

Diffusion of Religious Values and Repositioning the God *Sakra* in Sinhalese Religious Pantheon: The Case of *New Lakshmi Shrine* in Katharagama

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Abstract

Historically, Buddhism in Sri Lanka has been shaped by various socio-economic and political frameworks. Within the existing sociological and anthropological literatures on Buddhism's changes in Sri Lanka, the present paper intended on analyzing the impact of Christian teachings on Buddhist religious pantheon as related to the legend of *God Sakra* at present social context. According to Buddhist teachings, an individual is provided with positive consequences depending on his/her meritorious actions and demerits depending on his/her evil actions. This is a fundamental principle in the Buddhist philosophy. The concept of merit-sin (*Pin-paw*) is based on this fundamental principle. There is no Buddhist teaching on chasing or flushing of sin. Nevertheless, there is an organized religious cult with ritual performing to god *Sakra* at Kataragama new *Lakshmi* shrine which is believed to be influencing the devotees to believe in flushing or canceling their sins in this world. The *God Sakra* is imaginary god of Buddhist church. Nevertheless, with the development of particular set of ritual practices, god *Sakra* is being transformed as a living god in the devotee's court.

Keywords: Buddhist Philosophy, Christian Ideology, Flushing of Sin, *God Sakra's* Pond

1. Introduction

Even though the Theravada tradition which is considered as a fundamental doctrine or conceptual religious base of Buddhism seems to be of crucial importance to the ideological identity of Buddhism, there are a number of significant ideological as well as ritualistic changes emerged recently. Such traditions lead the present day scholars to understand the vital socio-cultural changes in the religious contexts of Sri Lanka. Traditionally, there are two major religious traditions which can be considered as supplementary processes of changing Buddhist philosophy further: (1) Hinduism and (2) Christianity. With the results of mixing and diffusion of non Buddhist religious contexts and perspectives it seemed more transformative. Thus the scholars and anthropologists tend to use the term "Sinhala Buddhism" in order to specify the particular changes in the broadest sense (Gombrich and Obeyesekere, 1988).

Indian religious movements have made significant impacts even during the Pre-Buddhist era, where people specially believed in Gods and Goddesses before establishing Buddhism as the dominant doctrine in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, it can clearly be observed that the Hindu influences of deities are directly transformed to the Buddhism as a result of socio-cultural, economic and political interrelation between two countries since the 12th century (Dharmadasa, 1994; Soratha, 1993). Thus the beliefs in Gods and interrelated rituals have become prominent and salient features of later Buddhism. Nevertheless, the Buddha is the highest position of Buddhist religious pantheon though the beliefs of gods and rituals of Hinduism influenced the Buddhism. As Obeyesekere (1966) states, the Buddha is the presidential deity of the pantheon; he is perceived as pure benevolence. According to this transformative scenario of Hindu god concepts the notion of spirituality, *Nibbāna (nirvāna)*, principles of cause and results (*hethu pala vadaya*) of Buddhism have also been slightly redefined and reconsidered.

The second most significant changing force within the Buddhist ideological and ritualistic structure is Christianity which was popularized in the

country during the colonial era. However, radical religious influences of Portuguese and Dutch were not as vital as those took place during the British Colonial period. Especially, Christian missionaries aimed at forced diffusing the Christian doctrine throughout the country. Moreover, this inevitable process was expanded to administrative, educational and other cultural domains of the society resulting in a religiously and administratively structured society. Therefore, the dilemma of superiority sentiments of particular doctrines and the devotees were categorized according to two antagonized and polarized religious pathways. This situation urged the necessity of change and transforming certain religious practices and rituals in order to survive. Later, those changes have been identified by eminent scholars based on a number of different conceptual elements (Gombrich and Obeyesekere, 1988; Senevirathne, 2001; Tambiah, 1992).

These two major religious divisions have attempted to change the nature of Buddhism further; especially the Hindu influence is gradually establishing subordinated micro-religious practices and cults. According to Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) the emergence of popular cults such as *kataragama*, *Hūniyan* and *kāli* can be considered as new changes. However, in this context it can observe such changes and cults as becoming the new religious traditions in the society. Moreover, there is a tendency of attempting to synchronize those cults and religious groups with fundamental doctrines as mediators of reestablishing religious sentiment by various emerging evangelical groups.

2. Methods and Objectives

The present study has two major objectives: to identify the influence of Christian ideologies on Buddhist philosophy in the modern context and; to examine devotees' interpretations and perceptions with reference to this influence. The researchers shall analyze case study data which were carried out at *New Sri Lakshmi* shrine at *Sella Kataragama*. Qualitative data collection methods including observation and semi structured interviews were also used in data collecting process.

The Legend of God Sakra

The practice of believing in god *Sakra* emerged in the Sinhalese Buddhist society with the influence of Hinduism. *Sakka* or *Sakra* is a powerful god who has been mentioned in Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism. In Hinduism, *Sakra* is another name for Lord *Indra* (Donbastiyan, 1912:36-37; Soratha, 1993:26).¹ *Sakra* means powerful. The name of *Sakra* is mentioned in many verses of *Rig veda*, *Sama veda* and *Atharven veda*. *Sakra*, the epithet of lord *Indra*, has also been mentioned in the classical text *Mahabharata*. In Buddhism, *Sakra* has been described as the ruler of the *Thawtisa* heaven. The full name is '*Sakko Devanam Indra*'² which means *Sakra*, lord of the *Devas*'. The legends of *Sakra* in the Buddhist texts are different from those belonging to the Hindu god *Indra*. In Buddhism, *Sakra* and *Indra* are different in identity.

Sakra is the emperor of *Thawtisa* heaven which is believed to be located on the top of the mountain called *Meru* also known as *Maha Meru*. This paradise is imagined to be the polar centre of the material world around which the sun and the moon rotate. *Thawtisa* Heaven is said to be the highest of all the heavens and keeps indirect contacts with the Earth. The god *Sakra* is long-lasting but mortal. It is believed that when one *Sakra* dies, his place is taken by another deity who then becomes the new *Sakra*. *Sakra* is mentioned in the *Jataka* stories and several *sutras*. He is depicted as consulting Lord Buddha in various Buddhist texts on morality. According to Buddhist literature, the god *Sakra* and Brahma are believed to be the protectors of Buddhism. In Jainism, *Sakra* or Lord *Indra* and his wife *Sachi* are portrayed to be travelling using the Eternal Elephant *Airavanta* also known as *Airavana*.³ The word '*Sakra*' appears several times in Jain texts as a

¹ According to Soratha (2000). *Indra* is the leader among gods, hence, we believe that god *Sakra* should be the epithet of *Indra*

² The *Dhajagga* sutra denotes "*Sakko Devanamindo.....*" here conjunction could be '*Sakro Devanam Indra*'

³ There are evidences on *Airavana* in Sinhalese literatures. Eg. *Selalihini Sandesa* says *Airavana Unath Nawatana Risin Ena*

name for the king of the *Devas*. *Sakra* in many Jain texts plays an important part in the lives of the Jains and as the king of the gods.

Placing the God Sakra in the Sinhalese Buddhist Society

It is important to discuss the faith in gods when understanding the moral order in the Sinhalese Buddhist society. Although believing in gods is still a controversial arena of Buddhist philosophy, there is a momentous space devoted to gods in the Sinhalese Buddhist society (Dharmadasa and Tundeniya, 1994). According to some scholars, the faith in gods and rituals which are performed on behalf of gods, is historically established mainly in the 12th, 13th and 14th centuries due to Indian cultural influences (Dharmadasa and Tundeniya, 1994:19).

Although other gods are worshiped and rituals are performed for them, the god *Sakra* is not worshiped by devotees and there are no specific rituals or shrines relating to god *Sakra*. He is an imaginary god according to the Buddhist belief system. Although there is lack of evidence regarding images of god *Sakra* in the Sinhala Buddhist tradition, we can find some images of god *Sakra* in the Indian tradition.

The folk understanding of the god *Sakra* is that his seat (*Pandukambala Sailasanaya*) begins to heat when pious people get into trouble. Then he makes interferences to protect such people. As many *jataka* tales⁴ reveal, the god *Sakra* has attempted to protect the Buddha in his previous lives. *Guttilla*, *Sasa*, *Dahamsonda*, *Padhamanawaka*, *Vidhura*, *Chulla Dhanuddhara* and *Vessantara jataka* are some examples.

⁴ Stories that describe the previous births of the load Buddha's. According to Buddhist literature, there are 550 *jataka* tales.

Picture 1
God *Sakra* with *Airavana*



Source: <http://jadeturtlerecords.blogspot.com/2011/02/sakra.html>

Picture 2
The God *Sakra* (center) and *Brahma* (right) paying respect to Lord Buddha



Source: <http://jadeturtlerecords.blogspot.com/2011/02/sakra.html>

As Obeyesekere (1966) has pointed out in his *Rambadeniya* study, there is a hierarchical order of gods in the Sinhalese conception. According to him, the pantheon is positioned according to gods' relationship to the Buddhist church (*sāsānā*) and their authority. The diagrammatic representations of the Sinhalese Buddhist pantheon presented by Obeyesekere (1966) and Mallikarachchi (2003) is given below:⁵

Figure 1
A Linear Representation of the Sinhala Buddhist Pantheon.



Although the Buddha is placed on the top of the moral order, he is not considered as a god. The Lord Buddha is worshiped and given a high position in the devotees' belief system. God *Sakra* is the leading and authoritative god of

⁵ There is no a particular layer for the god Sakra of Mallikarachchi's diagrammatic presentation of Sinhala Buddhist Pantheon. Here we have made a separate layer for the god Sakra based on Obeyesekere's explanation (1966).

the pantheon and is positioned slightly below to the Lord Buddha. As Obeyesekere mentions, the main role of the god *Sakra* is to protect the Buddhist church.

"Slightly below the Buddha, is *Sakra* the protector of the universal Buddhist church (*Sasana*). Though constantly referred to in myth, he is never directly propitiated or worshiped in *Rambadeniya* for he has delegated his authority to *Saman*, the protector and guardian of the Buddha *sasana* in Ceylon." (Obeyesekere, 1966: 09)

Further, in the context of the Sinhalese Buddhist society, god *Sakra's* role as the protector of Buddhism can be traced from historical sources. *Mahavansa*, the great historical narrative of Sri Lanka, refers to the day of Buddha's passed away and the arrival of prince *Vijaya* and his followers. On the request of Buddha, god *Sakra* has delegated god *Upulwan* to protect prince *Vijaya* and his followers.

"The guide of the world, having accomplished to good of the whole world, attained the supreme moment of bliss and was lying on his dead-bed. The *great sage*, the noblest among speakers, told *Sakra*, who was standing by him there, in the vast assembly of deities, king *Sinhabahu's* son, *Vijaya*, from *Lata-Country* has reached Lanka, together with seven hundred followers. Lord of gods, my faith will be established in Lanka. Therefore, protect him along with his followers and also Lanka diligently

The lord of the gods heard the word of *Tathagata* and, with respect, entrusted the protection of Lanka to god *Uppalavanna*. As soon as he was commanded by *Sakra*, he came to Lanka speedily..." (*Mahavamsa*, Chapter Seven: 1-4 stanzas).

It can be concluded from the already mentioned facts that the god *Sakra* in the Buddhist moral order is considered to be a god who is devoted to protect Buddhist church rather than a god who is benevolent to devotees in their day to day inconveniences.

3. Discussion and Findings

Origin and Development of New Lakshmi Shrine

Katharagama is one of the most celebrated places of pilgrimage in Sri Lanka, sacred similarly to the Buddhists as well as to the Hindus. *Sella Katharagama* is also a very important place in *Katharagama*. It is situated about five kilometers away from *Katharagama*. According to folklore the famous love story between *Skanda* and *Valliamma* took place at *Sella Katharagama*. *Sella Katharagama* has many *Kovils* namely, *Ganapathi Kovil*, *Siva Kovil*, *Katharagama Kovil*, *Valliamma Kovil*, *Lakshmi Kovil* and *Saman Devalaya*.

Nevertheless the present story of cult of god *Sakra* at new *Lakshmi* shrine is not taking place at this sacred *Sella Katharagama Kovil* premises. It is situated another two kilometers away from sacred *Sella Katharagama*. The present place of *New Lakshmi shrine* that we discussed in the paper has no such long history or sacred value. It was started in 1996 by one of the famous businessmen. *Priyantha Rathnayaka*, the owner of *Ira Handa Private Limited* is the founding father of this *New Lakshmi shrine*.

Accordingly, the interview with *Priyantha Rathnayaka* reveals that in early 1990s, when his business was in trouble, he was instructed by one of his Hindu friends to perform some rituals called *Lakshmi Puja* to the Goddess *Lakshmi* who symbolizes prosperity, wealth and happiness.⁶ The Goddess

⁶Primarily eight kinds of wealth are established, associated with goddess *Lakshmi*. They are:1) *Adi Lakshmi* (The main goddess),2) *Dhanya Lakshmi* (Granary wealth), 3) *Dhairya Lakshmi* (Wealth of courage), 4) *Gaja Lakshmi* (Elephants, symbols of wealth),5) *Santana Lakshmi* (Wealth of progeny),6) *Vijaya Lakshmi* (Wealth of victory),7) *Vidya Lakshmi* (Wealth of knowledge), and 8) *Dhana Lakshmi* (Monetary wealth)

Lakshmi is said to bring good luck and is believed to protect her devotees from all kinds of misery and money-related sorrows. At the same time, he was helping the political propaganda of former president *Chandrika Bandaranaiyke Kumarathunga* from his *Ira Handa* newspaper. As a result of that, he was gifted a piece of land about three acres near to sacred *Sella Katharagama* soon after *Chandrika Bndaranaiyake* was elected as the president in 1995. As *Priyantha Rathnayaka* revealed, when he received the land, it had been a wasteland for a long period of time. Except an old *Nuga* tree, there was nothing religiously valuable.

Then he developed the land as a religious space preserving the existing aesthetic value of the environment. The main purpose of developing this religious place was to attract the pilgrims who visit the sacred *Katharagama* and *Sella Katharagama*. According to our observations a significant number of pilgrims visit the newly developed *Lakshmi* shrine each day. Within the three acres of land of newly developed *Lakshmi* shrine there are many *kovils*, two Buddha image houses and other religious structures.

The existing religious cults and structures within the newly developed *Laxshmi* shrine can be summarized as follows:

- Buddha Image House
- *Seevali* Image House
- *Vishnu Devala* (affront to *Lakshmi devala*)
- *Ganapathi Devala*
- *Lakshmi Devala*
- *Senasuru Devala*
- *Saman Devala*
- *Patthini Devala*
- *Krishna Devala*
- God *Sakra's* pond

- Sculptured structure of *Lumbiniya* (with statues of birth of Lord Buddha, renunciation of household life, Period of severe asceticism, *Kiripindu Pujawa*, nibbana, first dharma speech)
- *Fook* Statue
- *Fensui* statue
- Sculptured statues of *Kiri Ammawaru*
- Wishes Waterfall of *Radha-Krishna*

The above list of cults and structures make an important sketch about the religious background of the newly developed *Lakshmi* shrine. It is important to note that the authorities have well identified the psychological needs of various types of devotees including ordinary Buddhists, youth, infertile women, business community, lovers, people with problems related to education and devotees from all kinds of misery and money-related sorrows. Further, a well-trained young staff is also present, praying and chanting mantras at the each *devala* and the other places where rituals are performed. While paying attention to these various religious cults and practices, this paper attempts to provide an overview on cult of god *Sakra*.

The Karma Principle and the Cult of God Sakra

Buddhism primarily attempts to educate the public about the very notion of 'karma'. This is a fundamental characteristic of Buddhism. This belief was prevalent in India before the presence of Lord Buddha. The *Pali* term '*karma*' implies 'action' or 'doing'. Any purposive mental, verbal, or physical action is regarded as *karma*. Generally, all good and bad actions produce *karma*. *Karma* means all moral and immoral wishes. Basically, the theory of *karma* in Buddhism examines the relationship between cause and effect. Each and every action (good or bad) has a result (good or bad) (Dhammananda, 1998; Dharmasiri, 1986; Obeyesekere, 2002)

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The classification of *karma* in Buddhism can be identified as having references to different functions of *karma*⁷ depending on the priority of effect⁸, to the place in which the effect takes place⁹ and the time when its effects are implemented. In this discussion, our main attention was given to discuss the final category of *karma* classification because of the basic argument. In relation to time, four types of *karma* can be identified:

1. Immediately effective (*ditthadhammavedaniya*) *karma*.
2. Subsequently effective (*uppapajjavedaniya*) *karma*.
3. Indefinitely effective (*aparapariyavedaniya*) *karma*.
4. Defunct or ineffective (*ahosi*) *karma* (Dhammananda, 1998).

Immediately effective *karma* are experienced by humans in the present life. According to *Abhidhamma*, one does both good and evil actions during the present life and is received the results of such actions during the present life itself. Results of some actions take place in the next or the subsequent birth. Such actions are called 'Subsequently effective' *karma*. Indefinitely effective *karma* is not utilized in the second birth. The effects of indefinitely effective *karma* follow individuals as a circle until they attain *Nibbana*. The forth category, defunct or ineffective *karma* end without effect. Certain minor sins are cancelled when strong merit actions are performed. According to Buddhist philosophy, humans are bound to *karma* which, one may experience in the course of his/her wandering in *Samsara*, and no one, including even the Lord Buddha and *Arahantas*, could exempt from it.

The concept of *karma* has been established in the Sinhalese Buddhist society as a way of morally educating individuals' life-cycle. It is mentioned in the Buddhist literature that good or bad actions are systematically transformed into good or bad consequences. Their results affect the present life or the next birth.

⁷ Reproductive *karma*, Supportive *karma*, Obstructive *karma* or counteractive *karma*, Destructive (*upaghataka*) *karma*

⁸ Weighty (*garuka*) *karma*, proximate (*asanna*) *karma* or death-proximate *karma*, habitual (*accina*) *karma*, reserve or cumulative (*katatta*) *karma*

⁹ Evil Actions (*akusala kamma*), Good Actions (*kusala kamma*)

Social morality, it is supposed, should punish those who commit wrong and should reward those who conform. Thus, it is supposed to be a kind of religious morality.

Where the above two aspects of philosophical and social morality regarding *karma* in the Sinhalese Buddhist society are concerned, it becomes clear that there is no teaching of chasing or cleansing of sin. Buddhists believe that their meritorious actions are rewarded with positive results while demerits or evil actions result in bad outcomes. This is a fundamental principle of Buddhist philosophy. The concept of merit-demerits in the Buddhist society is based on this idea. In Buddhism, there is no teaching of fomentation or flushing away of sin and force involving in the salvation of individual from sin. However, Christianity includes a particular teaching of chasing sin unlike *karma* in the Buddhist society. According to the Bible, the teaching of salvation is one of God's gifts provided to his (Jesus Christ) followers. Biblical salvation is God's way of providing his people with deliverance from and spiritual death through and faith in Jesus Christ.¹⁰ By faith in Jesus Christ, believers are saved from God's judgment of sin and its consequence- the eternal death. According to the Bible, if someone feels "tug" of god inside his/her heart, he/she can experience the assurance of salvation. By becoming a Christian, an individual takes one of the most important steps in his/her life on earth and begins a distinct adventure.

As Bible's Acts 3:19 mentions: "*Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that time of refreshing may come from the Lord.*"¹¹ According to the Bible's teaching why Salvation is necessary for humans? The simple answer is that 'when a frustrated human is separated from God by sin, the God's holiness punishes him/her and then helps him/her to move towards the eternal death. Our death is not sufficient to cover the payment for sin. Only a perfect, spotless sacrifice, offered in just the right way, can pay for our sins.

¹⁰ In the Old Testament, the concept of salvation is rooted in Israel's deliverance from Egypt in the The New Testament reveals the source of salvation.

¹¹ Source: <http://christianity.about.com/od/faqhelpdesk/p/newinternational.html>

Jesus, the perfect God-man, arrived at the earth to offer an opportunity to those frustrated people to reach a good life if they wish so, because Jesus loves humans.

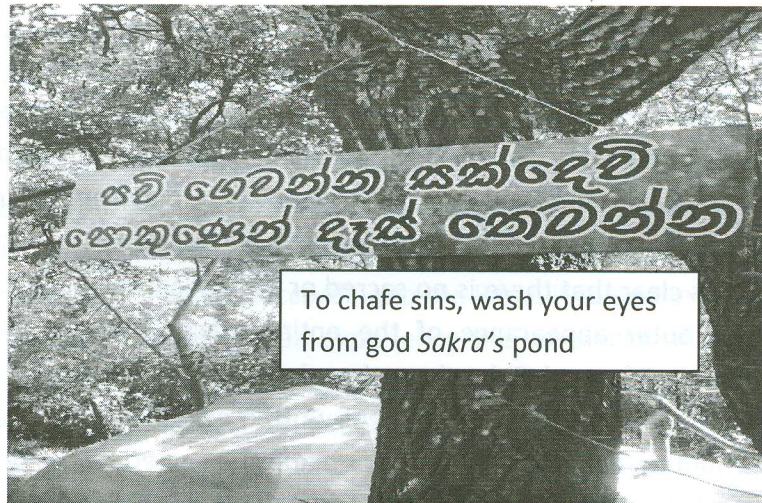
The famous folk poem '*upanda sita karapu paw neta warak wendot Kelaniye*' (all your sins from the day you were born could be eliminated by your worshipping of the *Kelani* Temple at least once) does not represent Buddhist philosophy. It is a very unorthodox vision of the world of traditional village people. Devotees believe that they are blessed if they have an opportunity to worship the *Kelaniya* temple which is the place where the Lord Buddha arrived in his third visit to Sri Lanka.

This discussion leads us to the basic argument of the study. That is, at *Kataragama* new *Lakshmi* shrine, there is a spiritual as well as physical space especially dedicated to God *Sakra*. This space consists of a huge *Maila* tree with banner and artificially created pond with water fountain (see the picture 4). There is a hut closer to the tree and an alms box is placed inside. As in the general observation, it is clear that there is no sacred or symbolical value attached to the tree. However outer appearance of the entire space is shown as having a commercial value. The god *Sakra* is an imaginary god of Hinduism as well as Buddhism. Hence, there is lack of sufficient written evidence regarding both the rituals performed on behalf of the god *Sakra* and the sacred places dedicated to god *Sakra*. This is the first place we found dedicated to god *Sakra*.

Although believing in the god *Sakra* belongs to Hinduism, no ritual is performed for god *Sakra* even in the Tamil community in Sri Lanka. But in New *Lakshmi shrine* at *Kataragama*, a number of rituals are promoted by the owners of the shrine in order to pay respect to god *Sakra*. Generally, both Tamil and Sinhalese communities perform rituals in relation to gods and goddesses in similar manner. Lighting oil lamps and camphor, chanting mantras, offering flowers, lighting candles and incense sticks, ringing bells and offering divers of fruits are some of similar rituals shared by both communities. Nevertheless, such rituals cannot be seen at this artificial place.

As we observed, the most important ritualistic activity is washing face from the pond devoted to the god *Sakra*. When devotees perform rituals for particular gods or goddesses, it can be clearly observed that they pay respect to gods and behave righteously. They are mentally fearful of gods. This fact can be attributed to the architecture of shrine and colorful images, sounds of bells, smell of camphor and other environmental facts that produce psychological obesity among the devotees. However, this attitude is not present among the people who perform the rituals to particular god *Sakra*. They perform these rituals with happy and pleasurable appearance on their faces.

Picture 3



Source: Field Survey. 2010

The shrine owners train the devotees to perform ritual activities at a well-organized space. First of all, a thoroughly trained young guide who is wearing a white sarong and a shirt explains the advantages of performing rituals. The young guide's role cannot be perceived as a traditional *kapurala's* role, for he does not chant mantras or any psalm. The banner that is hanged on the tree says "To chafe sins wash your eyes from god *Sakra's* pond". It is clearly observed that the devotees who visit the shrine jostle to perform this ritual (see Picture 04).

Devotees of the *Lakshmi* fane either place notes of ten, twenty or hundred rupees as presents in the alms box near the god *Sakra's* pond or buy donation tickets that are sold at the fane premises. These rituals symbolize how religious philosophy is being changed under the modern commercial conditions. As Lindquist (2008) has pointed out, the central value system of religion is shaped by the present commercial aspirations in a given society. On the contrary, post-modernists denote that religious rituals and practices have been changed in the post-modern context while the philosophical base of the religion remains constant in its form (Pathirana, 2005).

Picture 4

Devotees are washing their eyes from god *Sakra's* pond



Source: Field Survey. 2010

During this study, we observed that this ideological change has taken place in the commercial context. It is not possible to conclude that these rituals and donation of money and gifts are performed and made with the purpose of flushing off the sin. It might be an over simplification of the judgment. The vast majority of the devotees perform these rituals just for gratification or by imitating others (this matter is examined in the next part of the article). But some

interviews revealed that the devotees tend to perform these rituals with the purpose of flushing sin. One Buddhist woman who had a disabled child explained her purpose of performing this ritual this way:

"How wonderful it is, if at least a part of the sins done in the past life-times could be ended? We are suffering in this life due to the sins we did in our previous births" (interview data).

Another infertile Buddhist woman said:

"I am still young but I don't have babies. I am suffering from this issue. My mother in law insults me because I am infertile. I believe that I might have done so many sins in my previous births. I need to escape from this hell at least in my next birth. God will pardon me. I strongly believe that."

Referring to above interviews, it can be concluded that the alienated woman considers her disabled child as a result of the sins she has committed in her previous birth(s) and she performs these rituals in order to get rid of those sins. Further, the second woman is also suffering a lot because of her infertility. These two interviews reveal the fact that people tend to perform rituals for mental relaxation when they are marginalized in the society due to various reasons. This matter has been researched by several sociologists as well as anthropologists. In his study *Medusa's Hair*, Obeyesekere (1981) mentions that devotees express their devotion to the gods through fire walking, tongue-piercing, hanging on hooks and trance-induced prophesying. Hence, there is always reciprocity between the personal-psychological dimension of the symbol and its public, culturally sanctioned role. The function of this contact between personal psychology and symbol is stress releasing. Here, our analysis is that, although the manifest function is stress releasing, devotees believe and attempt to chase their sin by seeking the aid of a third force: Gods. The contradiction of this is the fact emerges with the Buddhist teaching of *Karma* and chasing sin. Further, we can reach at this conclusion by analyzing the following case study.

Premasiri's Case Study

Pramasiri is forty five years old, married and has two children. He is a Buddhist. He has received education up to grade ten. He does not have a permanent job. When he was twenty six, he got married and now he is a father of two children. His wife is ready for her third child-birth. As he mentioned he has not done anything wrong against anybody. The tragedy is that his two children are disabled. His elder daughter is partly blind since her birth and the second daughter is totally blind. *Premasiri* and his wife are healthy and they do not have such disabilities. He has tried to treat his elder children with western medicines but has failed. He has practiced various religious rituals (*Bodi Pooja*, *Pahan Pooja*, and vow to gods). But they failed. Finally, he has met a father of Church through one of his friends. Father has advised *Pramasiri* to participate in Church praying for three months. He has done it with his wife and blind children. The father has said this situation to the god during his praying. After three months, his partially blind daughter has received a bit clear vision. But it was not a total recovery from her disability. Then *Pramasiri* and his wife strongly believed that this positive situation of their partial blinded daughter was because of god's benevolence. Although three months were over, their children were not recovered. Father has advised them to participate in praying for god whenever possible. When they were about to give birth to the third child, they regularly participated in praying. They strongly believe that god will pardon them, chase their sin and give them a healthy baby.

This person has accidentally found god *Sakra's* pond in a visit to *Kataragama*. Then he has washed his eyes and has asked his

wife to do the same. He has also washed their blind children's eyes, thinking of chasing sin they have done in their previous birth(s). And they asked the god's benevolence to have healthy baby in their next time.

As *Premasiri* and his wife said, while performing the ritual, they prayed to god "*api ekatuwela karala tiyena paw walata samawa denu menavi devottamayanani. Apata anukampa karanu manavi...*" (Dear lord, we request your pardon for the sins we have committed together. Please provide your benevolence to us!). This praying is symbolically similar to the pray performed by Christians aiming at salvation from sin:

Dear Lord,

I admit that I am a sinner. I have done many things that don't please you. I have lived my life for myself. Pardon me. I believe that you died on the cross for me, to save me. You did what I could not do for myself. I come to you now and ask you to take control of my life, I give it to you. Help me to live every day in a way that pleases you. I love you, Lord, and I thank you that I will spend all eternity with you. Amen.¹²

When interviews and case studies are analyzed, it becomes clear that people come seeking for genuine relief as they do in the other *devales* that are found in *Katharagama*. But some devotees attempt to perform rituals for god *Sakra* with the purpose of chasing sins. Especially, people who are marginalized in the society due to socio-economic factors often attempt to perform these rituals to get the mental gratification.

¹² This quotation was given by a Christian believer.

The Purpose of performing rituals for god *Sakra*

A ritual is a set of actions, performed mainly for their symbolic value. It may be prescribed by a religion or by the traditions of a community. The term usually excludes actions which are arbitrarily chosen by the performers (Kyriakidis, 2007). The purposes of rituals are varied. They are connected to many religious obligations or ideals, satisfaction of spiritual or emotional needs of the practitioners, strengthening of social bonds, social and moral education, demonstration of respect or submission, stating one's affiliation, obtaining social acceptance or approval for some event or, sometimes, just for the pleasure of the ritual itself (Kyriakidis, 2007). Performing rituals make an interaction between individual's spirituality and psychology and the physical object (Obeysekere, 1981). Every step in the process of performing rituals is not only a part of the process of creating rituals but also a part of the enactment of the ritual. By going through these processes, the performers of the ritual first mentally and then physically manifest the focus of the ritual. Although the purposes are varied from one context to another, each and every event of ritual performing includes the following steps:

1. The need, the desire, the emotional involvement
2. The knowledge and preparation
3. Belief and manifestation
4. The ability to keep silent, the willingness to release and accept (Kyriakidis, 2007).

The purpose of performing rituals for god *Sakra* is based on the individual's socio-economic and psychological context. We examined the purposes of performing these rituals of 50 devotees. Their answers are summarized below. It should be noted here that the answers are summarized according to the first priority they have given.

In Table 1, we have given the percentage of persons performing rituals for specific purposes. It is significant to note that those who perform this ritual with the purpose of chasing or flushing sin are socially excluded groups due to various

reasons. We found that the people who have chronic diseases, physical disabilities and infertility tend to perform this ritual. Hence we conclude that there is a clear relationship between social marginality and chasing sin as influenced by the Christian ideology. As Perera (1997) and Nanayakkara (2007) argue in analyzing behavior of evangelical groups in the matter of unethical religious change, caste and poverty based social exclusion has impacted on marginalized community to change their first religion (Buddhism) in to second religion (Christianity). They further denote that social marginality is an opportunity for the various evangelical groups to involve in the process of unethical religious conversion. This issue was proven during the present study from a different angle. That is, social marginality caused by chronic diseases, physical disabilities and infertility significantly influences the devotees' inclination to believe in chasing sin by performing rituals for god *Sakra*.

Table 1

Purpose of performing rituals for god *Sakra*

Purposes	No.of Devotees	Percentage
Chasing or flushing sin	13	26
Mere gratification	18	36
Imitating others	11	22
For benevolence	08	16
Total	50	100

Source: Field survey 2010

According to the above table, the category of mere gratification and imitating others is higher than all other categories. Hence, it is clear that mental satisfaction and imitating others make common psychological adjustments with regard to the rituals performed. The other significant factor is the category of the benevolence which has a very low percentage of devotees. The reason for this may be the god *Sakra* is not involving in the daily matters of ordinary people.

4. Conclusion

According to the above discussion, several conclusions can be made. In this discussion our entire argument was based on the role of the god *Sakra* in Sinhalese Buddhist society. According to traditional understanding, god *Sakra* is an imaginary god. Nevertheless, with the development of particular set of ritual practices, god *Sakra* is being transformed as a living god in the devotee's court. As Obeyesekere denotes, gods who are in the upper positions of the god pantheon are positioned as otiose. This means that those gods become seldom world-involved, very benevolent and consequently they are not always able to help the devotees (according to the *Karma* Principle). This happens because of the transferring of merits by devotees and it is accelerating the Buddha quest of the deity (Obeyesekere, 1986: 205-206). But Mallikarachchi (2003) in his study on *Revolving Hierarchical Pantheon of the Sinhalese Buddhist Traders* challenges this upward change of the god pantheon. According to him the god pantheon (hierarchy) enters into people's practice not in a lineal fashion or in a mechanical way but through a process of intentional involvement, and relation to situational needs. Further he denotes that individuals (traders) have personal hierarchies based on their needs and practices (Mallikarachchi, 2003:30).

Nevertheless, our argument is slightly different from Mallikarachchi's interpretation. He does not discuss the imaginary position and downward changes of god *Sakra* of god pantheon. The ethnography and the analysis that we have presented show that when rituals are performed on behalf of god *Sakra*, he is positioned as a benevolent god or a living god.

On one hand, it can be concluded that with the expansion of Christian evangelical theologies, the teachings of chasing sin or salvation from sin are being established in the Buddhist society. This is a radical change of the Buddhism. Here we should note that, the ethos of open economy and capitalism and globalization have impacted to change the central value system of Buddhists. In the present social context, a considerable number of popular religious cults can be identified with their own unique identity. Cult of *Sai Baba*, cult of *Lakshmi*, cult of *Huniyan*, cult of *Pattini* and *Bodhi Pooja* are some crucial ones among them. However, the

cult of god *Sakra* has still not been developed strongly. These popular religious cults in Sri Lanka are mainly symbolical inclusion of Hinduism. Furthermore, Christianity has also influenced popular religious cults. Ultimately, most of these popular religious cults have been developed as money making projects while giving psychological satisfaction to the devotees.

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