

GLOBALIZATION AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF PLANETARY RITUALS IN SOUTHERN SRI LANKA

Sasanka Perera

GLOBALIZATION AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF PLANETARY RITUALS IN SOUTHERN SRI LANKA by D.A. Premakumara de Silva. Colombo: ICES, 2000. Pgs. 122. Review by Sasanka Perera, Department of Sociology, University of Colombo.

When a book on ritual transformation or any other analysis located in the general areas of social anthropology or sociology enters the Sri Lankan academic marketplace, and when it is produced by a local scholar it needs serious scrutiny. Unfortunately, the reasons for such scrutiny also says much about the intellectual contexts in which local scholars have to work today. So de Silva's book emerges at a time typified by mediocre scholarship, where many scholars in the local context have ceased to become scholars but report writers and many others seem to produce ethnography that seems more like unsuccessful fiction. In this context, it is very easy to succumb to the prevailing conditions of relative mediocrity. However, even a general reading of the book would indicate that de Silva has cleared these hurdles. In general, the book deserves serious comment for a number of reasons. One, it is well researched and well written, including the logic of presentation. Two, it deals with an area of ritual that is under-researched in the anthropology of Sri Lanka. Three, it locates the ethnographic findings within a contemporary theoretical discourse and comes up with a set of conclusions that deviates somewhat from conventional anthropology on Sri Lanka.

De Silva's most interesting treatment of the subject he has chosen to write about, is contained in the fifth chapter of the book titled *Bali Ritual: Disappearance or Transformation*. But prior to that, in four informative chapters he discusses the conceptual framework of globalization within which he wants to locate his analysis as well as a good descriptive summary of the correlation between Buddhism, astrology and planetary rituals, information on the ritual specialists of the Bentota tradition which is the focus of his field work and details of the *bali* ritual, inclusive of its many variations. In these four chapters he constructs the foundation for his analysis, and this is done on the basis of both extensive field information as well as comparative literature on ritual in Sri Lanka as well as the better known recent tracts on globalization.

De Silva's basic premise is that *bali*, contrary to popular and conventional anthropological wisdom is not disappearing but rather, undergoing a process of transformation in keeping with the

changing socio-political conditions of the times. The rationale for the conventional argument of course is that due to contemporary socio-political changes in the rural sector in particular but the country in general, the once village based communally and collectively organized healing rituals are undergoing a process of decline or disappearance. While part of this argument is based on obvious changes in the ritual practices of the country undergoing rapid changes, it is also based on a nostalgic yearning for the past.

However, in comparison, de Silva points out quite convincingly that *bali*, "are shifting away from the public arena to a much narrower focus on the family or the individual (88). In this process of personalization of *bali*, its traditional public performance aspects have been removed. So in the new versions, the drumming, dancing and comic episodes have been removed so that they can be performed in individuals homes without community participation and without informing the community in order to protect individual privacy. The personalization of the ritual from its more elaborate community performances have also brought down the cost of the ritual so that an individual without access to community resources can commission them while the time consumed for the ritual has also been dramatically reduced. Clearly, all of these changes are catering to the lifestyles of contemporary individuals, including those living in urban centers.

The second transformation of *bali* that de Silva discusses is its movement into a different kind of public space from the smaller community space of the conventional village. Here, regional and national politicians as well as cultural organizations organize *bali* and similar rituals as large public performances in public spaces such as school halls and playgrounds on the argument that these rituals have to be protected from the threat of disappearance because they are part of the cultural heritage of the Sinhalese. The threat in this context is generally seen as forces of globalization. In this context, such public performances, which are often televised, become part of the Sinhala nationalist discourse on culture as well as the past. In this scheme of things undertaken with political patronage, some aspects of the traditional rituals are further removed despite the rhetoric on the need to protect these skills and knowledge. So in these large public performances, the comic and often 'crude' entertainment episodes are removed, making them politically correct performances where the middle-class conscience of the sponsors would not be bruised.

De Silva also observes that in the transformation of *bali* from the community-based healing rituals to public rituals, the meanings of the rituals also tend to change. He refers to one large public performance which was organized among other things, to bless the armed forces and the nation, which can only be understood in the context of contemporary politics. In this specific context, de Silva argues that the purpose of *bali* has changed from the need to heal a particular patient to the need to heal the whole country (93).

Finally, I have two concerns about the book. One deals with what I believe is a bit of disconnect between the theoretical and conceptual discussion on globalization and the final analysis. For instance, de Silva presents a substantial assessment of the recent arguments and positions on globalization in his introductory chapter. In the context of this discussion, his conclusion is that despite the forces of globalization *bali* is not disappearing, but rather changing its form and continuing to adapt. One could equally well argue that the changes, mutations and transformations taking place in *bali* has nothing to do with the demands or impact of globalization, but are the results of socio-political changes specific to Sri Lanka. However, as we know, global influences will never be completely removed from these local influences.

The other concern I have has to do with the fundamental difference between a dissertation and a book. A dissertation is merely a tool for a clearly defined end, to obtain an academic degree. When work undertaken for such an end is transformed into a book, like the transformation of *bali* according to new conditions, it needs to change taking into account the new context. It seems to me that this has not generally happened in this publication. For instance, de Silva's last chapter *Summary and Conclusions* serves the purposes of a dissertation but not that of an academic publication. The conclusions were already drawn in the fifth chapter, and therefore the final chapter is quite redundant. On the other hand, the book could have benefited quite substantially if de Silva

investigated some other related issues: given the popularity of *bali* and its sustainability through transformation and adaptation, why is it that *bali* images or shrines dedicated to planetary deities have not mushroomed around the country as has been the case with shrines dedicated to other popular deities since the late 1970? It seems to me that the book could have also benefited if the reasons for and the dynamics of the politically correct versions of *bali* currently performed with political sponsorship were investigated more rigorously. That would have shed much light on the moral positions of the middle-class urban elites whose collective tastes and values today have serious impact not only on ritual and religious transformation, but also on popular culture and politics as well.

On the other hand, the richness of de Silva's ethnographic information and the discussion on globalization could have been substantially strengthened if more analytical rigor and theoretical sophistication was employed in interrogating both the globalization discourse itself and the associations with globalization and the transformations in *bali*.

Let me conclude by referring again to the issues with which I began. That is, this book emerges in a context where local anthropological knowledge production is in serious crisis. In that specific context, de Silva's contribution has to be seriously taken note of. Not only does he bring into research focus an area of study that is under-researched, he also points to the realm of what is possible. This is the work of a scholar who was completely trained locally despite all the lapses and weaknesses in that system. Yet, if he could manage to produce something of this nature in English, perhaps it is an indication that the hopes for the future in terms of local knowledge production in anthropology and sociology are not yet completely lost. In this context, research of this nature and their publication and dissemination needs to be encouraged so that through debate and dissemination, our dying scholarship in the social sciences may be revived.

To commemorate the 100th birth anniversary of Philip Gunawardena, the SSA publishes

**Philip Gunawardena:
The Making of a Revolutionary**

by
Charles Wesley Ervin

Price 150/-

limited edition

Suriya Bookshop