

THE SINHALESE OLD AGE AND RELIGIOSITY

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Many people tend to become religious in their old age. Old people perceive religion as an important aspect of their lives (Atchley 1980). Religion in old age is a broad, pervasive and multi-dimensional phenomenon. Increased levels of religiosity in old age may be due to a number of reasons. Religion in old age can be a mechanism by which elders maintain their social interaction and uphold physical and psychological integrity. Positioning its argumentation within the debate of Great and Little Traditions of Buddhism (Obeyesekere 1963), this study shows that elders in Sri Lanka are engaged in different levels of religious activities focusing particularly on temple attendance, collective rituals, prayers, religious beliefs, knowledge and spiritual exercise. In addition, the research collected data on potentially altering elderly religious behaviours characteristic of doctrinal and popular religion.

Following the mixed methods approach, the research employed qualitative interviews and a structured survey questionnaire (N= 400) for the collection of data. Research was carried out in five cultural-ecological zones in Sri Lanka *viz*, urban, semi-urban, estates, traditional villages and agricultural colonization schemes identified in the Districts of Colombo, Kalutara, and Ratnapura.

The study found that a large majority of elders were engaged in religious activities characteristic of popular Sinhalese Buddhism. The proportion of elders who behave in ways characteristic of doctrinal Buddhism, remained relatively low. Female elders showed higher levels of religious attitudes and behaviour and a higher tendency towards popular Buddhist practices compared to the males. While on the one hand male and female elders in traditional villages showed the highest level of doctrinal Buddhist practices, on the other, urban and rural elders are engaged in relatively high levels of popular Buddhist practices. However, it is difficult to say that the elders of a specific geographical location upheld *Theravāda* Buddhist values as opposed to popular Buddhist practices. This study also revealed a relationship between widowhood and religiosity among elders. Elders in semi-urban, estate and new settlement schemes showed a relatively low level of religious enthusiasm. Qualitative output of the study highlighted that a minority of elders were not happy with the widening disparity between Buddhist philosophy and practice as it happens in temples. Temple rituals provided the elders with opportunities to increase social interaction. This interactive environment served the esteem needs of the elders fulfilling their psychological needs. The research concludes that religion serves as a means of coping with the unresolved anxieties of old age; specifically the death anxiety.

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