

A Sociological Study on the Contemporary Nature of Popular Buddhist Rituals in Sri Lanka and their Impact on Society

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ABSTRACT

Buddhism, a major religion in Sri Lanka, is divided into two sections, Theravada and Mahayana. After the arrival of Mahinda Thero, Theravada Buddhism spread in the country, and later the ideas of Mahayana Buddhism became mixed. Buddhism is one of the most popular religions in Sri Lanka today and is most reflected in the offerings of Buddhism. Accordingly, this study examined the current nature of the rituals associated with popular Buddhism in Sri Lanka and its impact on society. The Kandy District was selected as the field of study. The aim was to identify the current nature of the offerings associated with popular Buddhism and its impact on society. Adopting a qualitative approach, the study gathered primary data through observation and semi-structured interviews with a hundred devotees who came to pay homage to the temple under the objective sampling system that was selected as the study sample, and information was obtained. Accordingly, the data were analyzed thematically, complemented by secondary data from academic books and journals. The findings of this study show that the rituals associated with popular Buddhism have changed, and new rituals have been created that address the worldly needs in line with the social order. It was clear that although large-scale sacrifices had a positive effect on the development of social relations and the alleviation of social tensions, they failed to mitigate the social problems expected through social norms. Sacrifice has become a money-making business. Accordingly, it will be possible to use the Buddhist philosophy for social development and to build a good personality by turning the temple back into a multi-purpose institution and working for moral development.

Keywords: Popular Buddhism, Secular, Theravada, Sacrifice, Rituals.

INTRODUCTION

Religion is a social institution that has existed in society for an extended period. Social institutions emerge as a result of collective human efforts to fulfill various objectives and needs. Religion, in a certain sense, fulfills a fundamental human need. In almost every contemporary society, the belief in religion can be observed, as individuals rely on religious faith to navigate daily hardships, overcome challenges, and attain relief from suffering. Moreover, religion serves as a means for individuals to achieve worldly well-being by addressing their difficulties and uncertainties (Perera, 2014). The term *religion* is derived from the Latin word *religion*, which is connected to the English word *religion*. This etymology conveys the meaning of "binding together" or "holding fast," signifying the relationship between humans and a higher, supernatural force (Kumara, 2011–2012). There is no universally accepted definition of religion, as various theoretical perspectives offer different interpretations. These perspectives include doctrinal, sociological, anthropological, psychological, phenomenological, and technological approaches. Accordingly, religion can be understood as a community centered around a sacred entity, comprising rituals and practices that are conducted through a belief system built upon interpretations of natural forces. Furthermore, religion serves as a medium through which human knowledge is expressed and disseminated.

Buddhism, one of the world's major religions, is widely practiced in the South Asian region, where it is followed by a significant portion of the population. The religion has spread across various countries, exhibiting notable differences in practice and interpretation. In Sri Lanka, Buddhism is constitutionally recognized as the state religion. Article 9 of the Sri Lankan Constitution affirms that "the Republic of Sri Lanka shall give Buddhism the foremost place... and it shall be the duty of the State to protect and foster the Buddha Sasana" (Constitution, 1978). Furthermore, as a nation that values religious freedom, Sri Lanka ensures the right of all individuals to

follow a religion of their choice.

Buddhism is broadly categorized into two main traditions: Mahayana and Theravāda. Various forms of rituals and offerings have emerged based on Buddhist teachings. Over time, these rituals and ceremonial practices have evolved, undergoing numerous changes, which have contributed to Buddhism becoming a more widely popular religion. The term "Pūjā" is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as "the act of presenting something before someone in acknowledgment or rejection." Additionally, this term encompasses meanings such as offering, proving, sacrificing, giving, donation, gift, surrender, and reverence. According to the *Sri Sumangala Dictionary*, the term "Āmisa Pūjā" refers to offerings made with material objects such as fruits, meat, bones, and other offerings. Additionally, the term "Pūjā" also signifies the act of giving offerings, while "Pratipatti Pūjā" refers to the worship of Dharma and Adharma principles, implying the practice of adherence to these principles (Uparathana, 2002).

According to Theravāda Buddhism, the worship of principles (Pratipatti Pūjā) is valued more highly than the offering of material objects (Āmisa Pūjā). After the period of colonialism, the practices of Buddhist rituals underwent significant changes, evolving into more symbolic forms. Subsequently, with the advancement of technology and urbanization, popular characteristics were incorporated into Buddhism. Accordingly, the popular Buddhist rituals associated with Buddhism have taken on an attractive form, while such rituals are not explicitly mentioned in the original teachings of Buddhism. The emergence of various ritual practices aimed at achieving worldly desires, influenced by urban social conditions, has had a significant impact on society. These rituals, which are often tied to the pursuit of secular goals, have led to substantial societal influence. As a result, this study aims to examine an exploration of the transformation of traditional Buddhism into popular Buddhism, and the contemporary nature of the Buddhist rituals associated with popular Buddhism in Sri Lanka and the impact these rituals have on society.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Among the world's major religions, Buddhism exhibits a unique organizational structure and belief systems that evolve over time. The original forms of rituals associated with sacred objects have undergone changes over the course of time, adapting to different social and cultural contexts. Due to the social and political changes brought about by colonialism, the status of Buddhist monks declined, leading them to seek assistance from state institutions, while also distancing themselves from providing counsel to state governance. In response, Dharmapala opposed these developments, striving to revive and protect Sinhala society, aiming to redirect Buddhist principles and resources toward the promotion of social welfare and the well-being of the community (Berkwitz, 2006).

The isolated communities of indigenous peoples living in the upland forests of Sri Lanka are deeply rooted in religious beliefs and regularly perform rituals and offerings. They also adhere to the concept of Nirvana as outlined in the major Buddhist tradition. Additionally, in South Asian countries where Christianity is the dominant religion, the influence of popular Buddhist trends within the broader Mahāyāna tradition can also be observed (Obeyesekere, 1963).

In his review article on the book *Buddhism Transformed* by Gananath Obeyesekere and R.F. Gombrich (1990), J. Spencer highlights that, in Sri Lanka, Buddhism has consistently been linked to rituals of devotion to deities and spirits, commonly referred to as "Ātma Vandana." The rise of Reformed Buddhism also shifted the focus of Buddhist practitioners towards secularism. Within the framework of Reformed Buddhism, secular festivals, Buddhist activities, social welfare movements, and diverse Buddhist leaders can be observed. Additionally, the practice of excluding women from the Bodhi tree and the offering of prayers to deities in pursuit of worldly goals is noted. The use of Buddhist prayers for secular purposes and the rise of white magic, among other practices, became popular, signaling a transformation in traditional Buddhism after the 19th century (Spencer, 1990).

According to the findings of Holt's (2017) study of *Buddhist Ritual Cultures in Contemporary Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka* by Jhon Holt, (2017) examines popular ritual practices that hold central significance within Theravāda Buddhist cultures, focusing on Laos, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, and Cambodia. By adopting a

comparative approach to understanding Theravāda traditions, the research explores how transformations in the political and economic structures of these societies have influenced the nature of religious practices and cultural expressions. Furthermore, a study conducted in China indicates that while popular religious adherence exhibits a stable negative correlation with educational, it does not explicitly determine education levels. Additionally, the study highlights that popular religious beliefs demonstrate a strong positive correlation with social cohesion. The findings further emphasize the significance of popular religious practices in rural areas, revealing that rural communities exhibit a notable inclination toward popular religious adherence (Leamaster and Hu, 2014).

The transformation of popular ritual practices that hold central significance within Theravāda Buddhist cultures in Laos, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, and Cambodia illustrates the impact of political and economic changes on the nature of religious traditions in these societies. This study presents a comparative approach to the application of Theravāda Buddhism and examines the nature of social transformations in contemporary Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia.

The modernization of Buddhism began in the latter half of the 19th century. This transformation was reflected in the development of devotional practices, where the bhakti rituals in Buddhist worship became prominent. During this time, both the merchant class and non-elite groups in the colonial era played significant roles in supporting these changes. Furthermore, rituals and acts of devotion, both public and personal, became key markers of religious identity, symbolizing the evolving religious landscape of the time (Pemaratana, 2020). In the review of the aforementioned studies, both local and foreign researchers have focused on traditional Buddhism, Buddhist practices, and popular Buddhism. It has been shown that, over time, the religious practices that initially existed within the religious community have evolved into new forms as they undergo a process of transformation. The primary findings of these studies suggest that with the politicization of religion, the spiritual responsibilities of religious leaders have diminished, leading to a transformation in the original form of Buddhism.

METHODOLOGY

This study aims to examine the research question of how ritualistic worship practices associated with popular Buddhism in Sri Lanka influence society, within the context of a sociological study on the contemporary nature of these rituals and their societal impact. This study examines whether ritualistic worship practices in Buddhism have undergone transformations to contemporary social changes. It also explores the socio-economic classes around which popular Buddhism is centered and how dynamic interactions within a complex and competitive society are influenced by these practices. Furthermore, the study analyzes whether these ritualistic practices exert positive or negative impacts on society.

For this study a qualitative research design has been used. This approach was chosen as the most appropriate research design, as it allows for the collection of in-depth and flexible data, facilitating a comprehensive exploration of the research subject. In this study, a purposive sampling method was employed to select a sample of 100 individuals from the religious community visiting the temple, ensuring alignment with the research objectives. In the collection of primary data, in-depth interviews and observational study methods were used to obtain qualitative data from the key data contributors, namely the religious community. Additionally, secondary data were gathered from studies conducted on the research topic, relevant articles, journals, research books, and online sources. The qualitative data obtained through these methods were analyzed using thematic analysis.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The Influence of Professional Background on Inclination Towards Religious Rituals

This study reveals that individuals' engagement with religious rituals can be analyzed through multiple socio-economic lenses, including their employment status. Broadly, individuals can be categorized as employed, unemployed, or retired, with their professional circumstances influencing the extent and manner of their participation in religious practices. Within this framework, professional background plays a crucial role in shaping one's relationship with popular Buddhist rituals, particularly as a mechanism for coping with the

psychological and emotional demands of contemporary society. The study sample can further be categorized based on their professional background as follows:

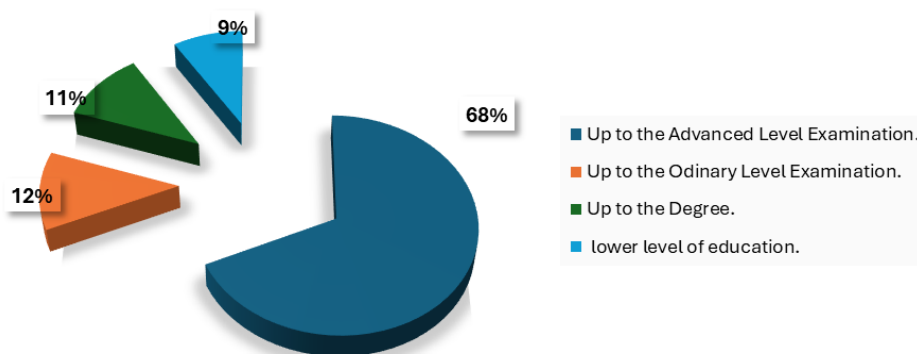


Figure 01- Professional background of respondents (Source – Field Study, 2023)

Accordingly, it is evident that those who do not engage in formal employment demonstrate a higher inclination towards popular Buddhist rituals. Similarly, a considerable proportion of employed individuals also participate in these practices. The majority of those who are unemployed and engage more frequently in religious rituals are women. They often visit the temple as a means of overcoming loneliness and emotional distress. According to the study sample, many individuals attribute their decision to refrain from or withdraw from employment to the necessity of childcare and household responsibilities. As part of their familial obligations, women who remain at home tend to engage in religious rituals with the intention of securing a prosperous future for their children, ensuring their success in examinations, protecting their families from hardships, and achieving overall well-being.

Similarly, individuals engaged in various professions turn towards popular Buddhist practices as a means of coping with the challenges and pressures arising from the competitive nature of society. The difficulties they encounter in their daily lives further contribute to their inclination towards religious rituals as a source of solace and guidance.

The Influence of Educational Level

The level of education a person attains, along with their knowledge and experiences, shapes their views and thoughts. In the context of the competitive educational patterns in contemporary society, the acquisition of knowledge leads to changes in one's perspectives. The information regarding the study is outlined below.

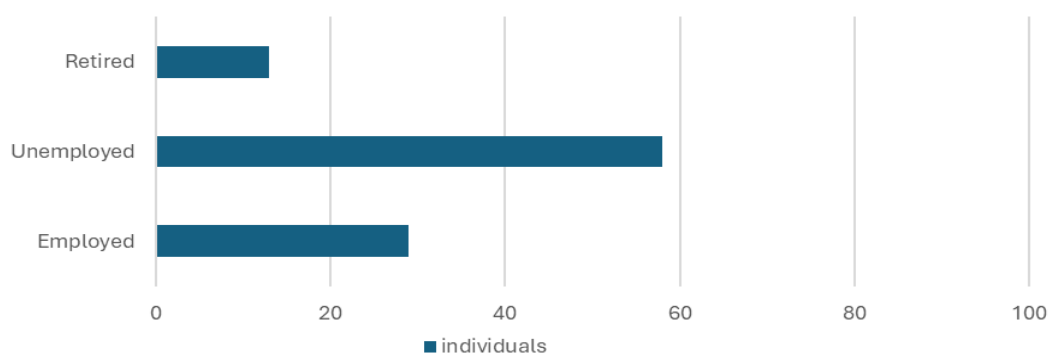


Figure 02- educational level of the respondents (Source – Field Study, 2023)

According to the data of the study, 68 individuals have received education up to the Advanced Level Examination, while 12 individuals have completed education up to the Ordinary Level and 11 individuals Bachelor's degree level, respectively. A 9 number of individuals have attained a lower level of education. The majority of these individuals are teachers. Accordingly, it is observed that a greater proportion of educated

individuals are more inclined towards popular Buddhism and its ritualistic practices. Accordingly, their views on popular Buddhism take on varying forms, reflecting different perspectives.

The Analysis of the Relationship with the Temple

Historically, rural communities maintained a profound connection with temple rituals, preparing offerings at home before attending ceremonies. These practices were grounded in a clear understanding of the spiritual and communal significance of rituals, such as making offerings and donating food. The act of preparing ritual items at home was undertaken with sincere intentions. However, the influence of social modernization, coupled with the increasing busyness of contemporary life, has led to a gradual erosion of the deeper meaning associated with these practices. Over time, the connection to the ritual's purpose has become more superficial, as practical considerations have come to the forefront, often overshadowing spiritual intent. A larger proportion of adults who visit the temple have maintained a connection with the temple since their childhood, and they visit the temple at least three times a month.

As urbanization and the demands of modern life continue to shape social structures, it is evident that ritual practices have become increasingly commodified. The relationship between individuals and the temple has evolved, with many devotees continuing to visit the temple regularly, often maintaining their spiritual ties from childhood. Approximately 68% of participants in this study reported bringing offerings from home, while the remaining 32% purchase offerings from nearby shops. One female participant exemplified this shift in practice by stating,

"If I have time, I bring flowers, oil, and sandalwood from home. Otherwise, I purchase them from a shop"
(Interview).

This study reflects not only the convenience-driven dynamics of modern society but also the impact of commercialized religious practices on ritual behavior. Based on the above example, it is evident that society has been commercialized alongside the competitive economy. Due to increasing business, the emergence of convenient methods for accomplishing various tasks has led to a detachment from the true purpose of performing religious rituals. Moreover, this trend also highlights a broader socio-economic dynamic. The commercialization of offerings has contributed to the economic development of local communities, particularly in low-income areas where such transactions serve as a vital source of income. This analysis illustrates the ways in which modernization, commercialization, and changing social dynamics are reshaping the relationship between individuals and the temple. While these transformations provide new avenues for participation, they also provoke questions about the preservation of the original spiritual essence of Buddhist rituals in an increasingly commodified world.

Analysis of Religious Offerings and Rituals

The findings of this study indicate that the religious offerings and rituals conducted in urban Buddhist temples diverge significantly from those typically performed in rural monasteries. One notable transformation is the introduction of new ritual forms that emphasize visual appeal and greater attraction. These changes are largely a response to the demographics of participants, who predominantly come from urban or semi-urban backgrounds. As a result, the ceremonies have evolved into socially engaging spectacles designed to cater to the worldly expectations of contemporary society, rather than strictly adhering to the original religious principles of simplicity and the pursuit of enlightenment. Consequently, religious offerings have increasingly moved away from fundamental Buddhist teachings and have become integrated into a broader consumerist culture. These rituals now align more with market-driven lifestyles, reflecting a shift towards consumption-oriented patterns of living.

Buddhist rituals, traditionally rooted in modesty and spiritual reflection, have undergone significant transformations as they have gained popularity. The growing demand for visually stimulating and entertaining practices has led to the incorporation of elements such as dancing, singing, and instrumental music, signaling a departure from the austere rituals of the past. Along with this aesthetic enhancement, the grandeur of offerings has also expanded, in part due to the commercialization of religious practices. The results of this study

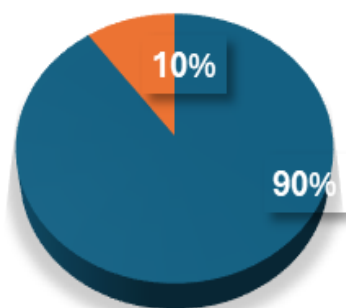
demonstrate how religious offerings have evolved to reflect these changes, moving away from their previous forms. As one participant noted, "The Bodhi ritual is now held separately for exams. It wasn't like that before" (Interview), illustrating how new contexts have reshaped the meaning and purpose of these practices.

The shift towards new forms of religious offerings demonstrates their accommodation of secular needs in the modern social system. These rituals now incorporate elements that resonate with various aspects of contemporary life, such as education, career development, and societal concerns. The innovations in these rituals aim not only to provide comfort and mental relief but also to help participants reconnect with the teachings of Buddhism. Despite these adaptations, it is evident that these modern rituals do not necessarily adhere to the core Buddhist principles of simplicity and the ultimate goal of attaining Nirvana. Instead, they have increasingly become aligned with consumerist lifestyles that emphasize commercial objectives and material satisfaction. these rituals are perceived as mechanisms for addressing personal troubles, with participants turning to them for resolution of both material and spiritual concerns. The collective nature of these rituals contributes positively to social relationships, as they bring together individuals with varying expectations and needs. This communal engagement fosters connections and facilitates social harmony, further strengthening social cohesion within the community. In this way, these modernized rituals serve a dual purpose: they act as tools for individual spiritual solace and communal social unity, raising important questions about the balance between religious tradition and contemporary socio-cultural practices.

Religious Belief

The veneration of deities constitutes a significant aspect of popular Buddhist practice, reflecting the intersection between Buddhist teachings and local belief systems. While classical Buddhist doctrine emphasizes the path to enlightenment through ethical conduct, meditation, and wisdom, the practical application of Buddhism in contemporary society often includes devotional practices that integrate deity worship. This phenomenon is evident in the presence of shrines in almost every Buddhist temple, where a hierarchical structure is maintained, positioning the Buddha at the pinnacle while simultaneously acknowledging various deities. Such syncretic practices demonstrate the adaptability of Buddhism across diverse cultural contexts and underscore the socio-religious functions of deities within Buddhist communities (Perera, 2014).

Deities such as Katharagama, Lakshmi, and Kali play an integral role in popular Buddhist traditions, where they are revered for their perceived ability to influence human affairs. Within the Buddhist cosmological framework, offerings are made not only to the Buddha and protective deities but also to regional gods, yakshas, and spirits (preta/bhuta), illustrating a layered system of reverence (Amarasekera, 2013). These practices reveal the ways in which Buddhism, as a lived religion, extends beyond philosophical teachings to address the pragmatic concerns of devotees. Worshippers frequently engage in deity veneration to seek protection from adversities, mitigate the effects of planetary afflictions, and ensure personal and communal well-being. Such practices raise critical questions about the doctrinal compatibility of deity worship within Buddhist traditions and provoke scholarly debate regarding the extent to which these practices align with or diverge from the fundamental tenets of Buddhism.



■ Belief in Deities

■ Absence of Belief in Deities

Figure 03- Belief in Deities (Source – Field Study, 2023)

According to the study participants, belief in deities is deeply integrated into the practice of Buddhism, serving both religious and secular purposes. The belief in deities is not only a form of spiritual devotion but also a way to address practical concerns, such as seeking protection from harm, alleviating suffering, and fulfilling worldly desires.

Contemporary discussions on Buddhism's practical applications highlight both the continuity and transformation of these devotional aspects. While some scholars argue that deity worship represents a localized adaptation of Buddhist teachings that fosters inclusivity and social cohesion, others contend that it reflects a departure from the original principles of non-theistic spiritual cultivation. In modern contexts, Buddhist principles are applied through various means, including mindfulness practices, ethical decision-making, and community-oriented rituals, all of which continue to interact with elements of deity veneration. This intersection of belief and practice remains a subject of academic discourse, prompting further exploration into how Buddhism negotiates its doctrinal purity with the realities of lived religious expression. By critically engaging with these perspectives, contemporary Buddhist studies contribute to a nuanced understanding of how religious traditions evolve while maintaining their foundational philosophical ethos.

CONCLUSION

The contemporary nature of popular Buddhist rituals in Sri Lanka reveals a dynamic intersection between traditional religious practices and modern socio-economic, cultural, and psychological needs. Based on the information gathered through the study, it can be identified that modernization has occurred within temples in terms of social, economic, and political aspects. Accordingly, it can be observed that factors such as profession, residential area, and education level influence the involvement in popular Buddhist rituals. The findings suggest that individuals engaged in professional occupations tend to show greater involvement in these rituals. It can also be concluded that individuals are drawn to these rituals in order to alleviate responsibilities, daily life troubles, and suffering. Furthermore, the participants attending the rituals are equally represented from both rural and urban areas. These rituals, while rooted in Buddhist teachings, have adapted significantly to address secular aspirations such as personal well-being, social cohesion, and material prosperity. It can be concluded that the organization of large-scale religious ceremonies fosters a sense of community among the public and exerts a positive impact on social imitation. Due to social modernization, the nature of these rituals has undergone changes. The impact of these rituals on society is multifaceted, fostering a sense of community, addressing individual psychological needs, and reinforcing social values. These religious rituals exert a positive influence in alleviating social discomfort and reducing societal tensions that arise while functioning in a competitive society. Additionally, this study situates Buddhist rituals within broader debates concerning ethical decision-making and interfaith dialogue. While traditional Buddhist ethics emphasize non-attachment and renunciation, the commercialization and consumerist orientation of contemporary rituals raise critical questions regarding the alignment of modern practices with Buddhist moral philosophy. By addressing these societal stresses, these rituals contribute to minimizing social conflicts and provide a beneficial effect within the competitive social framework. The primary reason influencing individuals' involvement in popular Buddhist rituals is the need to fulfill secular expectations. The emergence of rituals that address social needs has led to people following religious beliefs more for personal benefits than for the teachings of Buddhism itself, and this trend has had a significant impact on individuals' daily lives. As Sri Lankan society continues to evolve, the future of these rituals will likely be shaped by the balance between maintaining traditional practices and responding to modern societal demands.

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