

REVIEW ARTICLE

**TRADITION AND TRANSFORMATION:  
RECENT WRITING ON THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF BUDDHISM  
IN SRI LANKA**

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R. F. GOMBRICH and G. OBEYESEKERE, *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1988. xvi, 468 pp., Bibliography, Index, Figures. \$49.50.

1. *Colonized Buddhism*

'In a very real way the subject matter of anthropology has been the study of the colonized', or so Bernard Cohn (1987: 224) has recently reminded us. If this is so, then the subject-matter of any anthropology of Buddhism in Sri Lanka must inevitably be 'colonized Buddhism'. The Portuguese first settled on the coastal plain of Sri Lanka in the early sixteenth century; they were followed by the Dutch, then the British, who in 1815 conquered the last independent kingdom and ruled the whole island for almost a century and a half, until independence in 1948. Some parts of the island, then, were subject to more than four hundred years of European rule, while even the later additions to the colonial domain—the highland areas of the former Kandyan kingdom—were the scene of a particularly penetrating economic and political transformation in the nineteenth century.

The paradox is that the Buddhism of the late nineteenth century was, to all intents and purposes, far stronger and more vibrant than the Buddhism of the immediately pre-colonial period. In the early eighteenth century the *sangha* (order

of monks) had lost the tradition of continuous ordination which should, in theory, legitimate contemporary practice by connecting it in a single line of spiritual descent to the Buddha himself; the island's monasteries and temples, many of them controlling large areas of productive land, were in the hands of an odd group of semi-monks known as *ganninanse*, who administered monastic property but had lost both the tradition of ordination and the commitment to celibacy which has always been fundamental to the *sangha's* institutional discipline. The ordination tradition in Kandy was renewed from Thailand in the second half of the eighteenth century. In the early years of the nineteenth century new ordination traditions (this time emanating from Burma) were established in the colonized littoral by groups who, on grounds of caste, were excluded from the Kandyan *sangha*.

The revival of the ordination traditions was one important component of—or perhaps precondition for—the revival of Sri Lankan Buddhism in the nineteenth century. A second was the loss of kingship and the reluctance of the British to assume the king's mantle as protector and purifier of the *sangha*. This prised loose the *sangha* from its place in a close symbiotic relationship with the ruler; in the long run it allowed more and more room for lay initiatives in Buddhist affairs, leaving behind a sense of puzzlement (still evident among many outside observers) over what exactly the *sangha* is *for*. The third was the encounter with Christianity (although this had been going on in various forms since the arrival of the Portuguese) and Victorian modes of proselytization, of which the vernacular printing-press and the mission school were the two most far-reaching in their effects. What emerged from this encounter was an apparently new style of Buddhism, aptly characterized in Obeyesekere's phrase as 'Protestant Buddhism' (Obeyesekere 1970). It was at once a protest against Christian cultural encroachment which, like other colonial movements of its time, borrowed a great deal of its style *and* its content from the Christian antagonist, a style of Buddhism which encouraged a new this-worldly asceticism for the laity, and a movement which sought, like Protestant Christianity, to slough off impurities and accretions and return to the 'original', textually ordained form of Buddhism.

Anyone interested in going beyond this brief historical sketch must read Malalgoda's essential history of the Buddhist revival (Malalgoda 1976). Two important points emerge from it, both concerning the idea of 'tradition' in Sri Lankan Buddhism. The growth of Protestant Buddhism in the nineteenth century appears to be an exemplary case of radical transformation being enacted in the name of tradition; it follows that the idea of the traditional is no longer an innocent analytic category in Sri Lanka but has become a central weapon in arguments about what Buddhism is and what it should try to be in the contemporary world. But if we are tempted to see this as a pure product of colonialism, the combined effect of Victorian Orientalist assumptions about textual authenticity and Victorian missionary arguments about religion and lay morality, it is important to remember where Malalgoda starts his history: in the precolonial Kandyan kingdom and the moves to restore the ordination tradition. In other words, the impulse to religious renewal on the basis of textual authority—the appeal to the textual tradition—was

not simply imported as part of the culture of colonialism, but is (and probably always has been) an integral part of Theravada Buddhism, the 'school of the elders'.

## 2. *The Real Buddhist Way of Life: Carrithers and Southwold*

In the summer of 1984 I attended a religious festival, one of those indeterminate occasions known simply as 'merit-making' (*pinkama*) in Sinhala. The festival in question was held at a monastery in the southern foothills of the central mountains. I had come with a number of friends from the nearby village where I had lived on and off since 1981. At the monastery I was assigned the companionship of the only other European there; he had come with his teacher from a meditation centre where he was studying for ordination. He was not impressed with the proceedings. 'This', he said, surveying the crowd arranging itself for a collective act of worship to the Buddha which was to be followed by a huge almsgiving (*danaya*) for the many monks assembled there, 'is nothing to do with Buddhism.' I protested that these people thought of themselves as Buddhists, as had their ancestors for generations, and I saw it as no part of my business to tell them they were wrong. My companion clarified his objections: this was not Buddhism because it was superstitious nonsense and empty ritual (which reminded him, moreover, of the Catholicism of his home area); the only way to be a real Buddhist was to meditate.

Both the comments, and the context in which they were uttered, were dense with irony. One of the two senior members of the *sangha* in whose honour the festival was held is a prominent and learned monk, well-known in European Buddhist circles. Much loved in his home area where I worked, he is usually identified with the austerities of reformist Buddhism, although the chapter based on interviews with him in Gombrich and Obeyesekere's *Buddhism Transformed* (pp. 299-313) concentrates more on his unusual interest in matters like astrology. The kinds of ceremony disparaged by my companion were themselves recent additions to the ritual repertoire, distantly modelled, it seems, on Christian acts of worship. And our disagreement over what is 'really' Buddhism was yet another manifestation of the dominant European response to Buddhism. To get some idea of just how odd this response is, it is necessary to imagine an ethnography of religion in a Spanish peasant community or an English dormitory suburb which concentrates on the question, 'Are these people really Christians?'

Two recent studies of Sinhala Buddhism, apparently as contradictory in their methods and conclusions as it is possible to imagine, nevertheless share this basic orientation. Martin Southwold's *Buddhism in Life* (1983) makes a strong argument for the pre-eminence of religious practice—rather than religious belief, or religious texts—in the analysis of Buddhism (or any other religion). In particular, he argues that it is the ethical practice of Buddhist villagers in everyday life which can be said to embody 'authentic Buddhism', not the ascetic practices of the renouncer.

Villagers figure little in Michael Carrithers' *The Forest Monks of Sri Lanka* (1983), which describes a reform movement in modern Sri Lanka which is based on the re-creation of what is held to be traditional ascetic practice. His study hinges on a comparison between the movement of self-ordained enthusiasts, *tapasayo* as they were known, which briefly flourished in the post-independence period, and those more settled monks whose ascetic practices are based on close attention to a specific textual tradition, in this instance the *vinaya* rules of monastic discipline and the *Visuddhimagga*, the commentarial text on the 'path to purification'. Unlike the textualists, whose movement flourishes (in appropriately ascetic fashion), the movement which turned its back on the textual tradition and the rules of discipline was ephemeral and ultimately unsuccessful: 'momentary enthusiasm is no substitute for training' (Carrithers 1983: 126).

Southwold is disparaging about the ideal of radical asceticism which is at the heart of Carrithers' book. He talks, for example, of those who 'indulge in isolated meditative self-cultivation, letting the world go hang' (1983: 79); for him, the nirvanic goal is redefined—somewhat startlingly even by the high imaginative standards of earlier European commentators—as 'the fellowship of the world' (ibid.: 69). The modernists of the Sinhala middle class, with their interest in meditation and the like, are victims of a widely propagated and powerful European misapprehension about the nature of Buddhism. For Southwold, 'authentic' Buddhism is to be found in ethnographies, not in canonical texts (ibid.: 127); more pithily, 'the Buddhism of the better people should be accounted the better Buddhism' (ibid.: 3), and the better people are the villagers he lived among, not the urban proponents of 'true Buddhism'. But whenever the guardians of the authentic—the villagers—persist in holding some embarrassing opinion, the ethnographer helpfully intercedes to explain it away, leaving behind a Buddhism largely purged of its institutional structure and of any residue of distinctively South Asian philosophical assumptions (on rebirth, for example).

Carrithers is far more reticent in advancing his personal position than Southwold and, it should be added, far more conventionally informative in his ethnography. But Southwold's greatest merit is his honesty, not least in making explicit what motivates the unusual tone and progress of his study: 'in Polgama I was looking for what lay buried in myself, and in seeking an order in village Buddhism I was seeking most to put myself in order' (ibid.: 51). What unites the work of Carrithers and Southwold (and many other writers on this subject) is the element of personal quest which structures their books. That which is explicitly announced in Southwold is more elusive in Carrithers, although important clues can be found in the authorial tone and narrative structure of his book. Where the *tapasayo* are described in stern and sometimes admonitory terms, the later chapters on successful forest hermitages are increasingly warm and affectionate, and the overall structure of the book, after introductory discussions, leads the reader past various historical dead-ends and diversions to those establishments which best correspond to Carrithers' own understanding of the ascetic ideal.

The theme of post-colonial irony returns in the history of the two books after their publication. Southwold, whose critique of Western-imposed notions of 'true' Buddhism culminates in his own delineation of 'authentic' Buddhism, has made little discernible impact within Sri Lanka. Carrithers' book, in contrast, has been widely read by English-educated Buddhists and highly (and justly) praised by a number of distinguished Sinhala academics. But the most extraordinary review came not in a learned journal but in a speech by the then President of Sri Lanka, J. R. Jayewardene, in 1986; it was reported in the *Daily News* of 4 February 1986 and cited by Kempe (1990: 196):

This [*The Forest Monks of Sri Lanka*] was a very important book. It revealed the ideas of the forest monks, their meditation, their way of life and the difficulties they have undergone in following the teachings of the Buddha. He [the President] intended to ensure that this book was translated into Sinhala and published and distributed...so that all people could gain some knowledge about the way of life of these monks. That was the real Buddhist way of life—not talking politics and abusing ministers, MPs and officials.

### 3. *Buddhism Transformed: Gombrich and Obeyesekere*

Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka has always co-existed with various forms of more overtly instrumental religious practice oriented to deities and demons, some of them familiar figures from the Hindu pantheon. In their monographs, Carrithers and Southwold have little to say about this aspect of religion: both progress by a series of refinements of the essential from the non-essential, of the 'real' Buddhism they seek from whatever other stuff—Gombrich and Obeyesekere describe this residual area as the 'spirit cult'—may be going on in the name, or in the form, of religion. On the other side of the divide, writers on exorcism and other facets of the 'spirit cult' (which also includes the worship of Hindu deities) tend to play down the importance of the institutional forms of Theravada Buddhism (e.g. Kapferer 1983, 1988). One consequence of the rise of Protestant Buddhism is that most Sinhala Buddhists, if pressed, can also differentiate between what they consider to be really Buddhist and what is merely worldly distraction. But this sort of compartmentalization is inimical to the governing spirit in other studies in the anthropology of religion, which is at its best a totalizing enquiry.

The writer who has done most to preserve a single perspective on the entire religious field of Sinhala Buddhists is Gananath Obeyesekere (e.g., 1959, 1963, 1966, 1968), while the most authoritative recent work on 'traditional' Buddhism is Richard Gombrich's *Precept and Practice* (1971), which, partly under the influence of Obeyesekere, also holds fast to a single perspective on Buddhism and the deities. Among the many remarkable achievements of their dazzling collaborative volume on recent religious change in Sri Lanka, *Buddhism*

*Transformed*, is the skill with which they manage to deal with an extraordinary diversity of phenomena within one analytic frame. The decision to treat such apparently disparate phenomena—the rise of new deities and new forms of Buddhist devotion, ecstatic priestesses and exaggeratedly restrained Buddhist nuns, meditation and possession—within this single framework is triumphantly vindicated by their discovery of frequent points of connection and crossover. In the end it leads them to posit the emergence of a new phenomenon: ‘post-Protestant Buddhism’.

Rather more than the massive monograph on the cult of the goddess Pattini (Obeyesekere 1984), *Buddhism Transformed* is the sequel to Obeyesekere’s brilliant *Medusa’s Hair* (Obeyesekere 1981), a volume whose theoretical achievement has never been wholly acknowledged in Britain, possibly because of the paroxysms of anxiety induced in academics of a certain age by any mention of the name of Freud. Even these critics will feel more comfortable with the new volume, which is less explicitly Freudian (and, lest I forget the co-author, less explicitly Popperian) than the authors’ previous works. The common ground on which Gombrich and Obeyesekere have united is empirical: between them they have assembled an immensely rich body of ethnography, much of it new, most of it urban, on religious change in Sinhala Sri Lanka in the 1970s and 1980s. Like Carrithers and Southwold, the two authors argue and criticize these new developments from a committed point of view self-consciously located within the Theravada tradition. But the authorial voice that emerges is far less sanguine than that of either Carrithers or Southwold. Although the authors claim to ignore the ethnic conflict which overshadows all recent studies of the island (p. x), this (and the collapse of Sri Lankan political culture, of which it is merely the most visible symptom) would seem to be the source of the persistent note of cultural pessimism which is sounded throughout the book.

*Buddhism Transformed* is divided into four parts. After a long introductory chapter which describes both the ‘traditional’ order and some symptomatic examples of change (an urban shrine to the deity Huniyam, a university lecturer’s collection of devotional pictures which includes both Sai Baba and the Virgin Mary), the second part concentrates on changes in the worship of deities, specifically the growing interest in the god of the southern shrine of Kataragama and the more recent rise of Huniyam and the goddess Kali. The third part describes parallel changes within Buddhist practice: Protestant Buddhism, the attempts to recreate the order of Buddhist nuns (moribund for hundreds of years because of the alleged extinction of its ordination tradition), new kinds of worldly Buddhist activity like bourgeois marriage ceremonies or the development work of the Sarvodaya movement, and a series of biographical accounts of ever more heterodox Buddhist leaders. In earlier discussions of similar material it had been possible to distinguish two kinds of religious orientation corresponding to the respective changes in institutional Buddhism and the spirit cult: on the one hand ethical rationalization and this-worldly asceticism, on the other emotional intensity and *bhakti*-style devotion. In the final section this distinction breaks down;

Buddhist rituals like the new congregational worship of the Bo-tree (*bodhi puja*) are more emotional and more oriented to this-worldly goals, even as Kataragama itself is being appropriated as a Buddhist shrine and gradually cleansed of the more embarrassing reminders of its Hindu and Tamil past.

Perhaps the most important overall impression to emerge from this wealth of material is the intensity and creativity with which Sinhala Buddhists are seeking to patch together the threatening gaps between inherited understandings of the world and new and unpredictable areas of experience. This process can best be described as 'Buddhist modernism'; the expression was coined by the German Orientalist Heinz Bechert, but could be extended by borrowing Marshall Berman's definition of modernism as 'any attempts by modern men and women to become subjects as well as objects of modernization, to get a grip on the modern world and make themselves at home in it' (1988: 5). 'Modernism' is perhaps preferable to Gombrich and Obeyesekere's division of recent Buddhism into 'Protestant' and 'post-Protestant' because it allows us to grasp all of their evidence as part of a single, albeit complex process. As a description of this process, their ethnography is not merely one of the most exciting studies in the anthropology of Buddhism, it is also possibly the most detailed ethnography we have of that area of post-colonial doubt and argument which Geertz has characterized as 'the struggle for the real' (Geertz 1968).

Much of the excitement and desperation of this struggle is captured in the detail of the ethnography. Obeyesekere's Freudian inclination manifests itself here in the use of biographical case-studies of various key figures, a technique employed to good effect in *Medusa's Hair*, and also used with great subtlety in Carrithers' monograph. The biographical twists and turns are sometimes extraordinary—by the end of the first chapter we have already been introduced to a lady who was brought up a Buddhist, became possessed by the goddess Kali, visited a Roman Catholic shrine in an attempt to shake this off, and, her interest aroused by a pamphlet (*Demons we Reduce to Ashes*), eventually joined a Pentecostal group with whom she now habitually speaks in tongues. Later we meet a Buddhist monk who believes himself to be a reincarnation of Jesus Christ, a group of 'nuns' who are rewriting the Pali canon on the basis of thought waves picked up from the atmosphere, and a minor bureaucrat who one day, or so he claims, attained enlightenment and embarked upon a new career as the Sun Buddha. ('For the first time in Sri Lanka a Police Constable sees the vision of the Enlightened One', as one of his followers' pamphlets informs us.) Some of these stories are funny, but beneath them all there is a sense of desperate pathos; it seems unlikely that the new canon picked up by the 'nuns' will offer even as many answers to the problem of modernity as the old canon, while those who relish the cool scepticism of the Buddha's teachings will lament the apparent rise in obsessive credulity documented here.

Probably the most important new argument in the book concerns the rise of 'post-Protestant Buddhism', the new synthesis of radically different religious styles which combines ecstatic devotionalism of mostly proletarian origin with the

rationalized Buddhism which originally gained favour with the indigenous élite of the colonial period. But, as the authors warn the reader that their account is far from exhaustive (p. xiii), the inevitable question is how much of their evidence for this is bound to the peculiar circumstances of Colombo society, and what parts of it are more generally distributed throughout Sinhala society? My own experience in a relatively remote rural area in the early 1980s suggests that two particular aspects of post-Protestant Buddhism are indeed spreading fast. The first of these is various new forms of congregational worship directed at the Buddha and employing members of the *sangha* in the unfamiliar role of ritual officiant. The best documented is the collective ritual to the Bo-tree known as the *bodhi puja* which was invented by one particular monk in the 1970s (Seneviratne and Wickremeratne 1980; Gombrich 1981; *Buddhism Transformed*, pp. 384-410), but many similar rituals, like collective *budu pujas* (offerings to the Buddha), had also become enormously popular in the 1970s and 1980s (Nissan 1985: 72; Spencer 1990: 52-70). As collective acts of worship to the Buddha, these rituals reaffirm the collectivity of Buddhists in true Durkheimian spirit, and part of their appeal is as ritual expressions of the embattled nationalism of Sinhala Buddhists in recent years.

The *bodhi puja* has also become popular as an individualistic act of devotion employed to gain supernatural help in the pursuit of worldly ends. Gombrich and Obeyesekere interpret this as a sign of a radical break with the past, in which worldly requirements were solely the concern of the spirit cult, never a matter for the Buddha. They do mention the most obvious exception to this radical dichotomy, the *pirit* ritual in which the *sangha* chants protective verses, which has an ancient provenance but has become increasingly popular amongst urban Buddhists in recent years (p. 394). Not only does this ritual involve members of the *sangha* in the protection of worldly interests, it also employs a ritual technology (thread, water, limes, and so on) which is shared with many exorcistic rituals (De Silva 1981). But they argue that the element of expressive emotion in *bodhi puja* is quite different from *pirit*. Even so, something like this element, again in my limited experience, might be found in other ritual contexts, most notably the pilgrimage to Sri Pada (Adam's Peak, the mountain shrine of the Buddha's footprint). This is the most important Buddhist religious centre in Sri Lanka to have escaped adequate ethnographic documentation so far, and my evidence is entirely based on my own impressions as one of a party of village pilgrims. As pilgrims climb the mountain, they sing joyous songs of devotion and exchange friendly greetings with fellow pilgrims amid an atmosphere which is at once happy and celebratory and unmistakably Buddhist. It is possible that we might find here a precedent for the new expressive tone of collective devotion.

My companion in climbing Sri Pada was a friend who, at a troubled moment in his youth, had made a vow to climb the mountain every year and add a lamp to the flame that burns on top if his troubles would clear; he had climbed the mountain and lit his flame every year for over a decade when I joined him. He was not entirely clear or consistent as to whether his vow had been made to the

Buddha or simply to the divine guardian of his footprint, the god Saman. Similar confusions concerning the guardians of this-worldly and other-worldly interests are documented in Nissan's evidence from another major national pilgrimage centre, the Bo-tree Temple at the old royal capital of Anuradhapura.<sup>1</sup> Vows are made to the Bo-tree for worldly ends by pilgrims, again sometimes mediated through the figure of its guardian deity and sometimes not (1985: 91). Gombrich and Obeyesekere report as novel the exclusion of women from the Bo-tree at Kataragama; such restrictions are commonplace in the worship of deities but, they say, 'completely unprecedented' in Buddhist worship (p. 397). But Nissan reports that not only were menstruating women forbidden access to the Anuradhapura Bo-tree, monks returning from funerals were also held to be polluted and required to bathe before re-entering the temple's precincts, although death pollution is generally believed only to apply to the laity (1985: 92-3). The extension of the prohibition to include all women does indeed seem to be novel, but Nissan's evidence suggests that the treatment of relics of the Buddha, such as the Bo-tree, as if they were gods accords well with other historical evidence that relics have long been held to exert an influence in worldly affairs on behalf of the Buddha.

But even if this implies that these developments in post-Protestant Buddhism are less radical than Gombrich and Obeyesekere suggest, there is no doubt that the use of ostensibly Buddhist worship for worldly purposes, 'white magic' as they put it (p. 393), is rapidly gaining in popularity throughout Sinhala society. In the rural area where I worked, the worship of outlandish new deities like Kali and Huniyam was virtually unknown, and there was limited interest in either meditation or possession as sources of spiritual advancement, but there were already a number of new specialist healers offering their services to cure afflictions through a combination of older exorcistic practices and new rites like the *bodhi puja* and other sorts of 'magical Buddhism'. I suspect that the greater appeal of 'magical Buddhism' and collective Buddhist worship in the rural areas, if this is indeed the case, is testimony to the greater hegemonic hold of Protestant Buddhism—reproduced through newspapers, radio, and especially the ubiquitous schoolteacher—in Sinhala villages. The life crises that may send an urban Buddhist off to the Kali shrine or into trance occur just as often in village society, but are more likely to be met there by innovations within the now familiar idiom of Protestant Buddhism rather than through the importation of new and unfamiliar religious figures.

This is, of course, speculative. But if it is at all true, it does mean that the opposition between 'village Buddhism' and 'middle-class Buddhism' will have to be rethought in future research. Certainly it seems unacceptable to continue to equate the 'rural' with the 'traditional', and Gombrich and Obeyesekere's account of social change as a move from 'traditional village communities' to urban anomie

1. Nissan's doctoral thesis (1985) and Kapferer's monograph on exorcism (1983) are probably the most important studies omitted from Gombrich and Obeyesekere's otherwise comprehensive reading of the recent literature.

is noticeably less nuanced and less historically precise than their rich account of accompanying religious change. The long history of colonial domination described earlier begs the question 'When was tradition?'; the chronology implicit in Gombrich and Obeyesekere's account seems to imply that the heyday of the 'traditional village community' came at the end, not the beginning, of colonial rule. Nissan has shown in some detail how features of 'traditional' temple organization were created in the colonial period (1985: 133-243), while the most perceptive critic of Gombrich's earlier study of 'traditional Buddhism' pointed out how various features which Gombrich had treated as 'traditional' were in fact innovations dating from the colonial period (Malalgoda 1972). In fact, the basic model of rural change presented by Gombrich and Obeyesekere was first put forward by élite politicians in the later colonial period (Samaraweera 1981). What 'tradition' indicates in sociological terms is not some fixed arrangement at a fixed point in the past but what Raymond Williams calls (1977: 128-135) a 'structure of feeling', a complex attitude toward the present. The 'loss of traditional community' is not a process we can describe with any precision in historical terms: it is an attitude towards change which is located in the circumstances of individual biography, a sense that at some earlier point life was clearer and more settled. As such it is one of the surest indicators, wherever encountered, of an awareness of the indeterminacy of the modern. It goes without saying that this awareness haunts social scientists, with their dichotomous accounts of change—tradition and modernity, *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, life-world and opinion—as much as anyone.

Within Sinhala Buddhism the delineation of 'tradition' is especially problematic because, as I suggested above, the idea of the unbroken preservation of the original teachings of the Buddha is itself a traditional (with no quotation marks) feature of Theravada Buddhism. In the nineteenth century two important things happened to this tradition. The texts were collated, edited and printed in new 'definitive' forms by Europeans (Cohn 1985; Nissan 1985: 322-8; Rogers 1990), and these much more accessible forms then became open to interpretation by a wider range of people than had ever been imaginable before. One irony is that most lay Buddhist understanding of the Pali canon is now mediated through English translations (pp. 223-4). The range of people busily interpreting and re-interpreting the idea of what it means to be a Buddhist now includes monks and villagers, professors, anthropologists and philologists, and a host of enthusiastic autodidacts, and the whole process has taken on a new urgency in the post-colonial period even as it draws on understandings and resources shaped by earlier colonial domination. Almost all who engage in this argument, whether inside or outside Sri Lanka, sooner or later seek to legitimate their version of what is essential by appeal to some idea of the 'traditional'. This is true of Gombrich and Obeyesekere, even though their own analysis (as in the chapter entitled 'The Creation of Tradition') undermines the authority of just such appeals (pp. 241-73).

But one mark of their achievement in *Buddhism Transformed* is the openness of their conclusions. For all its detail and scholarly authority the book's overall

effect is not to establish the final word on any of the phenomena it describes, but instead to suggest new questions and new directions for future research. I have already mentioned the need for a comprehensive study of the pilgrimage to Sri Pada. Malalgoda's history ends at the turn of the century; we still lack a reliable historical account of Sinhala Buddhism between that point and the 1950s, the period when cultural nationalism gradually took root as a political force. We also lack any reliable information on the social composition of the *sangha* (Gombrich 1988: 209), one recent scholar being forced to fall back on an Indian journalist's generalizations for help on this point (Kapferer 1988: 232 n.2). The very pace of the changes in urban religion described in *Buddhism Transformed* more or less guarantees new material for prospective researchers in that area. Everyone engaged in this research will be in the authors' debt for many years to come. No one writing about any aspect of Sinhala society in the 1980s and 1990s can afford to ignore the stimulation and insight on offer on every page of this remarkable book.

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