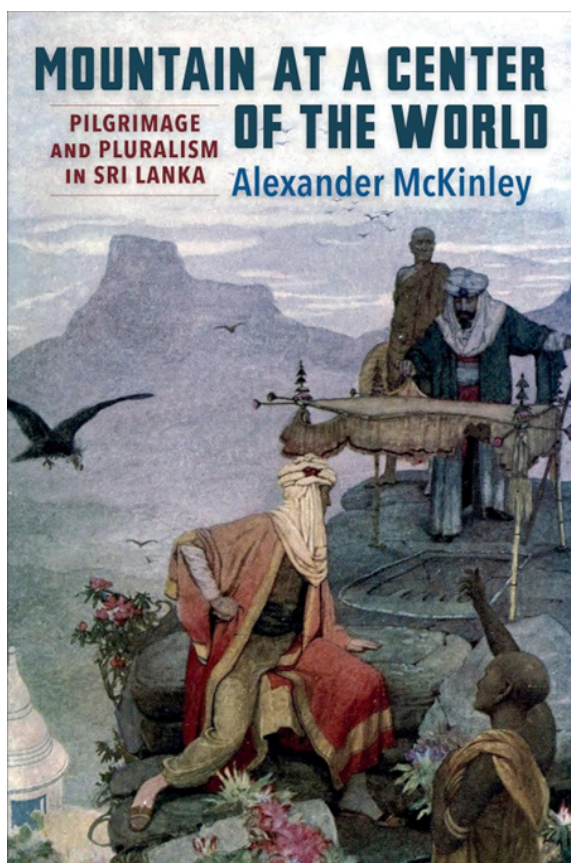


Mountain at a Center of the World: Pilgrimage and Pluralism in Sri Lanka. Alexander McKinley. Columbia University Press, 2024.

Anushka Kahandagamage



Between the lines of this book, the Siripāda mountain emerges not merely as a place, but as a living, breathing entity—an ancient being which has interacted with humans, animals and deep time. It transcends the corporeal into the world of symbol and spirit, older than time itself, still

but mysteriously full of life. Siripāda can be found in tales passed down through generations and countries, where memory and imagination intertwine, making it difficult to separate. It resides in a huge, always shifting discursive vortex—a juxtaposition of the lives of humans and animals, of myth and history, of devotion and poetry. The mountain is timeless and eternal.

Apart from the introduction, the book consists of three parts. The first, 'A Mountain and its People', includes two chapters: 'Rock, Water and Montane Agency' and 'The Workaday Mountain'. In the first chapter, the mountain takes centre stage, and McKinley rescues the mountain from the anthropocene perspective, placing it within a multiverse and proposing it as an example of planetary pluralism. Drawing from geological knowledge, which is unfamiliar to social anthropologists, the author explores the mountain's formation over deep time. Since the mountain lacks an origin myth, the author expertly incorporates precise geological information into mystical worlds, such as Buddhist deep time. The concept of Buddhist deep time reminded me of Obeyesekere's outstanding work, *Awakened Ones* (2012), which analyses time and space in visionary experience, using the example of the night when Siddhartha gained *nibbana*. In this context, the mountain appears in thousands of memories with many stories: observed by sailors, emerging from the heart of the oceans, giving rise to rivers, found in rain, rubies, and revered by animals climbing it in homage to the Buddha's footprint. The author supports this argument by incorporating poetry from various periods, accounts from visitors, and occasional images from diverse sources. Ultimately, the author celebrates the mountain's multiple forms of existence.

The author explores the political dynamics around the mountain top in the second chapter, 'The Workaday Mountain', looking at how different social and political players have attempted to influence the site's infrastructure and architecture over time. Three historical periods are covered by McKinley's discussion of them: pre-colonial, colonial, and recent. The chapter examines how their many endeavours—from building actual structures to adorning them symbolically—were motivated by the desire to acquire merit, increase their level of political or personal popularity, and get more authority. The author examines how militarisation affected mountain politics in the recent past and talks about how "sponsors" or market pressures, helped climbers become more popular and achieve virtue in the Buddhist system, by examining these players' intentions and behaviours. By reflecting on the recent past, the author shows how the prevalent militarisation in the island has influenced politics on the mountain. Further, in connection with the discourse on militarisation, the author also discusses how sponsorships, offerings, and related market forces play a vital role in the discourse of merit-making and in gaining popularity among climbers. By analysing the motivations and actions of these actors, the author offers insights into the intersection of politics, culture, and public perceptions of the peak throughout history.

The second part of the book, 'A Mountain of Myth', consists of two chapters that discuss how Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist narratives regarding the mountain overlap and intertwine. The first of them (the third chapter of the book), 'Adam's Peak and Buddhist Visions on Mecca', examines how the mountain appears in records of Muslim historians, sailors, and other writers. The author also looks at how Mecca is represented in Sinhala poetry from that time, portraying it as a place where the Buddha is believed to have walked. Instead of merely suggesting that Buddhists are claiming ownership of Mecca, the author investigates the use of Pāli and Sanskrit words and how their meanings shift in different contexts. For example, the term *yonakapura* can refer both to the idea of a Muslim city and to someone from the West. The author explores how the development of ethnic identities during the British period impacted claims to the peak, including in the 1915 riots. Before 1915, some Muslims placed the peak in the Adamic deep time. Reflecting on more recent events, the author reveals how anti-Muslim sentiments and Sinhala-Buddhist hegemony have contributed to making the peak a Sinhala-Buddhist site, excluding other religious associations. Interestingly, the stories that once united the communities have now been reinterpreted to exclude non-Buddhists from the peak.

In the fourth chapter, 'Admitting and Forbidding Siva at the Peak', the author examines how the peak appears in Tamil mythologies or, in some cases, how it is not explicitly mentioned but still holds deep significance. McKinley explores how the Sinhala-Buddhist hegemonic narrative, solidified through written history, has diminished Hindu Shaivite claims to the mountain. By bringing together various stories, poems, and other sources from both Sinhala and Tamil traditions—whether written, told, or believed—the author effectively situates the peak at the intersection of these different narratives.

In Part III of the book, 'Being Like a Mountain', the fifth chapter, 'Pilgrimage Ethics from Pluralism', explores how Buddhist hegemony dominates preservation efforts on the mountain, particularly in relation to environmental conservation. Even government authorities have put up signboards reflecting bias in favour of Buddhism. The author argues that presumed pluralism is non-existent and suggests an alternative concept of planetary pluralism. In the first section of the chapter, the author discusses local histories of pilgrimage ethics tied to environmental history. In the second, he examines how religious language is used to navigate human impacts on the environment. In the third and final section, pilgrimage ethics are explored through the lens of the peak's planetary pluralism.

With the moving title 'Deep Stakes', the book's conclusion offers a contemplative synthesis of the various viewpoints the author has skilfully interwoven throughout. He challenges the reader in this concluding section to venture beyond the confines of linear history and into the immensity of deep time, an almost unimaginable geological scale that reorients our perception of the planet and our position within it. According to this perspective, mountains are dynamic actors, ancient sentinels that have been sculpted by and influencing the globe throughout aeons, rather than being static backgrounds for human narrative.

The author considers how people have looked to nature, particularly mountains, for myth, meaning, and spiritual stability across history and across cultural boundaries. With stories that appeal to our deepest needs, fears, and longings, these majestic shapes take on a sacred, legendary, and sentient quality. He shows how our relationships with landscapes are not just physical but also deeply emotional and imaginative by delving into these mythopoetic elements.

As I became absorbed in the pages of the book, my own existence felt lighter, less significant, while the mountain's geographical presence—and the weight of

the tales it carried—grew heavier and more immense. Though I felt insignificant, I also experienced an unexpected closeness to the mountain. In a brief yet powerful moment, it was as if my soul stretched into the deep time of the mountain's existence—into its soil and unbreakable silence. I empathised with the mountain, and it began to inhabit me. For a moment, the mountain and I became one.

The book deconstructs the single, dominant centre of meaning and replaces it with a multitude of centres. In doing so, the author challenges the neoliberal concept of the atomised consumer-citizen, replacing it with an entangled existence within a web woven from human, animal, spiritual, and geological life. This is not just a pluralism of religions or communities, rather a planetary pluralism that includes stones, stories, memories, rivers, butterflies, monuments, and myths. By exploring, tracing, and retelling the ways people across time and space have crafted myths and narratives tied to nature—particularly the peak—*Mountain at a Center of the World* takes the reader into a world where their perspective will be profoundly transformed.

The book destabilises the prevalent anthropocentric viewpoint by presenting the human-centric gaze as one of many—including the mountain's gaze. This viewpoint disturbs and pulls us away from the notion that humans are the centre point and independent observers of the world, which invites the reader to re-examine and re-assess their position in the world. The viewpoint humbles the human, encouraging them to rethink their position as transient beings among many others who participate, interact, and co-create the meaning of the mountain peak. This perspective strongly resonated with a book I read a few years ago, *Living Earth Community: Multiple Ways of Being and Knowing*. That 2020 edited volume by Sam Mickey, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim, similarly challenges the anthropocentric framework by drawing on diverse ways of knowing—particularly indigenous, ecological, and relational worldviews—that resist the separation of humans from the more-than-human world. Both works advocate for a worldview grounded in interconnection and reciprocity, inviting us to move beyond human-centred narratives and to engage more deeply with the living Earth as a community of meaning-making beings.

McKinley concludes the book with a beautiful anecdote about butterflies. In Sinhala, one of the ways of referring to the mountain is *samanāḷa kanda*, the “mountain of butterflies”. According to a local-myth, the butterflies too are pilgrims, and they visit to venerate the mountain. They travel the same perilous

path as human pilgrims and, once at the summit, die in contentment, having finished their journey. This moving image effectively conveys the idea that pilgrimages are not limited to humans. Instead, the mountain pilgrimage evolves into a shared, multispecies ritual in which human and non-human boundaries melt, and a more expansive ecology of devotion is envisioned.

The book contributes significantly to the evolving scholarship on multi-religiosity in Sri Lanka, a subject previously examined by scholars such as Kalinga Tudor Silva, Premakumara de Silva, and Mark Whitaker. While these earlier studies primarily approached multi-religiosity from a socio-anthropological perspective, exploring rituals, overlaps and synchronisation through a human-centric perspective, the book under discussion problematises the anthropocentric view that has dominated the social sciences scholarship for decades. Instead, the book locates the mountain as a central actor within a more than human, broader web of power and agency. The author provides a fresh ontological and ecological approach by reframing the mountain as a player in producing religious experiences rather than a passive backdrop for religious activities. This approach breaks down many of the conceptual barriers established by previous scholarship, providing a new and compelling contribution to debates about religion, place, and agency in Sri Lanka.

The book stands out for its originality and its graceful movement between ecology, philosophy, mythology and anthropology. The book is beautifully written, poetic, and a delightful read, but it also stands out as an intellectually stimulating rich ethnography. The scientific sections, such as those explaining the geological formation of the mountain and the regional gem deposits, add depth and context, though at times they disrupt the natural flow of ethnographic narrative. However, the story of the soil is significant, since the rationale of the book is based upon distancing from the anthropocentric view and allowing the silenced nature to speak.

The author examines the idea of planetary pluralism within a comprehensive philosophical and ecological framework, seeing people as co-inhabitants of nature rather than as essential or superior. McKinley portrays the mountain as a living being that existed before humans and will continue to exist for a very long time, rather than only as a picturesque setting or symbolic representation. When viewed in this light, the mountain bears testimony to human history and serves as a reminder of the temporal and geographical dimensions that transcend human concerns and lifespans.

The book establishes the idea that there are multiple ways of being in the world, each with its own value. Although this viewpoint examines the benefits of diversity, whether it be cultural, ecological, or religious, the book also critically examines the notion that several religious groups may coexist peacefully and organically at the highest level. The author questions the widely held belief that different ethnic and religious groups live side by side in harmony atop the mountain. Rather, the

book reveals a multitude of relationships, engagements, conflicts, and tensions that occur within communities, as well as between communities and ecosystems.

Anushka Kahandagamage (PhD., University of Otago) has researched new Buddhist trends in post-war Sri Lanka. She is a postdoctoral fellow at the Harvard Divinity School 2025-2026.

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