

THE BRIDE WEARS WHITE

Some Christian Contributions to Buddhist Lay Life in Sri Lanka

by G.P.V. Somaratna

Christianity in Sri Lanka has recently come under heavy fire from Buddhist nationalists as a force destructive of Sinhalese Buddhist culture. This tendency has always been present in the Buddhist revivalist movement; the report of the Buddhist Committee of Inquiry entitled *Betrayal of Buddhism* published in 1956 had presented the era after the arrival of the Portuguese as a period of decline in Sinhala Buddhist culture.¹ However, even a superficial look at the history of Sri Lanka during the colonial period would show that our society had been enriched in many respects during that period.

The Christian impact on Buddhist lay life initially resulted from the activities of the large number of Roman Catholic priests working in various villages and cities of Sri Lanka during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when Portuguese influence was strong. Later, Dutch rule extended Christian influence over a wider scale in the maritime provinces of Sri Lanka.

Deliberate attempts were made by Buddhists to imitate Christian practices in many ways. An important step in that direction was taken with the arrival of the Theosophists in 1880. Even before that, however, Buddhist monks like Revs. Mohottiwatte Gunananda, Koratota Sobita and Dodanduwe Piyaratna Tissa had successfully utilised Christian missionary institutions for Buddhist purposes.²

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The second stage was a conscious and deliberate attempt by American and English Theosophists to help Sinhalese Buddhists to adopt Christian missionary methods and practices for their benefit. With the arrival of the first Theosophists, Colonel Olcott and Madame Blavatsky at Galle in 1880, they became and continued to be a source of inspiration and help to Buddhists for a considerable period of time. There are many Christian practices adopted then, which are accepted today as part of the heritage of Buddhist society in Sri Lanka³.

The Christian Church in Sri Lanka

The presence of Christians in the Anuradhapura period is indicated by archaeological and literary evidence. We are, however, unable to ascertain the nature of their contribution to the culture of Sri Lanka. The assertion made by Prof. Senerat Paranavitana in *The Story of Sigiri* connecting the Sigiriya fortress with Christianity, is not popular among historians. The arrival of Franciscan missionaries from Portugal in 1543 in Kotte, at the invitation of *Bhuvanekabahu VII* (A.D. 1521 - 1551) marks more clearly the beginning of Christian influence on the life of Sinhalese Buddhists. Apart from those who embraced the Roman Catholic faith during this period, the Sinhalese Buddhist population also came under this influence. Thereafter, under the Dutch administration of the Maritime Provinces of the island the process of Christian cultural contacts with Sinhalese Buddhist society continued. The expansion of missionary activities in the

nineteenth and twentieth centuries under Protestant missionary organisations resulted in further cultural influences to Sinhalese Buddhist society.

In this article, we shall examine briefly two important areas in which this influence was marked - the rituals connected with the Sinhala Buddhist marriage and funeral ceremonies. These institutions are an integral part of the life of the people and have undergone vast changes as a result of Christian influence during the last four centuries. We shall attempt to identify here, some of the elements which have been adopted by Sinhala Buddhists through contact with parallel Christian institutions.

In Buddhism, priests are regarded as renouncers of lay life. Hence, they are not expected to play any role in important areas of lay life such as birth, marriage and death. There are no Buddhist rituals specified for these important areas of lay life, except for general guidelines found in the Buddhist canonical work known as *Sigalovada sutta*. These guidelines are not adequate to provide institutions like marriage with ceremonies which can be regarded as religiously prescribed. Such affairs of lay life do not appear to have been dealt with in canonical writings as matters of importance. When this vacuum, as compared with Christian practice, was realised, Buddhists made an attempt to appropriate institutions from Christianity.

Let us first consider the Buddhist institution of marriage as it stands today. The legally and socially accepted form →

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of marriage, among Sinhalese today, is monogamy and monoandry. However, a study of the literature pertaining to the period prior to Christian influence, shows that the institution of marriage functioned very differently in Sinhala society; there was a laxity in attitudes to this intimate personal relationship.

The Sinhalese chronicle *Rajavaliya* records King *Vira Parakumbahu VIII* (1476-1489), the King of Kotte, had two sisters as his chief wives (*randoliya*). That was an example of polygamy. Some time later, *Vijayabahu VI* (1513-1521) and his brother *Sri Rajasingha* had one wife, and from her they had four sons and one daughter. Three sons of this family got together to kill their father, *Vijayabahu VI*, in 1521, in the episode known as *Vijayaba kollaya*. This is an example of polyandry. Nor were these practices confined to royalty alone.

The early Christian writers had noticed this feature of Sinhalese society. De Queyroz, the Portuguese Chronicler of the seventeenth century, writing on the marriage practices of the Sinhalese in the sixteenth century says⁴:

“They [Sinhalese] also have taken from the *Malavares* the most barbarous custom that exists among those nations: for it is a common practice for four or five brothers or more, to marry one single woman, and on the contrary one single man can marry many sisters, and the youngest ever holds the first place in authority and power in the house and even in love. But in order to separate, each one's wish is sufficient, who taking what was brought to the household, may go back to marry at pleasure; and if they had children, the males are entrusted to the father and the females to the mother; and if they males or females, them they divide, each one taking what falls to him by lot. And Benito de Silva related that when he was *ouvidor* (magistrate) of Ceylon, there appeared before him a woman married to seven brothers to com-

plain of the ill treatment she received from so many, and begged in good earnest to be relieved of some of them. And as they were still subject to their laws and customs, the *ouvidor* asked her whether two would be enough for her, and she replied that she would take four; and choosing those she liked, the case was settled.”

The following quotations from Robert Knox, the English captive in the Kandyan kingdom during the period 1660-79, give us a picture of the situation in that kingdom, which did not come under Christian influence till 1815.⁵

“Their marriages are but of little force or validity. For if they disagree and dislike one the other; they part without disgrace. Yet it stands firmer for the men rather than for the women howbeit they do leave one the other at their pleasure...”

“Both men and women do commonly wed four or five times, before they can settle themselves to their contention. And if they have children when they part, the common law is, the males for the man, and the females for the woman. But many of the women are free from this controversie, being childless.”

“In this country each man, even the greatest, hath but one wife: but a woman often has two husbands; for, it is lawful and common with them, for two brothers to keep house together with one wife, and the children do acknowledge and call both fathers.”

Bentara Atthadassi Thera, writing in 1848 in reply to Gogerley's *Kristiani Pragnapti*, criticised the introduction of the institution of monogamous marriage from the point of view of Sinhala society. According to him, the law of the land had forced men and women to life-long unions without the possibility of separation even if incompatibilities were to surface later.⁶ Rev. Atthadassi further argued that monogamous marriage forcibly created individual families, cutting them off from

other family members who could be sources of support.

Rev. S. Langdon, in his visits to mission stations in the Kandyan districts, found polyandry being practised as late as 1890, even though such practices were discouraged by the government.⁷

“In one village he found that every woman in it, except one, had a plurality of husbands, usually three or four, but in one instance five. The reason ordinarily given for it is that, where the brothers of a family have one wife, there is no necessity for a division of the family inheritance. The custom was rendered illegal in 1858 because of the great crimes to which it frequently gave rise.”

The institution of sacramentalised lifelong monogamous marriage, was a Christian concept, first introduced to Sri Lanka by the Portuguese missionaries. Marriage in Christianity is an exclusive relationship. The total unity of persons - physically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually - is comprehended by the concept 'one flesh' and is encapsulated in the concept of Holy Matrimony. This eliminates polygamy and polyandry as options. The indissolubility of marriage has been the biblical principle guiding this lifelong union.

The registration of marriage, which this concept necessarily entails, was done in Sri Lanka in the *Tombo* registration books under the supervision of Roman Catholic clergy. Therefore, marriage has been referred to as *kasada* in Sinhalese, the word being a derivation from the Portuguese word *casado* meaning marriage. Marriage, thus, became a sacrament to those who embraced Christianity, unlike to the Buddhist to whom marriage, at which no religious dignitary is present, was not a sacrament. The marriage ceremonies described by Robert Knox (1681), Alexander Johnston (1813), John Davy (1821) and several other European writers, show that the elaborateness of the marriage ceremony varied according to the social class of the families of the couple.⁸

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In the nineteenth century, Buddhist leaders made a conscious attempt to imitate several Christian institutions. The Christian sacrament of Holy Matrimony was one of them. The ritual, associated with Christian marriage, was one of the attractions which drew Buddhists to Christian churches in the first half of the nineteenth century. This was something that Buddhist leaders viewed with great alarm. The Buddhist newspaper *Lakmini Pahana* proposed the *Poruwa* ceremony, as an alternative to the sacrament of Christian marriage for Buddhists.⁹ In 1869, the members of the *Lokarthasadhaka Samagama* who met at the *Sailabimbaramaya*, Dodanduwa resolved to advise Buddhist laymen to introduce the practice of a *Poruwa* ceremony as a Buddhist innovation, in order to prevent Buddhists from being attracted to Christian churches for the solemnization of the weddings.¹⁰

The *Buddhist Catechism* published by Colonel S. Olcott, in 1881, includes some Christian and European concepts in the Buddhist system of values.¹¹ Question No. 205 of this catechism is:

“What does Buddhism teach about marriage?”

The answer is:

“Absolute chastity, being a condition of full spiritual development, is most highly recommended; but a marriage to one wife and fidelity to her, is recognized as a kind of chastity. Polygamy was censured by the Buddha as involving ignorance and promoting lust.”

These are not, in fact, the teachings of the Buddha, but are based on Olcott's own expectations regarding the correct nature of the institution of marriage. Obeyesekere and Gombrich have indicated that there is no Buddhist text referring to the preferability of monogamous marriage; the Buddha did not teach the validity of monogamous marriage over other forms of marriage, known in North India at that time.¹²

Poruwa Ceremony

Early records of Sinhala marriages do not refer to an elaborate ritual or the widespread practice of a *poruwa* ceremony. D'Oyly and Johnston refer to a very simple *poruwa* ceremony, performed by the upper caste nobility, somewhat different from the present ceremonies. It had no religious significance. There was no religious officer to perform the ceremony; neither was a religious text chanted. The common people did not practice such a ceremony.

The elaborate rituals connected with modern *poruwa* ceremonies are a new phenomenon. They were acquired by Buddhists to counterbalance the sacramental nature of the Christian wedding. The early practice of using only a plank for the couple to ascend to the *poruwa*, has now become elaborated into a ritual, reminiscent of the consecration of royalty.

The rituals connected with the *poruwa* ceremony are based on auspicious times calculated to the minute; this, of course has been made possible only by the introduction of clocks in the present century. The *kapurala* has become the officiating priest who dresses and acts like a royal *purohita*. The chanting of *astaka* by a *kapurala* and the singing of *Jayamangala gatha* by maidens were introduced in the 1880's. These innovations were motivated by the desire to emulate various aspects of the ritual of the Christian wedding, which proved attractive to many Buddhists of the time.¹³

Today, the bride is accompanied by her father to an assembly of friends and relatives in front of a decorated *poruwa*. When the father leads the bride to the hall, the assembly rises, imitating the pattern of a church service. This practice shows how far the Buddhist mind was attracted by the Christian sacrament of Holy Matrimony and its rituals.

Among other Christian practices connected with the wedding ceremony, adopted by Sinhalese Buddhists is the

wearing of a veil and face veil by the bride. The habit of wearing white is another important feature. The traditional Sinhalese Buddhist belief is that white is connected with sorrow. The practice of brides in Hindu weddings is to wear elaborate colours and not white. Thus, the present custom of wearing white is also Christian.¹⁴

During the recent past, Buddhist monks have taken an active part in some Buddhist weddings by chanting *pirit* to bless the newly married couple and by tying *pirith* thread on their hands. This indicates that the Buddhist priesthood, having realised the drawbacks in their traditional roles, are now assuming new roles, comparable with those of Christian clergy.¹⁵

The practice known as betrothal, was a legally binding contract between the parents of the bride and the groom from the times of the *Old Testament*. Today, we have a similar practice known as the “engagement” where the two parties come to an agreement about the marriage. There remained a distinction between betrothal and marriage because the two partners did not enter into a sexual relationship.

Sexual Morals

The monogamous marriage and the sexual morality associated with it as accepted by the Sri Lankan Buddhist today, are in contrast with the practices that prevailed in the pre-Christian era in Sri Lanka. A closer study of these ideas shows that they have been derived from the Christian morals of Victorian England, introduced during this period by Protestant missionaries. The school system run by the latter, propagated these views among the local population through moral instruction. The *Buddhist Catechism* of Henry Olcott shows Christian morals being attributed to Buddhists in the following statement.

Q. What of husband to wife?

A. To cherish her; treat her with respect and kindness; be faithful to

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her; cause her to be honoured by others; provide her with suitable ornaments and clothes.

Q. What of the wife to her husband?

A. To show affection to him; order her household all right, be hospitable to guests; be chaste; be thrifty; show skill and diligence in all things.¹⁶

The morals connected with married life presented by Anagarika Dharmapala as appropriate to Sinhalese Buddhists, are what he learnt in Christian schools in his childhood. All mission schools gave moral instruction including sexual morals. They outlawed plural marriages. Divorce, which was easy in pre-Christian Sinhalese society, was rendered difficult by the English law, the monogamous marriage being legally registered and regarded as a life-long affair. It is, however, interesting to note that the view current among many Sri Lankans today, is that western society is lax in morals; it is not realised that their ideals of sexual morals have been based on western norms of the nineteenth century.

Lay morals are not clearly depicted in the Buddhist canon. The *Singalovada sutta* gives some moral guidelines for laymen, but they are merely a broad outline for living. With a view to filling this gap, Anagarika Dharmapala published in 1898, a book entitled '*Daily Code for the Laity*' giving guidelines for living for the Sinhala Buddhist. A close examination of this document shows that it is heavily influenced by Protestant norms. The qualities that Dharmapala advocated - truthfulness, faithfulness in marriage, honesty and hard work in business life - are those of Victorian Protestant ethics. The vocabulary and tone in the writings and teachings of Anagarika Dharmapala have a resemblance to those of the Protestants. Unrighteousness, abomination, perverse generation, holiness, defeating evil, are notable among the terms he uses. His homeless *anagarika* life is regarded by some scholars as an imitation of the Calvinist concept of a homeless life while living in the world.

Funeral Ceremonies

Knox gives the following account regarding burial practices in the Kandyan kingdom in the seventeenth century.¹⁸

"As for persons of inferior quality, they are interred in some convenient places in the woods, there being no set places for burial, carried thither by two or three of their friends, and buried without any more ado. They lay them on their backs, with their heads to the west and their feet to the east, as we do. Then, those people go and wash; for they are unclean by handling the dead.

The persons of greater quality are burnt, and that with ceremony. When they are dead, they lay them out, and put a cloth over their privy parts, and then wash the body by taking half a dozen pitchers of water and pouring upon it. Then, they cover him with a linen cloth, and so carry him forth to burning."

The reports left by the early Protestant missionaries show that the normal practice among the Sinhalese in the Low Country area was to take the corpse to the *amu sohona* and lay it there for carrion birds to consume. References to burial are rare in the pre Christian era. The Buddhist clergy and nobility were burnt on funeral pyres. Death was feared and a dead body was considered as something (*kili*) desecrating. Cemeteries were considered as places where demons took up their abode. *Kattadiyas* (exorcists) made visits to the *amu sohona* to contact devils or to obtain *mini tel* (oil from the dead bodies) for ceremonies connected with devil worship.

The practice of burial, which is common today among Buddhists in Sri Lanka, is a result of Christian influence. The Christian concept of death is not shrouded in fear, as are traditional Sri Lankan beliefs on the subject. The dead were treated with respect; the Christian concept of resurrection of the dead did not permit a fear that dead bodies would be

possessed by demons. The common Sinhala word for burial ground is *karakoppuwa* which is a derivation from the Dutch word *Kerkehoef*. The burial of departed relatives in a church yard was introduced for the first time to Sri Lanka, by Portuguese missionaries.¹⁹

The other Christian practice connected with burial was the traditional method of disposing of the dead. The early Christians adopted the custom of putting the feet toward the east, so that at the resurrection the reborn might hurry toward the sunrise. The Buddhist practice was to put the head of the corpse to the north with the face upward as the Buddha was laid at his death. The Christian practice was adopted by the Sinhalese Buddhists, who imitated the Roman Catholic rituals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.²⁰

Tombstones are also common today, among Sinhalese Buddhists. The addition of a symbol of grace to the tomb, is also a nineteenth century Christian practice borrowed by the Buddhists. The ashes of kings and Buddhist priests were deposited in small caskets and placed in buildings like *stupas* in the past. But the tombstone is a new phenomenon.

From the evidence available in writings, referring to the pre-Christian era, we find no reference to a Buddhist religious funeral service conducted at the site of the grave or in the *amu sohona*. Today, the presence of a Buddhist priest and a "transfer of merit" to the deceased has become obligatory at the burial of a Buddhist. This too, is a result of the influence of the Christian funeral service, where a priest is present.

The funeral procession with drummers and horane players is a common sight today, at Buddhist funerals. It is a practice unknown to pre-Christian Sinhalese society and derives from the fact that from very early on, in their work in Sri Lanka, Roman Catholics conducted funeral processions from the residence to the churchyard.²¹

Buddhists in the coastal areas chant the *Vessantara Jataka Kavya* at funeral

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houses. This became popular in this area in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Roman Catholics used the *Pasan Pota or Dukprapti Sangrahaya* (a work by Jocomo Goncalves) at funeral houses in order to keep awake in the nights. The Buddhist began chanting the *Malapota* or *Wessantara Jataka Kavyaya*. This shows that low country Buddhists imitated Roman Catholic usage. The use of coffins, throwing of sand on the coffin after it is laid in the grave, are again practices learnt from Christians.

The *Lakminipahana* in June 1862, suggested that Sinhalese Buddhists should adopt the occasion of the first rice eating by an infant to take the place of the day of Baptism. That day was proposed by them as the most suitable day to name a baby.⁴² This practice, however, did not catch on. Therefore, it is not mentioned in the early writings:

The above discussion shows that we have taken for granted much of the Christian contribution to Sinhalese social life. The very practices thrown at Christians as Buddhist heritage are the result of Christian influence. Christianity, meanwhile, has been represented as a foreign element in Sri Lankan culture and the Christian minority is accused of being the representatives of an alien culture.

Notes

1 *Buddha Toraturu Pariksayaya Sabhave Vartava*, Ambalangoda; Dharma Vijaya Press, 1956, pp. 29 - 35. An abridged version entitled *The Betrayal of Buddhism*,

was also published in the same year. (Ambalangoda, 1956).

- 2 George D. Bond, *The Buddhist Revival of Sri Lanka*, University of South Carolina Press, 1988, pp. 48 - 60.
- 3 Gananath Obeyesekere, *Colonel Olcott's Reforms of the 19th Century and Their Cultural Significance*, Colombo 1992.
- 4 Fernao de Queyroz, *The Temporal and Spiritual Conquest of Ceylon*, tr. by S.G. Perera, Colombo, 1930, Vol. i, p.91. Similar information is found in another Portuguese account, Robeiro's account of Ceylon. *History of Ceylao with a Summery of de Barros and do Couto*, Antonio Bacarro and the *Documentos Remettidos with Parangi Hatana and Kutantinu Hatana*, ed. by P.E. Pieris, Colombo, 1090, p. 143. It is recorded:
"A girl makes a contract to marry a man of her caste for they cannot marry outside it, and if the relatives are agreeable they give a banquet and unite the betrothed couple. The next day the brother of the husband takes his place, and if there are seven brothers she is the wife of all of them, distributing the nights by turns, without the first husband having a greater right than any of the others."
See also the accounts of two other visitors, Jacob Saar (1647-1657) in JRAS (CB) No. 39, p. 248 and Philippus Baldeus (1672) in *Description of Ceylon* by Philip Baldeus tr. by Pieter Brohier, Tisara Prakasakayo, 1960, p.384.
- 5 Robert Knox, *An Historical Relation of Ceylon*, Dehiwela; Tisara Prakasakayo, 1966, pp. 175-177.
- 6 Bentara Atthadassi, *Kristiyani Pragnaptiyata Pilituru*, ola manuscript available at Sri Mahabodhi Vihara, Dehiwela.
- 7 *Ceylon Friend*, Vol. 10, 1890, p 115.
- 8 Robert Knox, op.cit.p.117; John Davy, *An Account of the Interior of Ceylon and its Inhabitants*, London, 1821, p. 214;

Alexander Johnstone, *Important Public Documents from Ceylon*, no date

John D'Oyly, *Diary of John D'Oyly, 1810 - 1815*, ed. by H.W. Codrington, Colombo, 1917; *Sketch of the Kandyan Kingdom*, Dehiwela, Tisara Prakasakayo, 1982, pp. 82-83.

- 9 *Lakmini Pahana*, June, 1982.
- 10 Sri Lanka National Archives, Document No. 5/63/1/45/68.
- 11 H.S. Olcott, *The Buddhist Catechism*, Colombo; Ministry of Cultural Affairs, 1968, p.47.
- 12 Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsida, 1988, pp 255 - 273
- 13 Gombrich and Obeyesekere, 1988, p.267
- 14 Gombrich and Obeyesekere, op. cit. p. 263.
- 15 The emphasis on the new idea of the parish role of Buddhist priests is seen in the current concept of Temple, School and Police adopted by the government of Sri Lanka.
- 16 H.S. Olcott. *Buddhist Catechism*, pp. 47 - 48
- 17 *Gihivinaya in Dharmapala Lipi*, ed. by Ananda Guruge, Colombo: Government Press, 1963, pp. 31-64.
- 18 Robert Knox, op. cit. pp. 218-219.
- 19 Tikiri Abeyasinghe, *Prutugusin ha Lankava* (1597-1658), Colombo; Lakehouse, 1969, pp. 101-106; S.G. Perera, *History of Ceylon for Schools*
- 20 Michael Roberts, *Noise as Cultural Struggle: Tom Tom Beating, the British, and Communal Disturbances in Sri Lanka, 1880-1930s in Communities, Riots and Survivors*, pp. 241-283.
- 21 Sunil Ariyaratne, *Karol Pasam Kantaru*, Colombo; Samayavardhana, 1987, pp. 193.

Dark Road

The road is dark, and home is far.
Sleep now, in the poor state you are.
Tonight be dreamless, and tomorrow
Wake free from fear, half-free of sorrow.

Vikram Seth