The troubled history of ethnic relations in Sri Lanka since independence has inevitably politicized the historiography of group identity formation. In reaction to nationalist claims of an unbroken line of Sinhala nationhood stretching back to the centuries BCE, international academia has usually been concerned to push forward the emergence of Sinhala ethnic consciousness, patriotic sentiment and religious pugnacity as late as possible—and usually into the British period. This has been assisted by both modernization theory and ‘post-Orientalism’. More recently, and on quite different grounds, Sheldon Pollock has argued that ethnicity was simply not a feature of political culture in the Indic world (or ‘Sanskrit cosmopolis’), and indeed nor were religious legitimation or even ‘ideology’ per se. This obviously raises some profound conceptual issues for anyone working in South or Southeast Asian history and interested in establishing points of comparison or contrast with the history of the West. While there are indeed some interesting structural differences in the nature of group identity formation, I shall suggest that Sri Lankan history shows evidence of ethnic consciousness, xenophobia, and quasi-Providentialism from the first millennium CE into the eighteenth century—in ways that are broadly comparable with Europe. If Sri Lanka, really is so different from the rest of the Indic world, I shall try to suggest why that may be the case.

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ABOUT THE SPEAKER
Alan Strathern has just completed a term as a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at Asia Research Institute, NUS. He works in early modern global history as an Associate Professor at the University of Oxford, and Tutorial Fellow in History at Brasenose College. Previously he held teaching and research positions in the University of Cambridge. Much of his work has concerned the history of Sri Lanka, including Kingship and Conversion in Sixteenth-Century Sri Lanka (CUP 2007) and various articles on issues such as ethnicity and origin myths. Many of these themes are explored in a book he is co-editing with Zoltán Biedermann, Sri Lanka at the Crossroads of History (UCL Press, 2017). However, for the last ten years he has been at work on a book of comparative global history, Unearthly Powers: Sacred Kingship and Religious Change in World History (CUP, forthcoming).

DATE
Wednesday, 08 March 2017
TIME
3.00pm to 4.30pm
VENUE
AS8 Conference Room, #06-46, Singapore 119260