

On Buddhism and Folk Religion in Sinhalese Society

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Abstract

The Sinhalese folk play, as it exists in the villages today, is still so closely associated with the ritualistic practices of the folk religion. At one end are the elaborate ceremonies connected with the worship and propitiation of the numerous deities that control diseases, bring good or bad luck to the crops, and govern natural phenomena, and at the other end are the plays approximating, in varying degrees, to drama.

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The folk religion and Buddhism

(1)

The life of the Sinhalese village is governed, not only by Buddhism, but to a much larger extent, by the folk religion as well. Though Buddhism is the predominant faith of the people, a great part of their lives happens to be ordered by beliefs and practices which are really not of Buddhist origin. The reason for this is that Buddhism is different from every other religion. It is anti-ritualistic and therefore, largely non-congregational. It stresses individual salvation, and inculcates no belief in God or gods. It aims at solving the ultimate problem of sorrow and the recurring evils of birth, old-age, disease and death. It is not directly concerned with helping man in the difficulties he is faced with in his material existence. Hence while Buddhism profoundly influenced the general attitude of the Sinhalese to life and its problems, giving them a characteristically different outlook on what are known as the ultimate questions, it left them more or less free to seek other help in their day-to-day business of living. Buddhism interfered little with the lay life of an individual, unlike, for example, Hinduism. The life of a Hindu would be controlled, from birth to death, by a string of obligatory ritual, presided over by the priest. Many important events in the life of the average Buddhist, on the other hand, are governed by ceremonies which are connected with folk-cults which, in their origin, could be regarded as non-Buddhistic.

The fact that Buddhism had little prescribed ritual for the

lay life made it easy, and in some senses, necessary, for the folk religion to step in to fill the gap. It provided the layman with the means of solving his practical problems, that is, it gave him ceremonies for ensuring the success of his crops, it showed him how to propitiate the deities that cause disease and famine, and it opened up ways of gaining favours from the powers that control the elements. Its priests interceded between man and the unseen agencies, and performed benedictory rites for him in the crises of his daily life.

(2)

Thus there sprang up a curious relationship between Buddhism and the folk religion. The folk religion is based on a belief in supernatural beings and the efficacy of prayer and ritual. Strictly, there is no place in Buddhism for such beliefs. But Buddhism had to adapt itself, from being an individualistic and monastic creed, to a religion serving the needs of an organised lay community. What it did in Sri Lanka, was, therefore, to allow the people to go on with their usual practices, which they found useful to them in their daily life, and to make them turn to Buddhism for guidance in moral conduct and in matters concerning man's final destiny and the after-life. Instead of absorbing non-Buddhist beliefs and practices, and thereby tainting the original creed, as it did in most other countries, Buddhism came to a different kind of compromise with them in Sri Lanka. The gods and demons of the folk religion were looked upon as mere instruments whose help man could obtain in the ordi-

nary business of day-to-day living. They were all subservient to the Buddha. In a sense, man was superior to the gods, for the gods cannot acquire "merit" (pin) by doing good deeds and thus obtain final salvation. They must be born as mortals once again before they can strive for Nirvana, and while remaining gods, they must depend on human beings who can "transfer" at will, to the gods, the merit they obtain by doing good deeds. The priest was a man who could exercise power over supernatural beings by virtue of his knowledge of certain rites and rituals. When these rituals are performed, these supernatural beings have merely to obey. In some cases they are even cajoled and cheated into the service of man. The priest is employed for such purposes, and he is by no means to be confused with the holy monk of the temple who leads the higher life of contemplation, directing his energies towards the eradication of the passions. His is a life that has to be emulated. He sets the ideal, and although it may not be practicable for every one to follow his footsteps, it is everyone's ambition to do so.

Thus, although Buddhism did not come into conflict with the folk religion, we find it attempting, in a small way, to take the place of the folk religion in the lives of the people. As this had to be done carefully, and only to a degree that would not affect the true spirit of the teaching, Buddhism had to make some kind of alliance with the folk religion and to absorb some of its outward forms. The process began in India, where already Buddhism had absorbed some of the beliefs of its Hindu environment. The Gods of the Hindu Pantheon were admitted into its fold, and with these, a large part of Hindu mythology and beliefs about heaven and hell. Indra, the boastful Hindu warrior-god, became Śakra the pious defender of the Buddhist faith. Hindu beliefs about the departed became incorporated into Buddhism. The worship of the *cetiya* and the *bodhi* tree, originally beliefs belonging to the animistic stratum of Indian religion, became part of Buddhist ritual.¹

(3)

The process that began in India continued in Sri Lanka as well. Dr. S. Paranavitana² has adduced considerable evidence to show that there were cults of an animistic nature in Sri Lanka, before Buddhism became the official religion of the people of this island. Judging from the similarity of some of these cults with those that existed in North India about the same time, and the identity of some of the deities, we may infer that the cults were transported here by the early

Aryan immigrants to the Island. From Dr. Paranavitana we also gather the important fact that in the early days of the arrival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, there was a certain amount of fusion between these animistic cults and the new religion, and that, perhaps, missionaries thought it desirable to make a deliberate amalgamation in some instances. Certain Buddhist shrines appear to have been built on spots that were previously hallowed by the presence of the deities of the older religion. An inscription of the tenth century states that the Isurumuni Vihāra was situated by the side of the Tissa Tank the waters of which formed the dwelling place of the spirit (*rakus*) who was converted by Saint Mahinda and was made to be of service to the religion as well as to the world.³ Mahasena in the fourth century A. D. is said to have constructed a *cetiya* on the spot where stood the shrine of Yakṣa Kāvela, and the Thūpārāma itself was situated in the precincts of a shrine dedicated to the Yakṣa Maheja.⁴

(4)

The institution of *pirit* is one of the more conspicuous examples of a ceremony of a magical nature being absorbed by Buddhism. The *suttas* used for this purpose exist in the Pali canon itself, and this makes it likely that in some form, the practice of reciting them for benedictory purposes began in India. However, it seems to have been mainly in Sri Lanka that the practice took on the proportions of a large-scale ceremony. We first hear of it as being performed at the instance of King Upatissa who lived about A.D. 400, when there was a great drought and pestilence. Priests were made to go round the city all night reciting the Ratana Sutta.⁵

The institution of the recitation of *pirit* as an official ceremony is probably a result of the influence of Mahāyāna. There are Tibetan ceremonies very similar in character to *pirit*. Today it is performed as a general-purposes charm, on all important occasions in the private life of the individual or the public life of the community. The sacred thread, one end of which is held by the monks as they chant, and the other end by the listeners, would communicate the good effect from the one to the other, and the water placed in the vicinity of the chanting would, acquire magical properties and confer prosperity and immunity from mishaps on those who drink it or on those who are sprinkled with it. The thread could also be tied round the arm as an amulet, like the charmed thread used in folk magic.

A few other instances may be pointed out, where Buddhism seems to have incorporated some of the rituals which appear to have belonged to the religion of the folk. In the funeral obsequies of the present day, monks are given offerings of cloth (*mataka vattha*) at the graveside. After *pansil* the relations of the dead person kneel before the monks, with the gift of cloth in their hands, and repeat thrice a Pali sentence after the monks, to the effect that the cloth is being offered to the Saṅgha in the name of the dead person. The chief monk then delivers a sermon on the transitoriness of things, after which the close relatives of the dead person pour water from a jar to a cup. In the meanwhile, the monk chants a verse from the Tiro-kuḍḍa Sutta to the effect that, just as rivers flow into the sea, and just as water reaches its level, whatever is given here on earth will reach the hungry spirits of the departed. Monks are also given alms on the seventh day after the death of a person. Regular alms-givings to monks are also held three months and a year after the death.

(5)

These ceremonies suggest that Buddhism had made some compromise, in this instance, with the cult of the dead, which existed among the beliefs of the folk. This cult, widely prevalent in India and forming a vital part of Hindu belief, was probably brought here by Aryan settlers, but, under the influence of indigenous cults, it has gathered round it a large number of rituals. There are charms intended to "bind" the spirits of the departed (known as *perētayō*, Sk. *preta*), because of the harm they work on their relatives. It is likely, therefore, that the offering of cloth and food was originally meant to be for the use of the departed, and that in the funeral ceremonies of the Buddhists, the monk was substituted for the dead men. The offerings of presents to a living person as a substitute for the dead is a phenomenon that occurs in the ceremonies of the Chinese as well, among whom there is a strong cult of the dead.

(6)

In the annual pilgrimage to Śrī Pāda too, we see the relict of an animistic practice surviving under the aegis of Buddhism. In other parts of the Buddhist world sacred mountains are honoured as a result of the belief that they have been sanctified by the foot-print of the Buddha. Both in such cases and in our own case in Sri Lanka, we probably have an instance of an original mountain-deity being "converted" to Buddhism and made the guardian of the sacred foot-print.

The practice of making regular pilgrimages to holy places is a Hindu custom which Buddhism accepted very early in its history. But the pilgrimage to the top of the Peak must be made with the help of Saman Deviyo, the Guardian God, whose goodwill is necessary for the success of the undertaking. It is in this that we see the alliance between Buddhism and the cult of a mountain-deity. If Saman Deviyo could be identified with the Bodhisatva Samantabhadra, as Dr. Paranavitana suggests,⁶ it may have been the case that the animistic god of the mountain was fused with this Bodhisatva during the spread of Mahāyānism in this country, just as local gods like Pu Tai and Kwan Yin became identified with Bodhisatvas in China.

(7)

There are also instances where kings seem to have found it necessary, for practical purposes, to institute Buddhist ceremonies on the pattern of Hindu or Mahāyāna rituals, or to clothe non-Buddhist local rituals in a Buddhist garb. The annual ceremony of the bathing of the *bodhi* tree, and the *abhiṣeka* of *stūpas* were very probably borrowed from the folk religion.⁷ The festival of Giribhaṇḍa, which consisted of a ceremonial circumambulation of the Cetiya Pabbata, was probably connected with mountain-worship. It is also well known that a large number of Hindu rituals were incorporated into the worship of the Tooth Relic. A thing of recent occurrence is the transformation of the Perahāra at Kandy into a Buddhist ceremony. Originally celebrated in honour of the local deities Nātha, Visnu, Kataragama and Pattini, the Perahāra consists of a group of ceremonies connected with the folk beliefs of the people. This group of ceremonies were amalgamated with Buddhism by King Kīrti Śrī Rājāsinha in 1775, when he ordered the Sacred Tooth to be carried in procession along with the insignia of the gods.

(8)

The history of religions shows us that when a new religion is taken into the midst of a people with a different faith, some sort of alliance does take place between the two religions, but that such an alliance need not necessarily change the complexion of the new faith. The kind of alliance that took place between Buddhism and the local animistic cults in Sri Lanka, occurred when Christianity was taken to England. Sir Edmund Chambers points out that, according to tradition, the Church of St. Pancras outside the walls of Canterbury stands on the site of a fane at which Ethelbert himself worshipped, and that the Church of St. Paul's in

London replaced a temple dedicated to the woodland goddess Freyja who is regarded as the equivalent of Diana. This amalgamation was thought expedient on the part of the early Christian missionaries to England, just as the Buddhist missionaries seem to have thought it here. A letter written by Gregory the Great in June 601, advises St. Augustine not to follow his earlier instructions to break down the original places of worship, but to follow a new policy. He says, "Do not after all pull down the fanes. Destroy the idols, purify the buildings with holy water, set relics there, and let them become temples of the true God. So the people will have no need to change their places of concourse, and where of old they were wont to sacrifice cattle to demons, thither let them continue to resort on the day of the saint to whom the church is dedicated, and slay their beasts no longer as a sacrifice, but for a social meal in honour of Him whom they now worship."⁸ Maung Htin Aung says that a similar thing took place in his country as well. "When Buddhism in one of its purest forms," he says, "was introduced under Anawrahta, the great king realised the impossibility of attracting people suddenly to the new faith; so he compromised by recognising the nats as Buddhist spirits and giving them shrines in his Shwezigon Pagoda."⁹

(9)

These ceremonial accretions merely helped the religion to enter into the daily lives of the people and to integrate the society and enable kings to rule the country by means of a religio-political authority. In no wise did it affect, substantially, the character of early Buddhism, as it did in countries like Tibet and China. The degree of assimilation by Theravāda Buddhism of non-Buddhist beliefs and practices differed in each country, but the manner of assimilation was the same. The monk never became wholly priest, as he did in the Mahāyāna countries. The monk largely remained a recluse, and followed the ideal of not associating with the laity, and, although the tendency was in the opposite direction, this was checked from time to time by powerful movements and by royal edict. When it was felt even among the orthodox, that, while it was strictly in keeping with the teaching of the Buddha for the monk to live away from society, it was detrimental to the religion and to the power that it could exert on the people, the role of the monk was split up into that of the *ganthadhura* and that of the *vidassanādhura*. The men who took to the *ganthadhura* learned and taught the scriptures, while the others lived in lonely meditation.

Although the former performed a greater service to the community, it was never forgotten that the *vidassanādhura* monks were following the true ideal of Buddhism.

(10)

In actual practice, a large number of monks gave in to the temptation to gain power over the people and to win favours from them, in spite of the warning given by the Buddha in the Brahmajāla Sutta, and notwithstanding the *katikāvatas* issued by kings from time to time. They practiced medicine, and learned all the arts of sorcery and divination which were branded by the Buddha as "low" (*tiracchāna*). The instance of Śrī Rāhula is a case in point. Even to this day he is regarded as having had a remarkable command over demons, and most of the legends current about him are connected in some way with the esoteric lore which he was reputed to have possessed. Although there seem to have been powerful representatives of the opposite camp, as, for example, Śrī Rāhula's contemporary, Vidāgama Maitreya, the tendency has been at work up to the present day.

The monk in the village is very often the physician of the people. He is, often, their astrologer as well, and on many occasions he would recite *set kavi* (verses containing blessings) and *vas kavi* (verses containing curses). But even when this degeneration took place Buddhism was not affected. Orthodox opinion never confused the two roles although they were combined in one individual.

During a certain period in the history of the country, the role of monk and priest became one for a short while. This was during the reign of Narendrasinha, who came to the throne in 1701 A.D., when the institution of the Saṅgha completely disappeared, and there arose, instead, a class of secular priests who were not celibate though living in temples. They were called *gaṇinnānse*. They took over the functions of the village demon-priests, and also practiced as physicians. As monks were no more, they became the learned men as well. They did not wear the orthodox robe of the Buddhist monk, but clothed themselves in white or in saffron cloth. The *gaṇinnānse*, we understand, were responsible for many of the temple paintings of the period. The *gaṇinnānse's* wife was referred to as *gaṇegedera*, and his children as *gaṇageḍiyo*. After the establishment of the Saṅgha under Saraṇankara, these became terms of contempt, but the fact that efforts were made to re-institute the Saṅgha shows that the *gaṇinnānse*s did not receive the respect or the recognition of the more orthodox. In this short-lived institu-

tion, the role of monk and priest came very near being combined into one. In other countries, particularly China and Tibet, Buddhism was so completely absorbed by the local religions that it lost its original character beyond recognition. The monk wholly became priest. In Tibet, for example, the role of the Buddhist monk and that of the Bon priest merged into one, and resulted in the creation of the Lama. Guru Padmasambhava who carried Buddhism into Tibet, is said to have had to make several compromises with the Bon religion on account of the strong opposition he met with. In fact, Waddell remarks of Tibetan Buddhism that it is a "priestly mixture of Saivite mysticism, magic, and Indo-Tibetan demonology, overlaid by a thin varnish of Mahāyāna Buddhism."¹⁰ In China, too, the Buddhist monk took over many of the functions of the earlier Confucian priest, and officiated in this capacity in a large number of rituals, although, owing to the influence of the teachings of Lao-Tse, the Chinese did not entirely lose sight of the ideal of lonely contemplation and the development of spiritual insight.

note

1. Paranavitane, Pre-Buddhist Religious Beliefs in Ceylon, JRASCB Vol.XXXI.
2. ibid
3. ibid
4. ibid
5. Paranavitana, *Buddhist Festivals in Ceylon*, in *Buddhistic Studies*, ed. B. C. Law.
6. *Mahayanism in Ceylon*, in *Ceylon Journal of Science* Vol. II.
7. Paranavitana, *Buddhist Festivals in Ceylon*, in *Buddhistic Studies*, ed. B. C. Law.
8. *The Mediaeval Stage*, Vol. I, pp.95,96.
9. *Burmese Drama*, p.17.
10. Buddhism in Tibet, p.20.