohima War Cemetery is on high ground, forming a mound at the centre of a conurbation, distinctive as providing the only orthogonal grid in an otherwise organic urban morphology. In addition to the grid of headstones, the scene of the battle on the tennis court of the Deputy Commissioner's bungalow is preserved through delineation of the court markings in raised concrete lines on

the lawn featuring the Cross of Sacrifice. Its dual role as a public park dignifies the cemetery, attracting local and regional visitors to it, and its elevation offers it a commanding view of the town. There are 1,420 Commonwealth burials at the cemetery (1,275 identified), and 917 names recorded on the Kohima Cremation Memorial, mainly Hindus and Sikhs. Among them are two known Indigenous servicemen. With an over 80 percent Christian population, largely Baptists, the Nagas claim a far greater affinity for the cemetery's cultural program. Whereas Lankans seem ambivalent about or disinterested in the CWGC cemeteries on the island and the country's strategic role in World War II, the Battle of Kohima remains central to the imagination of the Nagas, a lingering connection with Britain maintained alongside resistance to Indian hegemony.