



# THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

### Review of Michelle Ruth Gamburd, *Breaking the Ashes: The Culture of Illicit Liquor in Sri Lanka*

**Citation for published version:**

Spencer, J 2011, 'Review of Michelle Ruth Gamburd, *Breaking the Ashes: The Culture of Illicit Liquor in Sri Lanka*' *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol 70, no. 1, pp. 275-276., 10.1017/S0021911810003591

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1017/S0021911810003591](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911810003591)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Publisher final version (usually the publisher pdf)

**Published In:**

*Journal of Asian Studies*

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

© Spencer, J. (2011). Review of Michelle Ruth Gamburd, *Breaking the Ashes: The Culture of Illicit Liquor in Sri Lanka*. *Journal of Asian Studies*, 70(1), 275-276 doi: 10.1017/S0021911810003591

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



# The Journal of Asian Studies

<http://journals.cambridge.org/JAS>

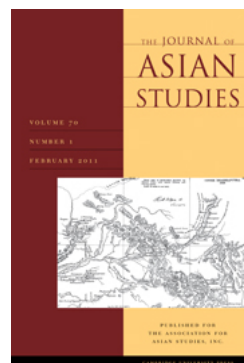
Additional services for *The Journal of Asian Studies*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



---

***Breaking the Ashes: The Culture of Illicit Liquor in Sri Lanka.* By Michelle Ruth Gamburd. x, 266 pp. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2008. 266 pp. \ \$23.95 (paper).**

Jonathan Spencer

The Journal of Asian Studies / Volume 70 / Issue 01 / February 2011, pp 275 - 276  
DOI: 10.1017/S0021911810003591, Published online: 23 February 2011

**Link to this article:** [http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract\\_S0021911810003591](http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0021911810003591)

**How to cite this article:**

Jonathan Spencer (2011). Review of Michelle Ruth Gamburd 'Breaking the Ashes: The Culture of Illicit Liquor in Sri Lanka' The Journal of Asian Studies, 70, pp 275-276 doi:10.1017/S0021911810003591

**Request Permissions :** [Click here](#)

inclusive meaning for “Hinduism” to support his sovereignty because they could not create an independent kingdom themselves.

Chapter 7, “Lost Meanings and New Stories: *Caṅḍīmaṅgal* after British Dominance,” discusses changes in the *Caṅḍīmaṅgal* texts toward the end of their production and reexamines human agency related to the challenges of British rule. Curley maintains that after the commencement of British dominance, textual production of *maṅgal-kābya* remained engaged with both devotional and this-worldly issues by ingeniously creating new stories based on contemporary issues of the society.

*Poetry and History: Bengali Maṅgal-kābya and Social Change in Precolonial Bengal* contains original research, but as a collection of essays, each individual chapter could serve as useful resource for teaching different issues in precolonial Bengal and the use of *maṅgal-kābya*. As such, it will be of interest to historians of India as well as to scholars of religion and literature. Finally, as Curley suggested the study forces us to consider the significance of *maṅgal-kābya* of Bengal and such literary genres in any vernacular traditions engaging in social discourse and to continue such engagement through new stories based on contemporary time through poetry.

GEORGE PATI

Valparaiso University  
george.pati@valpo.edu

*Breaking the Ashes: The Culture of Illicit Liquor in Sri Lanka.* By MICHELLE RUTH GAMBURD. x, 266 pp. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2008. 266 pp. \$23.95 (paper).

doi:10.1017/S0021911810003591

Michelle Ruth Gamburd has written an engaging and illuminating book on an important topic: the place of alcohol in a Buddhist setting in southern Sri Lanka. Although practicing Buddhists routinely recite the precept that promises abstention from intoxication, real rural Buddhists in Sri Lanka often do drink, often to excess, and often with serious consequences for their immediate family and sometimes for the wider community around them. Gamburd’s drinkers are almost entirely men, mostly poor and lower class, sometimes from families whose adult women are thousands of miles away working as domestic servants in the Persian Gulf (the topic of Gamburd’s previous book, based on work in the same community). Some of these men drink occasionally, especially at big public events such as weddings and funerals, but a significant minority drink heavily and as often as they can find the money to pay for it. What they usually drink is illegal hooch, known locally as *kassipu*. Sometimes things go wrong in the production of *kassipu*, resulting in blindness or even death. Even without these small local disasters, heavy drinkers pay a price in liver disease and other ailments. Gamburd, not a drinker herself, gives an uncensorious but

unflinching account of these consequences of the local culture of drinking, and she also reviews a range of attempts to do something about problem drinking, from biomedical interventions to vows to the Goddess Kali.

Gamburd's book has two great strengths. One is her skilful embedding of her ethnographic material in a broader nexus of poverty, politics, and local idioms of gender and especially masculinity. Alcohol, she argues, has to be part of a more holistic understanding of local society, and in particular, it has to be understood in terms of local political economy. The second strength derives from her unusually long-term engagement with the particular community at the heart of the book—this is her second ethnographic study based in this community, but it was also the place where Gamburd's mother did her anthropological fieldwork in the late 1960s and early 1970s. One particular relationship stands out in Gamburd's narrative, and that is her friendship with her long-term research assistant, Siri, himself a man with an occasional drinking problem. Siri facilitates the ethnographer's access to illegal drinking dens, their proprietors, and their patrons. Out of this come a series of memorable vignettes, drunks' tales of their own heroic drunkenness, and other villagers' less heroic tales of the disasters that often follow from drinking. This is an ethnography with unusually three-dimensional characters and unusually memorable tales of everyday drinking.

Alcohol, of course, can tell you about much more than just drinking. Gamburd's topic is illegal drinking, so her ethnography necessarily touches on the state and its agents, the local police. Here, I think, the reader may feel slightly short-changed. In the early sections of the book, the battle between drinkers, producers, and sellers, on one side, and the authorities, on the other, is taken a little too much at face value for anyone who is familiar with the grey zones in which police, local politicians, and criminals connect and support each other in much of Sri Lanka. This is acknowledged later in the book, where the theme of police corruption is discussed very cautiously, without fully reflecting on the ways in which this undermines some of the dynamic described earlier. An even bigger context—the global economy—is invoked in the closing pages, but the attempt to treat the story of everyday drinking as part of wider changes in global capitalism relies rather heavily on what might happen if the state encouraged deeper multinational penetration into local alcohol markets. But, of course, that is precisely what is *not* happening in the ethnographic sections of the book, and it is these much more locally framed interpretations that give this valuable book its authority and importance.

JONATHAN SPENCER  
*University of Edinburgh*  
jonathan.spencer@ed.ac.uk