

The Impact of Colonialism on Sinhalese Buddhist Women's Religious Practice

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Four hundred years of colonialism has had tremendous impact on the lives of Sri Lankan women. The economic and social implications of colonial influence on women have been the focus of a number of recent studies.¹ These studies, however, have paid little attention to the impact of colonialism on women's religious practices. Likewise there have been studies on Buddhism in Sri Lanka during the colonial and post-colonial periods but these tend to generalize all Buddhist religious practice without regard to gender.² I find this lack of secondary literature on women's religious practice curious because it runs counter to the images of women and religion found in much of 20th century Sinhalese literature. In literature women are often depicted as the back-bone of religious practice both through their support of the system and their role in training their children.

The following study will address the impact of colonialism on Buddhist women's religious practice in Sri Lanka. This practice will be traced chronologically from the pre-colonial period of the 14th and 15th centuries through the pre-Independence 1940's. The primary

¹See for example Carla Risseuw, The Fish Don't Talk About the Water: Gender Transformation Power and Resistance Among Women in Sri Lanka (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988), Jean Grossholtz, Forging Capitalist Patriarchy: the Economic and Social Transformation of Feudal Sri Lanka and Its Impact on Women, Duke Press Policy Studies (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1984).

²The major exception to this is Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere's Buddhism Transformed (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988) which mainly addressed the post-colonial period.

source material available for reconstructing women's religious history will be discussed with its limitations. Although the emphasis of the paper will be on the historical and social evidence, it will also consider how this evidence corresponds with the depiction of women and religion in some 20th century Sri Lankan literature. As we shall see, the religious practice of women in the coastal areas where colonial pressure was greatest differed from the experience of Women in Kandy. It will also be shown how in the late 19th and early 20th centuries Buddhists themselves began to actively incorporate Western ideas into their religious structure.

The Pre-colonial period

The evidence for Buddhist women's religious practice in pre-Colonial (14th and 15th centuries) Sri Lanka has been briefly discussed in an article by Sirima Kiribamune.³ There is relatively plentiful information from texts, especially the Mahavamsa and the Cūlavamsa and from inscriptions for the period for the period from the third century BCE through the 12th century CE, but following that the evidence becomes increasingly sparse with the 14th and 15th centuries apparently being among the least well documented.

It is known that the official order of women monks, *the bhikkhunis*, had disappeared by the 10th century.⁴ Women, however, had been employed in the men's monasteries since at least the 6th century.⁵ These women servants, called *mindī*, were given land and an annual payment

³Sirima Kiribamune, "Women in Pre-modern Sri Lanka," in Women at the Crossroads: A Sri Lankan Perspective, edited by Sirima Kiribamune, and Vidyamali Samarasinghe, Ices Sri Lanka Studies Series (New Delhi: International Centre for Ethnic Studies in association with Norad and Vikas Publishing House, 1990), p. 29-40.

⁴Ibid., p. 34.

⁵Ibid., p. 37.

for clothes. Different from the *mindī* were the women slaves, called *dasi*, who were owned by the monasteries and temples. The king, Parakramabahu IV was said to have offered male and female slaves to the Tooth Relic shrine during his reign in the 14th century. Among the known duties of female slaves included sweeping, garland making, and filling foot-basins with water at the stupa. Although the work of women slaves in monasteries does little to illuminate lay religion of free women, their mere presence there is still noteworthy since women are forbidden from working in monasteries today. In addition, some monasteries were occasionally named after women especially a female relatives of the king. Parakramabahu VI named one after his mother as late as the 15th century.⁶

Unfortunately, these brief comments summarize all that is known about Buddhist women's religious practice in the 14th and 15th centuries. However, as we shall see colonialism did not have an immediate impact on the central kingdom of Kandy and the evidence for women and religion from the 16th-18th centuries is probably also relevant for the earlier period.

The Early Colonial Period

Before discussing the impact of the Portuguese and Dutch control of the coastal regions of Sri Lanka (ca. 1505-1796), I will first discuss what can be discerned about women's religious practice in the central kingdom of Kandy. This area did not feel the full force of colonial influence until the British gained control over it in 1815. Up to that point, Kandy was the only area on Sri Lanka that enjoyed the uninterrupted practice of Buddhism as it had developed from the third century BCE. As will be seen, there is very little information on women's religious

⁶Kiribamune, p. 38 citing the *Cūlavamsa*, ch. 91, v.24.

practice in the coastal areas during the control of first the Portuguese and then the Dutch. This is not the case, however, with the Kandyan kingdom which has provided a relative abundance of primary evidence on women and religion in the early colonial period.

A.H. Mirando has investigated the literary evidence for Buddhism in Sri Lanka during the 17th and 18th centuries using primarily unpublished Sinhalese palm leaf manuscripts in the British Museum Library.⁷ It is his thesis that the common belief that Buddhist literature was in decline during this period is incorrect and Buddhist literature was in fact very much alive and flourishing. Among the Sinhalese writers were at least two women poets who wrote popular works on the Jātakas, or the birth stories of the Buddha. The earliest of these was Kurakkagedera Acāri Bavalat whose poem on the Hastipāla jātakaya was written sometime during the reign of Rājasimha II (1634-1684).⁸ In her poem, Kurakkagedera wrote that she wished to acquire merit by causing religious books to be written. The poem, like others of the period, put a strong emphasis on Buddhist ethics. The name of the other woman poet is not provided in the secondary literature but she was the eldest of the three South Indian queens of Narēndrasimha, king of Kandy from 1706 to 1739. In spite of her foreign origins, this woman studied Sinhalese language and literature and wrote a poem based on the Yasōdharāvata an episode in the life of the Buddha.⁹

The example of this queen was certainly followed by the queens of Vijayarājasimha

⁷A.H. Mirando, Buddhism in Sri Lanka in the 17th and 18th Centuries with Special Reference to Sinhalese Literary Sources, The Ceylon Historical Journal Monograph Series, v. 10 (Dehiwala, Sri Lanka: Tisara Prakasakayo, 1985).

⁸Ibid., p. 79, 81. Mirando is referring to oriental manuscript in the British Museum no. 6604.

⁹Ibid., p. 51.

(1739-1747). Although originally Hindus from Madura, the women upon coming to Kandy rejected their native religion and became ardent proponents of Buddhism.¹⁰ They participated in religious festivals, kept the five moral commandments and the *upösatha* vows, had sacred books copied, and called on young people to adopt ascetic practices. Most likely these queens served as important role models for Sinhalese women and it can probably be assumed that the ideal Buddhist behavior for women included a strong concern for ethics, ascetic behavior, and doing special deeds to acquire merit such as paying for the copying of religious texts.

One piece of doctrinal literature written during the reign of Narëndrasimha suggests that there was an expanding view of the possibilities for women in Buddhism. In other Buddhist literature we find that once the Buddha had decided to reach enlightenment he was never again born a woman. In the *Itibisöjäatakakavi*, however, the Buddha was born three times as a female seeking enlightenment: as a female squirrel, a hen parrot, and as Itibisö the daughter of a Situ.¹¹ While this story does not give any direct evidence on women's practice, it does strongly indicate what the contemporary perceptions of women and religion were in the 18th century.

Besides the literary evidence of the period, we have also an eye witness account of women's participation in religious and cultural life in Kandy. Robert Knox, the son of an English sea captain was taken prisoner by the king of Kandy (Raja Sinha II) in 1660 and remained in captivity until his escape to the Portuguese-held coast in 1679. Following his subsequent return to England, Knox wrote a record of his experiences which is one the earliest

¹⁰Ibid., p. 53 and 57. Mirando is citing the Cūlavamsa, pt. II, ch. 98, p. 247.

¹¹Ibid., p. 99.

Western ethnographies on Sri Lanka.¹²

Knox described the women of Kandy as having a great deal of freedom to participate in the social as well as the religious life. In fact he described the wedding night practice of the bride and bridegroom eating from the same dish as being for the express purpose of showing the equality of men and women.¹³ Knox depicted women as having considerable control over their bodies and their lives. He described women as constantly being involved in pre-marital and extra-marital affairs which were generally accepted by society.¹⁴ Women were free to divorce and remarry and it was common for a woman to wed four or five times in her lifetime. Although a man could only have one wife at a time a woman could have two husbands for, Knox noted, two brothers may keep house together with one wife. Women were responsible for their own property which was not taxable.

Knox never directly commented upon women's interactions with priests or the temples but presumably they did frequent the temples since Knox remarked that women were not allowed to go near temples or the houses of their gods during their menstrual period when they would have been considered impure.¹⁵ Knox commented in some detail about women's participation in Buddhist festivals.¹⁶ He said that often during festivals, a man accompanied by his wife and

¹²Robert Knox, An Historical Relation of the Island Ceylon in the East Indies (New Delhi: Navrang Publishers, 1983), originally published London, 1681.

¹³Ibid., p. 93, Part III, chapt. VII. "Then the Bride and Bridegroom both eat together in one Dish, which is to intimate that they are both of one rank and quality."

¹⁴Ibid., p. 91-94, Part III, chapt. VII.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 73, Part III, chapt. III.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 76-82, Part III, chapt. IV.

children would make a pilgrimage to either the mountain (Adam's Peak) or the Bogahah tree (Bo tree at Anuradhapura) to acquire dignity and merit. The women who went to the festival at the Bogahah tree dressed in their finest clothes and remained for three or four nights enjoying entertainment such as dancers and jugglers and chewing betel leaves. The procession of the feast of Perahar in Kandy is described by Knox at some length. Among those who walked in the procession were large numbers of women dressed in their best clothes and organized into various groups. The first group was the women who provided service to the pagoda such as potters and washer-women all separated by caste. Later a group of cook-women marched followed still later by "thousands of Ladies and Gentlewomen."

Women appear to have been particularly associated with almsgiving. Knox noted that every night when the rice was being measured for the family meal a large handful of rice would also be taken out and put in a bag to be used for the poor.¹⁷ He also described how well-to-do women would personally become involved in begging for alms for sacrifices for the Buddha. These do not appear to be examples of women who had adopted an ascetic life. In Knox's words:¹⁸

Ladies and Gentlewomen of good Quality, will sometimes in a Fit of Devotion to the Buddou, go a begging for him. The greatest ladies of all do not indeed go themselves, but send their Maids dressed up finely in their stead. These women taking the Image along with them, carry it upon the palms of their hand covered with a piece of white Cloth; and so go to mens houses, and will say, "We come a begging of your Charity for the Buddou towards his Sacrifice." And the People are very liberal. They give only three things to him, either Oyl for his Lamps, or Rice for his Sacrifice, or Money or Cotton Tarn for his use.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 85, Part III, chapt. 5.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 81, Part III, chapt. 4.

That Buddhist popular practice had magical and supernatural aspects to it is confirmed by Knox. According to him astrologers were consulted for cures for illness, for marriage decisions, when to begin journeys, etc.¹⁹ The use of magic is also discussed as being common but Knox does not specifically mention women in this context. He does however, know of both men and women being possessed by the Devil.²⁰

I have many times seen Men and Women of this People strangely possess, insomuch that I could judge it nothing else but the effect of the Devil's power upon them: and they themselves do acknowledge as much ... They that are possess, some of them will run into the Woods, screeching and roaring , but do mischief to none; some will be taken so as to be speechles [sic], shaking, and quaking, and dancing, and will tread upon the fire and not be hurt; they will also talk idle, like distracted folk.

When Knox's description is compared to later literary accounts of demon possession one is left with the impression that Knox may have been confusing the demon possession with the cure. The frenzied dancing he described was part of the devil-dancer's cure. Note that this may be the earliest mention of Buddhists participating in fire walking although here it is done through demon possession and not religious fervor.

Now that we have seen a little of women's religious lives in an area where they apparently were allowed to develop unhindered, we shall turn to the women of the coastal region who felt the first impact of colonialism. Although the beginning of the colonial period in Sri Lanka is usually placed in 1505 with the first arrival of the Portuguese, the actual involvement of the Portuguese in Sri Lankan affairs did not begin for several decades. The first contact made by the Portuguese in the kingdom of Kotte in 1505-6 was not capitalized upon until twelve years

¹⁹Ibid., p. 110, Part III, chapt. 10.

²⁰Ibid., p. 77, Part III, chapt.4.

later when the Portuguese returned to exploit the island's cinnamon trade.²¹ The Portuguese gained their first foot-hold over territory in the early 1520's when the kingdom of Kotte became a satellite state in exchange for military protection from the ambitious ruler of the Sitavaka kingdom. For the same end, the Kandyan ruler likewise agreed to become a subject kingdom 1540's but never came under military control.

With the Portuguese military came Franciscan missionaries intent on converting the Sri Lankan kings. Their first success at this came in 1557 with the conversion of Dharmapāla the king of Kotte.²² Dharmapāla confiscated all the lands owned by the Buddhist and Hindu temples and gave it to the Franciscans and in 1580 bequeathed Kotte to the Portuguese king. From Kotte, the Portuguese continued to consolidate their control of the maritime provinces but lacked sufficient military strength to ever completely dominate Kandy.

Political dominion for the Portuguese included the establishment of Roman Catholicism as the state religion.²³ Not only were temples destroyed but attempts were made to suppress all indigenous religious observance. Political and pecuniary incentives were given to those people who would convert to Roman Catholicism. There is no specific evidence that I could find on the impact of these changes on women's religious practice in the maritime provinces, but a few things certainly can be surmised. The traditional observances of Buddhism must have suffered with the destruction of temples and the departure of the bhikkus to the safety of the Kandyan

²¹K.M. de Silva, A History of Sri Lanka Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 100 ff.

²²Ibid., p. 107.

²³Kitsiri Malalgoda, Buddhism in Sinhalese Society, 1750-1900: A Study of Religious Revival and Change (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 29.

kingdom.

The effect of Roman Catholicism was probably felt most keenly by men who were required to convert in order to hold a public office.²⁴ The Franciscan missionaries also took over the schools and used them as a source for propagating Christianity. Since schools were only attended by boys at this period,²⁵ the impact of this form of proselytizing on girls was probably negligible. While the extent to which Franciscan missionaries focussed their efforts for converts on women in general is unknown, we do know that they targeted the noble families. It seems likely that many women of the Sinhalese nobility as well as women related to men in administrative positions were pressured to adopt Christianity at least in public. Those Buddhists who converted publicly to acquire government jobs but maintained their native religion in private became known as "government Christians."²⁶ That many of the conversions were sincere, however, is evidenced by the percentage of the population that chose to remain Catholic after the Portuguese had been expelled.²⁷ Unfortunately there are no statistics available for the percentage of the converts that were women.

The majority of the Sri Lankan people, however, objected to both Portuguese rule and Roman Catholic religion and from 1638 various Sri Lankan kings allied themselves with the

²⁴Ibid., p. 30.

²⁵Tilaka Metthananda, "Women in Sri Lanka: Tradition and Change," in Women at the Crossroads, ed. by S. Kiribamune and V. Samarasinghe (New Delhi: Vikas, 1990), p. 45.

²⁶Malalgoda, p. 32.

²⁷Ibid., p. 33-34. cf. de Silva, p. 195.

Dutch who eventually drove out the last of the Portuguese by 1663.²⁸ With the Dutch in control of the maritime provinces, the government religion was changed to the Dutch Reformed Church and Roman Catholicism became actively suppressed along with Buddhism and Hinduism.²⁹ Now the adoption of Calvinism became the prerequisite for acquiring a high government post and the schools were used to spread Calvinism.

A little more can be deduced about changes in women's religious practice under the Dutch because of the sweeping changes that were made to the legal status of women. Under the Dutch, and probably the Portuguese before them, baptism became virtually a requirement for all coastal Sinhalese. Only through baptism could a person's name be legally registered and civil and judicial matters relating to legitimacy and inheritance were contingent upon the registration of the person's name.³⁰ Where profession of Christianity to obtain an administrative job only affected men this practice affected men and women alike forcing many Buddhists to seek baptism when in need of legal redress.

Roman Dutch law also made a number of changes to the Sinhalese family law that proved far more restrictive for women.³¹ Under the Dutch the husband acquired power over his wife's body and property. A wife was now subject to her husband's authority in much the same way that a minor was subject to his or her parents. Not only did this give a husband increased

²⁸de Silva, p. 120-121.

²⁹de Silva, p. 195.

³⁰Malalgoda, p. 207.

³¹Metthananda, p. 54-59; see also Savitri Goonesekera, "Status of Women in the Family Law of Sri Lanka", in Women at the Crossroads, p. 162.

control of a woman's actions, but of her property as well. It is possible that a husband may have used this new authority to control his wife's form of worship, whether Buddhist or Christian. It is also possible that it became more difficult for women to use their personal resources to support the temples and priests or to give alms. Since money and property was used to obtain merit, this loss of personal assets could have been detrimental to women's religious practice.

As has been seen the evidence for the colonial impact of the Portuguese and Dutch on women in the coastal regions is very difficult to assess. This remained true under British colonial rule where information on women and religion must be pieced together primarily from the memoirs of Christian missionaries.

The British Colonial Period

The beginning of British military concern for Sri Lanka occurred during the French Revolution when Holland and consequently all Dutch property became subservient to the French.³² After years of fighting the French for domination of India, the British were not about to let the Dutch coastal provinces of Sri Lanka fall into French hands. They sailed to Sri Lanka and in 1795-6 successfully ousted the Dutch took possession of their property.

Kandy was still an independent kingdom in 1796 whose king, confident of his political and military invulnerability, refused to sign a treaty with the British. During the two decades there were constant intrigues between the nobles of Kandy and the British and between the chiefs and king of Kandy which eventually weakened the king of Kandy's political position. In January of 1815 the British governor Robert Brownrigg used a supposed Kandyan invasion of British

³²de Silva, p. 185.

territory as an excuse to launch a war and successfully took Kandy in 40 days.³³ The Kandyan Convention was signed in March of 1815 which ceded the kingdom to the British while keeping certain rights and privileges for the chiefs and people of Kandy.³⁴ More importantly, the British agreed to respect their laws, customs, and institutions which included assuming the responsibility to maintain and protect Buddhist rites, priests, and places of worship.

Under British rule the island became increasingly dominated by the attempts of Protestant missionaries to make converts. Education, itinerant preaching, and the publication of tracts were the primary methods used to seek converts. Unlike the Portuguese and the Dutch, the British missionaries made a concerted effort to direct their mission to women and girls.³⁵ They believed they needed Sinhalese Christian girls to become wives for the boys they educated, to set an example to the other village women, and to raise their children with Christian values. The main effort for conversion came through the attempt to include girls in their schools since the school lessons included memorizing Christian prayers and Bible reading.

The efforts of missionaries to educate girls met with limited success, however, for a variety of reasons. In the first place, the Sinhalese did not have a custom of educating their daughters and failed to be convinced that it was a useful activity. A Christian missionary to Kandy, James Selkirk, reported this as one of the primary obstacles.³⁶ Other difficulties, he

³³de Silva, p. 228-229.

³⁴de Silva, p. 230-231.

³⁵Metthananda, p. 61.

³⁶James Selkirk, Recollections of Ceylon, after a Residence of Nearly Thirteen Years; with an Account of the Church Missionary Society's Operations in the Island (London: J. Hatchard and Son, 1844), p. 211.

noted, included the parents' fear of having a daughter walk alone to and from school, the need in the lower classes to have the daughter home to help with the domestic chores, and the fear of having upper caste girls wrongfully exposed to lower caste ones. There are different figures of the ratio of male to female school children but the boys usually greatly outnumbered the girls. Selkirk wrote, for example, that at his station in Kandy in Oct. 1838 only 29 of 342 school children were girls.³⁷

The spread of Christian tracts was unlikely to have a direct influence on women because of their very low literacy rates. The itinerant preachers though felt that Christianity had a special appeal to Sinhalese women because Buddhism, in their opinion, did not include women in its religious practice. A missionary named Oakley reported in 1839 on an unusual finding when he was preaching to a group of four women and two men. According to him the women were surprised to learn that they too had souls and that the message of the Christian religion was for them as well.³⁸ One of the men present informed him that in Kandy women were not required "to think anything about religion." The recollections of a Christian missionary, however, must be used as source material with caution since that the missionaries were very hostile to Buddhism.³⁹ The subject of the place of women was also raised to another missionary in Kandy. Thomas Browning recorded in his journal in 1830 that someone had asked "whether any woman found admission into heaven."⁴⁰ The basis for this question, no doubt, was the Buddhist belief

³⁷Ibid., p. 210.

³⁸Ibid., p. 219-220.

³⁹Malalgoda, p. 205ff.

⁴⁰Selkirk, p. 205.

that a woman had to be reincarnated as a man before she could reach nirvana.

Much of the information available about women's religious practice in the 19th century comes from the published memoirs of British residing on the island and these were not only biased but occasionally contradictory. For example, a Lieut. de Butts wrote in his 1844 description of Sri Lanka that "Women take no prominent part in the ceremonies of Boodhaical worship."⁴¹ Only men, he claimed, could be found in the temples. On the other hand, de Butts, goes on to say that the women had no lack of devotion and appeared in great force during national processions.⁴²

Selkirk gave a slightly different, although contemporary, account describing how both men and women worshipped in the temples. In fact, he noted that when a family worshipped together, the wife entered the temple first in the position of prominence followed by her daughters in order of seniority, then by the husband and sons, and finally by the servants.⁴³ Following the offering at the temple the entire family went to hear discourses on the Buddha.⁴⁴ This hardly seems consistent with the missionary's above report that Buddhist women were "not required to think anything about religion."

Besides the temple attendance and national processions Selkirk reported a young woman

⁴¹Lieut. de Butts, Rambles in Ceylon (London: Wm. H. Allen, 1841), p. 134.

⁴²Ibid., p. 135.

⁴³Selkirk, p. 111.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 113.

possessed by the devil participating in a ceremony to exorcise it.⁴⁵ The description of the afflicted woman's frenzied dancing and the costume and dancing of the devil-dancer are remarkably similar to the account of the same given by the Sinhalese author J. Vijayatunga in 1935⁴⁶ and so was probably an accurate eye witness account. On another occasion Selkirk reported the efforts of astrologers to cure a sick woman using incantations, dancing and various paraphernalia including images of gods and pictures of planets.

Apparently Buddhist religious practice in the lowlands was not as observable to outsiders as in Kandy. James Cordiner, chaplain to the British garrison in Columbo, published his memoirs in 1807. In them, he reported that the higher classes of Sinhalese professed Christianity and that the Buddhists in the British area were not as strict as those in Kandy.⁴⁷ No doubt Cordiner was witnessing the "government Christianity" which had already become a fact of life under the Portuguese and Dutch.

While the Kandyan Convention of 1815 provided for the continuance of the traditional laws in Kandy (although this later was disregarded), women of the maritime regions were still subject to the more restrictive Roman Dutch law adopted by the British. Just as the Dutch had used the legal registration of the name after baptism as leverage to win converts however nominal, the British capitalized on this and expanded it. Men and women outside of Kandy were forced also to register births, marriages, and deaths with the Church simply to gain official

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 466-467.

⁴⁶J. Vijayatunga, Grass for My Feet (London: Edward Arnold, 1935), p. 151-159.

⁴⁷James Cordiner, A Description of Ceylon, Containing an Account of the Country, Inhabitants, and Natural Products, etc. (New Delhi: Navrang, 1983), reprint of 1807 ed., v. 1, pp. 112 and 145.

recognition of their basic civil rights.⁴⁸ This practice lasted until 1868 when the British adopted civil registration. It is small wonder that Cordiner, residing in Colombo had remarked that Buddhists under the British was not as strict as in Kandy since they were being legally forced to practice some Christian institutions.

As noted above, Roman Dutch law had made women subject to the authority of their husbands and women's property into communal property under the control of their husbands. The British provided some relief for this in the Matrimonial Rights and Inheritance Ordinance, no. 15 of 1876 which returned control of a woman's property to the woman.⁴⁹ The coastal woman's refound right to control her property would have allowed her greater participation in the popular resurgence of Buddhism occurring island wide in the second half of the 19th century. Disgusted with the incessant vicious attacks from Christian missionaries, the Buddhist monks had finally begun to take an active role in the disputation of Christianity and the encouragement of Buddhist practice. Among many things, the monks encouraged an increase in the role of *däyakas* or donors.⁵⁰ As seen above, 17th century merit gifts to the monks consisted of rice, oil, etc. to support the monks and the temples. In response to the Christian attacks, however, monks had begun going door to door collecting money to support first a Buddhist printing press and later an educational system, as well as the traditional activities. Although I could find no direct evidence of women seeking to earn merit in this way, it seems likely that this was the beginning of a practice that would follow women into the 20th century.

⁴⁸Malalgoda, p. 207-208.

⁴⁹Metthananda, p. 65-66.

⁵⁰Malalgoda, p. 238.

The resurgence of women's participation in Buddhist practices was noted by an Anglican bishop who visited the island at the end of the 19th century. Reginald S. Copleston while commenting on a Buddhist procession noted:⁵¹

One may see along the roads of the southern province twenty monks together ... And for miles one may meet companies of gaily-dressed people, women especially, but by no means exclusively, streaming along, cheerful and well-behaved, towards shrines which a few years ago attracted not a tenth of the number. Near such a shrine itself may be seen a hundred or more women, all in white, each carrying in her uplifted hand a piece of the fragrant areca flower, shouting, "Sadhu" from time to time as they march along, and at any rate enjoying the exhilarating sense of the procession.

Copleston also observed families inviting monks to dinner to obtain merit, men and women in Kandy flocking to hear the Brahmajāla Sutta read, and women regularly providing food for the mendicant monks.⁵² Like Cordiner ninety years before him, Copleston contrasted the Buddhists in the coastal regions with those in Kandy and found the former to be more moral.⁵³ He claimed that marriage was respected among the coastal men and women whereas in whole districts such as Kandy marriage was unknown. It seems likely here that Copleston was considering the forced Christian registration of a marriage in the coastal areas as a real marriage and the civil marriages of Kandy as simply cohabitation. Copleston also was the first to note the existence of female renunciants:⁵⁴

There are very few men of this profession [dasasil], but a considerable number of women, generally old, are to be seen about the temples, especially in Kandy, or on the way to

⁵¹Reginald Stephen Copleston, Buddhism Primitive and Present in Magadha and in Ceylon 2nd ed. (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908) reprint of 1892, p. 277.

⁵²Ibid., p. 256, 259, and 263.

⁵³Ibid., p. 286.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 279.

Adam's Peak. They usually carry bowls as if for begging, and their shaven heads and dirty white dresses give them a pathetic appearance; and one who had read the books would naturally suppose them to be nuns. Female mendicants they are; but they have not been admitted to the Community, and therefore are not called "*bhikkunis*," but only "*upasikas*."

As noted above the official order of Sri Lankan nuns known as the *bhikkhunis* (or *bhiksuni*) ceased its existence probably sometime in the 10th century. Since initiation of a nun (or monk) had to be done by someone who could trace their own initiation lineage back to the Buddha, it was impossible for the order of the *bhikkhunis* to be revived. The *upāsikās*, which means pious laywomen, observed by Copleston were probably renunciant women who had taken the ten precepts of Buddhism permanently.

The first five of these precepts called the *pan sil* are the ones taken by all practicing Buddhists to abstain from taking life, from taking what is not given (stealing), from wrong conduct in sexual desires (unchastity, adultery), from telling lies, and from intoxicating liquors.⁵⁵ The Eight Precepts are typically taken by some Buddhists on *poya* days or the holy days of the month which occur on the full moon, no moon, and two half-moons. The Eight Precepts, *ata sil*, are the Five Precepts with the third changed to mean abstaining from all sexual activity and the addition of the abstaining from eating at the wrong time (no solid food after midday), from seeing dancing, music, or other shows, from wearing perfumes, fine clothes, or adornment, and from sleeping in comfortable beds (mats on the ground only). The Ten Precepts, *dasa sil*, are usually taken permanently by the monks and a few very pious lay people and these are formed

⁵⁵These are: generosity, morality, mental development, transferring merit, empathizing in the merit transferred, doing service to elders, respectful behavior, teaching, listening to religious teaching, and holding right views, use of silver or gold or any money. cf. Gombrich and Obeyesekere, p. 24-25.

by dividing the seventh precept on entertainment and adornment into two separate precepts and adding a precept to abstain from accepting gold and silver (use money). The taking of the Ten Precepts permanently is the highest religious status attainable for women.⁵⁶ There is evidence for these renunciant women existing by the early 1800's but, there may have been women following this path since the collapse of the original *bhikkhunis*.⁵⁷

With the resurgence of Buddhism in the second half of the 19th century including its ascetic forms, however, the goals of the women renunciants took a new direction. The precise history of the nuns is really the combination of the case histories of different nuns and their followers, but some general observations can be made.⁵⁸ One of the early key figures, was Catherine deAlvis, the daughter of a wealthy Sinhalese and Anglican Christian family. After her parents' deaths, she converted to Buddhism, traveled to Burma where she took on the yellow robes of the *dasasil*, or one who took permanently all of the Ten Precepts.⁵⁹ Upon returning to Sri Lanka, she used her former family influence to convince some wealthy persons, primarily women, to found what appears to have been the first nunnery, or *upāsikā ārāmaya* in 1907.

From this point, if not earlier, there is evidence of renunciant women organizing themselves into groups usually connected with an *ārāmaya*. These women referred to themselves as *dasasilmattawa*, wore yellow robes, and shaved their heads. They accepted

⁵⁶Lowell W. Bloss, "The Female Renunciants of Sri Lanka: The Dasasilmattawa," Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies v.10, no. 1 (1987), p. 8.

⁵⁷For more history of the nuns, see "The Contemporary Resurgence of Nuns," in Buddhism Transformed, p. 274-295 which includes summaries of interviews with elderly nuns active during the early 20th century and Tessa Jane Bartholomeusz's Women Under the Bo Tree, dissertation, University of Virginia, 1991.

⁵⁸Bloss, p. 9-11.

female students who wore white and observed the eight precepts until their initiation. These women saw themselves as being somewhere in between the lay person and *the sangha*, the official monastic order. They chose an ascetic life removed from society, but not all Buddhist society was initially ready to accept this role for women.

In the 1930's and 1940's, H. Sri Nissanka who was very influential in Buddhist affairs on the island decided that the role of the nuns should parallel that of Catholic nuns. Rather than withdrawing from society, nuns should become involved providing service to the community.⁶⁰ He set about transferring his ideal of the nun into reality with enthusiastic support from urban lay Buddhists. Although his efforts met with some success, in general the nuns resisted being forced into community service. They were interested in living ascetic, withdrawn, contemplative lives and cared no more for social work than did the monks. What Nissanka did accomplish, however, was to make the *dasasilmattawas* more palatable to the middle and upper classes.⁶¹ In the early decades, it was primarily a movement of lower class women who generally were not held in high regard by the laity.

The above mentioned desire on the part of the laity to push nuns away from renunciation and towards community service is indicative of the most pervasive impact that colonialism had on Buddhism, namely the westernization/Protestantization of their basic world view. As discussed above, by the mid 19th century Buddhist monks had engaged the Christian missionaries in a battle of faiths. Although the monks met with considerable success in the areas of preaching and debate, they lagged behind in the area of education due to a lack of organization

⁵⁹Bloss, p. 12ff.

⁶⁰Bloss, p. 24.

and funding. When the co-founder of the Theosophical Society H.S. Olcott came to Sri Lanka in 1880, the monks welcomed him as the means for fighting the Western Christians using Western style tactics applied to Buddhism.

Olcott gladly accepted that function and not only introduced western style organization to the island's Buddhists but also some very Christian-like enhancements to Buddhist practice including a catechism and the conversion of Vedak into a Christmas-like holiday replete with carols and cards.⁶² Among the newly established organizations were Young Women's and Young Men's Buddhist Associations which eventually established themselves in every village ensuring the propagation of the new westernized Buddhist doctrines. This was the beginning of a change in Sinhalese Buddhism that was coined by G. Obeyesekere in 1970 as "Protestant Buddhism."⁶³

The real impact of this western/Protestant influence on Buddhism was not felt until the early 20th century though, under the influence of Devamitta Dharmapāla also styled Anagārika Dharmapāla. Dharmapāla had been Olcott's Sinhalese protégé and the first manager of the Buddhist Theosophical Society in Sri Lanka but later split with his mentor on doctrinal grounds. He had many views ranging from nationalism to education but the one that is important here was his view that the Sinhalese should adopt a proper code of conduct.⁶⁴ This code of conduct he

⁶¹Gombrich and Obeyesekere, p. 204-205.

⁶²Gananath Obeyesekere, "Religious Symbolism and Political Change in Ceylon," Modern

⁶³Ceylon Studies vol. 1, no. 1 (1970)

⁶⁴Gombrich and Obeyesekere, p. 213.

invented himself and circulated in pamphlet form in 1898.⁶⁵ Although Dharmapāla's initial followers were among the educated classes, his code very much addressed the daily activities of the peasant classes who had formed the backbone on Sri Lankan religious practice. The code instructed the laity to integrate religious practice into their daily lives and prescribed a puritanical morality.

For probably the first time women other than the renunciants were involved on a daily basis with religious practice and on a more personal level than giving alms. For example, soon after waking they were to utter Buddhist prayers and take the five precepts with their children, observe the eight precepts on *pöya* days and attend the temple once a week to hear sermons.⁶⁶ Although women's religious lives may have become more involved, the code was very restrictive for them on a personal and moral level. Gombrich and Obeyesekere note:⁶⁷

Among the thirty rules enunciated for them are the following: to keep the house and personal belongings, clothes, and body clean; to beautify the garden with flowering plants; not to bask near the fire or indulge in siestas; to wear saris and shun blouses that expose the midriff; not to address children or servants with pejorative pronouns; not to spend time lazily chewing betel; not to comb one's hair or pick lice in the presence of others.

The essence of Protestant Buddhism has been summed up as:⁶⁸

The hallmark of Protestant Buddhism, then, is its view that the layman should permeate his life with his religion; that he should strive to make Buddhism permeate his whole

⁶⁵Anagārika Dharmapāla, *Gihī Vinaya*; Gombrich and Obeyesekere, p. 214 note that with its 19th edition published in 1958, nearly 50,000 copies of this were in distribution. (I was not able to find an English translation of this.)

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, p. 215.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, p. 214-215.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, p. 216.

society; and that he can and should try to reach nirvāna. As a corollary, the lay Buddhist is critical of the traditional norms of the monastic role; he may not be positively anticlerical but his respect, if any, is for the particular monk, not for the yellow robe as such.

Although Protestant Buddhism, especially its moral codes, was felt island wide, its primary impact was on the educated classes namely the westernized middle and upper class persons living in the cities. By the early 20th century the traditional polarity of religious life in Kandy vs. religious life in the coastal areas had been gradually changing. The new polarity was becoming the religious practice of the urban areas vs. that of the villages. There can be no doubt that this change in religious practice was due to more than the Buddhist response to Christian missionaries. With the 20th century came modernism: industrialization, technological advance, and increasing Western influence. Although colonialist administration is what brought modernism to Sri Lanka, the influence of modernism was irreversible and has continued to impact the island after Independence. Still, we shall end this discussion with the semi-autobiographical impressions of village life of the author J. Vijayatunga.

During the 1890's the villager who lacked an English education became the comic butt for Sinhalese stories.⁶⁹ This negative image of the villager was not countered until 1935 when Vijayatunga published Grass for My Feet, a book of short stories placing village life in a more favorable light. As Yasmine Gooneratne has noted, "his evocation of a richly humane and tranquil way of life created a new regard for the local environment as a suitable setting for fiction, and a new respect for the values and traditions of rural Sri Lanka."⁷⁰ His depiction of

⁶⁹Yasmine Gooneratne, Stories from Sri Lanka (Hong Kong: Heinemann Asia, 1979), p.4.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 5.

women and religion is particularly interesting because it is imbued with very traditional magical elements still current in the 20th century as well as the new ideas found in Protestant Buddhism.

In "Averting the Evil Eye," Vijayatunga describes an exorcism that is done on a sick boy. Although a male specialist was called in, the mother had to make the preparatory arrangements for it including digging a small well. The narrator tells us that a menstruating woman was considered unclean (like Knox's account 300 years earlier) so the preparations had to take place in a home where there were no menstruating women. The "Bali Suniyam" tells of a woman possessed by a demon who required an all-night devil dance to free her. The narrator reports that many women desired to become possessed by a demon, presumably so they could become the center of attention at a devil dance.

In "The Two Temples" the narrator tells us that, "To a Buddhist mother the greatest happiness is to see a son enter the priesthood."⁷¹ His story depicts the mother and sisters frequently entertaining priests at their home, but nevertheless takes a modern twist. Although the women seem to have the traditional respect for the priests, the male, western educated narrator takes a more cynical view of their function and refuses to make obeisance to them. This attitude depicts how the ideas inherent to Protestant Buddhism had seeped into the younger generation.

The new morality of Protestant Buddhism came into contact with the old village morality in "The Awful Lapse." In this story a woman who had been widowed for ten years became pregnant. With some time and difficulty, the village accepted the illegitimate child until the widowed woman became pregnant yet again. The narrator tells us that, "With this the Awful Lapse became engraven as on stone in the eyes of my mother and the rest of her relatives, and

⁷¹Vijayatunga, p. 161-2.

the fact that they regarded her as an incorrigible outcast dawned upon Aunt Caroline's mind."⁷² The conflict in moralities here lies on the one hand in the horror of the family at the woman's sexual license and on the other in the woman not even realizing until the end that the family would disapprove.

Conclusions

As we have seen, during the colonial period women did not fulfill any type of a leadership role in the Buddhist religious practice of Sri Lanka. The official order of nuns was extinct and the renunciant women were considered marginal until the 1940's. There was no evidence for women preaching or teaching their religion, except for some 17th century poetry. Nor was there evidence for women acting in other active roles such as a devil-dancer, a priestess at a god's shrine, or an astrologer.

There can be no question, however, that women played an important and integral role in the religious life of the land. It was the women who gave food to the monks or other beggars who came to their door, a simple but crucial role for maintaining the basic structure of Buddhist practice. We also saw that women gave offerings at the temple, listened to preaching, and were particularly visible during festivals and processions. The British missionaries were quick to realize the importance of converting women if they wished to expedite the conversion of the whole island.

Colonialism proved though that women's religious practice was inextricably intertwined with women's legal, social, and economic status. The colonial government effectively forced

⁷²Ibid., p. 191.

women and men in the coastal provinces to undergo baptism and later to register their marriages, births, and deaths with a church in order to obtain certain basic legal rights. Women in the coastal areas also lost their traditional independence and rights to property under the Roman Dutch law for nearly two centuries. Finally the coastal Buddhists were deprived to some extent of the means as Buddhist temples and shrines were destroyed, the monks fled inland, and the state ceased to support their religious institutions.

From the beginnings then a dichotomy was created between the women of the coastal areas and those of Kandy. The women in Kandy continued, for the most part, to practice their traditional beliefs while the coastal women were subject to restrictions, limitations of access to temples, and forced acceptance of some Christian practices. This dichotomy existed until the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the Buddhist revival that led to "Protestant Buddhism."

This period saw Buddhists themselves choosing to integrate western concepts into their religious practice. The goal was to organize Buddhists island wide without regard to the historic divisions between the coastal areas and Kandy. Women would probably have played an increased role as *dāyakas* contributing money to support new Buddhist organizations including educational institutions and nunneries. The Women's Buddhist Association was founded and eventually spread to most of the villages. Dharmapāla successfully introduced a new western style morality that spread island wide limiting women's roles and sexuality. By the 20th century, the old dichotomy of the religious practice of the Kandyan women vs. the religious practice of the coastal women began to change. Gradually the new dichotomy was becoming the religious practice of the traditional village women vs. the practice of the educated, westernized urban women. The former practice kept its magical element while the latter became intellectualized.

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