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# ANTHROPOLOGY OF 'SINHALA BUDDHISM'

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The disciplinary identification of "Buddhism" in Sri Lanka as an anthropological object began in the late 1950s as part of the growing field of 'peasant' or village studies in South and Southeast Asian societies. In Sri Lanka, the work of Gananath Obeyesekere, Edmond Leach, Michael Ames and Nur Yalman is central to this inaugural moment. These anthropologists have identified the integration of the diverse beliefs and practices of Sinhala Buddhists within a religious worldview that is in accord with fundamental Theravada Buddhist teachings. Within this academic exercise Obeyesekere (1963, 1966, 1970) insisted on the term 'Sinhalese Buddhism' to convey the idea of full variety of religious practice, popular and esoteric, in Sri Lankan Buddhism. He argues that Sinhala Buddhism should be seen as 'a single religious tradition,' and not as composed of separate 'layers' to be analysed in isolation from each other.<sup>1</sup>

Most of these studies on the anthropology of Buddhism in Sri Lanka present an idealized, often perfectly integrated and highly Weberian or functionalist view. The continuity of this kind of theoretical approach in the anthropology of Buddhism in Sri Lanka can even be seen in recent studies. For example, it is addressed in the recent work of H.L. Seneviratne, *The Work of Kings: The New Buddhism in Sri Lanka* (1999), which is heavily grounded in the Weberian model of scholarship. Such questionable theoretical formulation on the 'anthropology of Sinhala Buddhism' is not only considered in Seneviratne's works but also in the works of other anthropologists who belong to a similar intellectual tradition. For example, works of Gananath Obeyesekere (1963, 1966, 1984, 1995), Stanley Tambiah (1976, 1992), Richard Gombrich (1971, 1988), Kitsiri Malalgoda (1976) and others are notable in this regard. The analyses they provide largely revolve around the popular binary categories such as 'village' and 'urban' or 'the great tradition', and 'the little tradition', 'worldly' and 'other worldly', 'orthodox' and 'syncretistic', 'tradition' and 'modern'.

However, recent works on religion, identity and politics by the later generation of anthropologists have criticized this kind of conventional, essentialized theoretical conceptualization in order to further our understanding of

the anthropology of Sri Lanka in general, and Buddhism in particular. For example, Jonathan Spencer has criticized the Weberian and functionalist position in his essay "Tradition and Transformation: Recent Writing on the Anthropology of Buddhism in Sri Lanka" (1990). As he puts it, "the idea of the traditional is no longer an innocent analytic category in Sri Lanka but has become a central weapon in arguments about what Buddhism is and what it should try to be in the contemporary world" (1990:130) and "almost all who engage in this argument, ... sooner or later seek to legitimate their version of what is essential by appeal to some idea of the 'traditional'" (ibid. 138). Spencer's main thrust is to disclose the unproblematic use of 'tradition' when understanding or formulating different forms of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. But the most influential criticism came from the work of David Scott (1994) who argues for a radical rethinking of historical change within the context of Sinhala Buddhism. He questions the ways in which anthropological and colonial production of knowledge about religion and ritual has objectified Buddhism in an unproblematic way (1994). Scott has proposed groundbreaking approaches to theorizing the relation between colonialism, anthropology and culture in Sri Lankan anthropology in particular, and anthropology in general. He has suggested that in order to understand 'Buddhism,' we need to drop our anthropological formulation that retained the colonial preoccupation with marking the distinction between an authentic Buddhism and Spirit religion, and instead to begin asking about the ways in which Buddhists in Sri Lanka make claims about what Buddhism is, the kinds of social and political projects into which the figures of the Buddhist tradition get mobilized, and to leave Buddhists to say what Buddhism is (1994: 242).<sup>2</sup> In short, his concern was to locate genealogies about what constitutes 'authentic Buddhism.' This radical approach to the anthropology of Buddhism in Sri Lanka has been further developed by the recent study of Ananda Abeysekara. In his award winning text *Colors of the Robe: Religion, Identity, and Difference* (2002), Abeysekara examines "the formations and deformations of contingent relations between 'religious' [Buddhist] identity and difference" (2002: 04) by turning to several native debates that challenged and shaped ideas about what can and cannot count as 'Buddhism'. In other words,

he explores how authoritative traditions become created, challenged, and established in varying conjunctures of Buddhist tradition in post-colonial Sri Lanka. Abeysekera brings his theoretical argument against the conventional anthropological formulation of ‘Buddhism,’ ‘politics,’ ‘violence’ and ‘monkhood’ by focusing his attention on the processes by which “authoritative understanding about Buddhism and monastic identity” is produced (2002:56). He focuses on “the ways in which diverse persons, practices, discourses, and institutions conjoin to foreground competing definitions about ‘Buddhism’ and its ‘others’” (ibid. 3) in order to demonstrate his theoretical framework that “what can and cannot count as Buddhism, culture, and difference, alter within specific native debates” (ibid.). He draws attention to several native debates pertaining to ‘what kinds of ‘Buddhist’ practice should be performed by whom’ (2002: 41), as well as “what persons and practices constitute Buddhist monkhood” (ibid. 43). How these are fashioned and debated transcend not only a monk’s own tactical rules and logic of formation but also disciplinary attempts at canonizing them as universal categories (ibid. 239). Such critical studies appeal to us to rethink the conventional anthropological formulation of Sri Lanka’s Buddhism.

This new approach to anthropology of Buddhism in Sri Lanka has heavily undermined the way in which ‘Buddhism’ has been constructed and analysed so far, particularly conceptualization of ‘radical’ changes that have taken place in Buddhism during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. According to this new approach, the ‘theoretical problem’ of the study of Sinhala Buddhism was developed in terms of “Buddhism and Society” rather than to investigate the relationship between ‘text and context.’ The former gives us, according to Scott, the illusion that Buddhism and society are two separate entities (1994: 178). Even though this anthropology of Buddhism avoids the pitfalls of earlier understanding of Sinhala religion, it also constructs an “authentic Buddhism” (ibid.).

The transformation of this ‘authentic Buddhism’ (e.g., Theravada Buddhism) has been the dominant subject matter in the anthropology of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. One recalls at once such notable book-length examples as Gombrich’s *Precept and Practice: Traditional Buddhism in the Rural Highlands of Ceylon* (1971) and *Theravada Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo* (1988).<sup>3</sup> In the latter, Gombrich develops social explanations for “three major points of change” that have occurred in Theravada’s history: the foundation of Buddha’s Sasana in India some 2,500 years ago; its migration from India to Sri

Lanka, where a reformulation of Buddhist identity happened; and in which a transformation took place in response and reaction to the influence of the Protestant Christian missionary contingent that accompanied the British colonization of Sri Lanka. Gombrich argues that ‘pre-colonial Buddhism’ was marked by fluid boundaries—religious tolerance that was mixed with indigenous strands of religion, particularly Tamil Saivite and Vāddā’s religion. ‘Colonial Buddhism,’ on the other hand, was mixed with the ‘colonial religion’ of political authority that was impervious to change at the popular level. Such intolerance, by Gombrich’s definition, cannot be Buddhist, so it is attributed to Protestant Christianity and its evangelical spread, which profoundly affected the nature of the Buddhist revival. Revivalist Buddhism, for Gombrich, began to assert religious boundaries and religious purity and thereby created an intolerant Buddhism.

The effect of this gap and the most recent ‘transformation’ of religion of Sinhala people are further identified in *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka* which is based on a collaborative research project begun in the 1970s by Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere. In this provocative detailed text, they identify the stages of how Buddhism has been “transformed” in Sri Lanka. They differentiate between three forms of Sinhala Buddhist religion: traditional Buddhism – the Theravada of the Buddha, the sangha, and the Pali Canon, which implies that some kind of authentic Buddhism has existed; “spirit religion”; and “Protestant Buddhism,” and they show how the spirit religion and Protestant Buddhism have interacted and mixed recently in complex ways and such new development is labelled as “Post Protestant Buddhism.”

“Protestant Buddhism,” a term previously used by Obeyesekere (1972), started in the late nineteenth century under the influence of Anagarika Dharmapala. It was at once a protest against Christian cultural encroachment that incorporated its style and content from Protestantism. It was a style of Buddhism that encouraged a new, this-worldly asceticism for the laity and a return to the text-based ‘authentic’ form of Buddhism.<sup>4</sup> Protestant Buddhism appeals to the more privileged urban middle class and reflects the cultural values of a bourgeois Protestantism. It also blurs the sharp dichotomy between the hierarchically dominant monks and the subordinate laity and encourages the greater capacity of the individual to seek his or her own salvation without the need of intermediaries and traditional authorities. The Protestant Buddhists have denounced the popular religion of their fellow Sinhala Buddhists as being corrupted and ‘non-

Buddhist,' one that is, as Gombrich and Obeyesekere say, labelled as "Spirit religion."

Spirit religion, which is defined at one point as the non-Buddhist part of the religion of Sinhala Buddhists, is nothing new. Deities, such as Vishnu, Natha, Saman and Kataragama and the goddess Pattini, planetary deities (*grahayo*), demons (*yakku*), and the manipulation of their powers have long been an integral part of Sinhala Buddhism. It deals not with Buddhist soteriology, but rather with mundane aims and worldly affairs. The recent transformation in the Spirit religion is called by them "Post Protestant Buddhism"—a different religious style which combines the ecstatic devotionism of Hindu *bhakti*, and the propitiation of the formerly out-worldly Buddha for in-worldly benefits particularly through the Bodhi *pūjā* ritual. This new development in Sinhala Buddhist religiosity has been identified in broad psychological terms and they attribute these major changes to the failure of the economy to meet the aspirations of the people, a political system which encourages unrealistic aspirations, and mass universal education, which, in turn, increases social aspirations. One way of relieving psychological tensions that arise from these changes, for Gombrich and Obeyesekere, is to rely on new forms of religiosity (de Silva 2000:5).

Following Gombrich and Obeyesekere's formulation, I am reluctant to distinguish contemporary religious practices by Sinhala Buddhists as belonging exclusively to either 'Protestant Buddhism' or 'post-Protestant Buddhism,' or 'village Buddhism' or 'urban Buddhism'. Sinhala Buddhist practices have a long history. For this reason I am inclined to regard such practices as 'popular religion,' which also expresses the sentiments of Buddhist revitalization. I am not seeking to identify a unitary whole, but I do wish to avoid the style of dichotomous reasoning that I regard to be a critical feature of early theoretical formulations in anthropology of Sinhala Buddhism.

Rather than engage in discussion regarding the pedigree of certain aspects of contemporary Sinhala Buddhism and thereby participate in specific Sinhala Buddhist discourses concerning what is 'authentic Buddhism' and what is not, I am interested in considering what Buddhism is, the kinds of social and political projects into which the figures of the Buddhist tradition get mobilized, and to leave Buddhists to say what it is Buddhism is. This is the project that has been suggested by recent scholars on anthropology of Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

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## End Notes

1 David Scott calls attention to the importance of Obeyesekere's seminal essay "The Great Tradition and the Little: the Perspective of Sinhalese Buddhism," (1963), which reconceptualized the Great Tradition and Little Tradition distinction in a manner that emphasized the integration of Sinhalese Buddhist belief and practice, in contrast to earlier work that stressed a distinction between "Buddhism" and " Sinhala" in Sinhala religion (See Scott 1994: 171-90).

2 Jonathan Spencer has criticized this claim of Scott (see *American Ethnologist* 1996: 192). But Scott's critique, like Philip Almond (1988) and Charles Hallisey (1995), also free of late twentieth-century American constructions and representations of Buddhism. Hallisey demonstrates some of the ways in which modern Asian patterns of discourse have marked European representations of Buddhism.

3 There are many other important works of K. Sri Vidyodaya. Buddhism in *Sulawesi Society: 750-1900 - A Study of Religious Revival and Change*, 1976.

4 Spencer argues that the appeal to the textual tradition was not simply imported as part of the culture of colonialism, but always has been an integral part of Theravada Buddhism (1990: 130-3).

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