

Special Focus: Bad Buddhism

The Mothers of the Righteous Society: Lay Buddhist Women as Agents of the Sinhala Nationalist Imaginary

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Discussions about the gendered experience of Buddhism, especially in the modern period, often center on the status of Buddhist women vis-a-vis their male counterparts. Based on fieldwork conducted in Sri Lanka in the aftermath of the civil war that ended in 2009, this article explores some of the conceptual challenges that lay Buddhist women's participation within nationalist spheres of civic activity pose to standard liberal feminist assessment of women's agency and power. In particular, it examines how lay women's religious giving and charity have played a pivotal role in efforts to sustain a hegemonic postcolonial Sinhala Buddhist imaginary. These women derive power and agency from these nation-building efforts, not in raising feminist consciousness against oppressive patriarchal nationalist project. Rather, middle-class lay Buddhist women enact their privileged place in society by shoring up culturally prescribed notions of motherhood to enhance their role as feminine moral guardians of the righteous Buddhist nation.

Keywords: Sri Lanka; gender; laywomen; motherhood; *dāna*; Buddhist nationalism; humanitarianism

In the field of Buddhist studies, discussions about the gendered experience of Buddhism, especially in the modern period, have often centered on the status of women and the changing role of women's authority and legitimacy vis-a-vis their male counterparts. A central question framing this and other scholarship on modernism and Buddhist women has been centered around how women resist or subvert their subordination to entrenched and pervasive patriarchy within Buddhist institutions. These inquiries have endeavored to restore and uncover hidden voices of Buddhist women in a tradition that is often dominated by men.

Over the past two decades however, a central critique within feminist theorizing has been to interrogate the presumed universality of the category "woman" in scholarship on religion and gender. In particular, these arguments highlight the dominant liberal assessment of women's religious practice in terms of their feminist awareness or consciousness in relation to ideas such as equality, self-autonomy, and freedom. From ethnographies on urban women's mosque movements in Egypt (Mahmood 2005), to accounts of the everyday lives of Buddhist female renunciants in Sri

Lanka (Salgado 2013), this scholarship critically calls into question the cross-cultural universality of defining women's agency in terms of her contribution to the liberal values of feminism, i.e., her self-realizing agency against the weight of tradition, custom, cultural, or institutional norms (see also Bedi 2006). These scholars insist that rather than evaluating women's actions in relation to their feminist consciousness, or lack thereof, we pay closer attention to what religious women actually do in relation to the conditions in which they live, exploring the kinds of possibilities those conditions allow (see also Asad 1996).

In the case of Theravada Buddhist studies, the liberal preoccupation of understanding contemporary women's lives in relation to issues of gender equality has also, in my view, significant implication on delimiting the scholarly field of Buddhism and gender. In particular, I suggest, it has had the effect of narrowing the field to primarily the study of female renunciants, focused as this area often is on issues involving the re-establishment of *upasampadā*, a struggle framed as a movement to free Buddhist women against patriarchal norms of Theravāda culture. One outcome of this focus has been the significant marginalization of studies exploring the piety and politics of lay Buddhist women.

This is evidenced by the literature. For instance, in contrast to the heavy scholarly concentration on female renunciants (see for example, Gross 1993; Bartholomeusz 1994; Cadge 2004), scholarship on lay Buddhist women, whose lives are imbricated in family life as mothers, wives, and daughters, is surprisingly less common. Although a number of authors do write on the significance of the female laity in early Buddhism or in the medieval period in Theravāda and Mahāyāna culture, drawing upon early Buddhist texts (Willis 1985; Andaya 2002; Ito 2007; Skilling 2001; Horner 1930), we find comparably little attention given to contemporary practices of Theravada laywomen today (see for noteworthy exception Huang 2013; Quli 2010; Keyes 1984; Rajasingham-Senanayake 2018). When effort is spared in this endeavor, it is often glossed over as "traditional." As sociologist of Asian American Buddhist culture Sharon Suh has observed, "Western Buddhist feminists often overlook laywomen's devotional practices," characterizing such practices as "popular religion" (Suh 2004).

Lay Buddhist women are frequently so regarded, I argue, because their often "illiberal" goals and spheres of activity in the context of the family, the home, and society resist being straightjacketed into normative liberal assumptions about women's agency and power. Despite their active engagement in civic and religious life, the agential action of lay Buddhist women often falls by the wayside of studies of Buddhist modernism for their efforts are often at odds with liberal feminist goals.

Our understanding of the lives and goals of contemporary Buddhist women's lives could be advanced if we were to instead describe them in their own terms. As Talal Asad has noted elsewhere, "this is an eminently anthropological enterprise," which requires describing things in "terms intrinsic to the social practices, beliefs, movements and traditions of the people being referred to and not in relation to some supposed future the people are moving towards" (Asad 1996).

In what follows, I explore some of the conceptual challenges that lay Buddhist women's participation within Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka pose to standard liberal conceptions of women's agency and power. To do so, I examine how women's religious giving and charity has played

a pivotal role in efforts to sustain a hegemonic postcolonial Sinhala Buddhist imaginary in Sri Lanka. In particular, I explore the ways in which lay Sinhala Buddhist women through their charitable and social welfare activities in the service of the *sangha* and the rural Sinhala Buddhist poor, inhabit and deploy a recognized feminized mode of power in Buddhism – as benefactress of the *Dhamma* – to enhance their role as feminine moral guardians of the Buddhist nation.

In focusing on lay women’s participation within Buddhist nationalist imagination, this paper focuses on a relatively neglected aspect of research in Theravāda Buddhist women’s practice and agency, noting here that these movements dominate but do not determine the range of expressions of Sinhala Buddhist women’s activism. As numerous scholars of Sinhala Buddhist women’s lay activism in the civil and political sphere have shown, there exists a diversity of women’s activism in Sri Lanka, including anti-racist, anti-war feminist activism, critiques of state-perpetrated violence (De Alwis 2002), as well as lay and monastic Buddhist women’s non-nationalist religious and pious aspirations (Salgado 2013, Rajasingham-Senanayake 2018, Lehrer 2018). Lay Buddhist women’s civic engagement in Sinhala Buddhist patriarchal hegemonic formations provides an important corrective to the liberal feminist lens that mistakenly equates agency with rejecting such structures. Like other contributors to this Special Focus who look toward “contradictions not as problems to be resolved, but as the most valuable source of analytical stuff”, this essay thus turns to the complicity of middle-class and elite lay Buddhist women as willing and active subjects of a particularly militant patriarchal Buddhist nationalist activism.

In the first section, I look at the role that Theravāda ideals about giving and generosity, especially around notions of cultivating moral virtue, have historically played in framing ideals of femininity for lay Buddhist women. Here, I explore how laywomen’s religious giving to the *sangha* are envisioned as an extension of their domestic and maternal responsibilities.¹ I then turn to look at how Sri Lanka’s experience of colonial modernity added a further dimension to Buddhist women’s responsibilities: as mothers of the nation vis-a-vis her guardianship of the Buddhist heritage as national culture. In the context of colonial modernity in Sri Lanka, Sinhala middle-class lay Buddhist women enacted their own privileged place in bourgeoisie society by shoring up culturally prescribed notions of motherhood for the purpose of the elite nationalist aspirations to realize a “righteous society.” Against this historical backdrop, I introduce ethnographic material based on long-term fieldwork I conducted in Sri Lanka between 2009 and 2010 with middle class and elite lay Buddhist women who engaged in civil society. Specifically, it examines how middle-class and elite women’s practices of giving *dāna* (alms-giving) to the *sangha* and participation in charitable activities in rural villages are two means through which elite Sinhala Buddhist women enact their agency as patrons and sustainers of a (hegemonic) Sinhala Buddhist national imaginary.

The goals that these women aspire to cannot be well accounted for through the liberal feminist framework, in which women’s agency is evaluated in terms of their capacity for transcending and resisting patriarchy and asserting self-autonomy. Indeed, in the liberal feminist viewpoint,

¹ I capitalize “Sangha” when referring to cited text only. The word is not capitalized or used with diacritics, as it is a term used in common parlance to refer to monastics generally.

motherhood is a particularly vexed subject (Glenn, Forcey, and Chang 1994). Motherhood and family are perceived as denying identities outside of mothering and is where subordination to patriarchy originates. For instance, feminist writing on female *upasampadā* often frame Asian women's renunciation as an opportunity to escape their "double burden" as wife-mother and wage earner. Yet, as Wei-Yi Cheng reminds, "Buddhist women do not exist simply as women, they are also embodied with class, racial, national, and other identities" (Cheng 2007: 6). The lived agency women enacted within these various hegemonic formations and oppressions cannot be accounted through a liberal prescription of agency.

Such groups remain underexamined in the literature on Buddhist modernism, and their "illiberal" political activism is likely to be relegated as inauthentic "bad Buddhist" expressions, which hamper the progress of Buddhist modernity. This is evidenced by the common bafflement about a Buddhist woman such as Aung San Suu Kyi. Once lionized by Western observers as a "warrior woman" for her formidable reckoning with the male-dominated Burmese military establishment and champion of socially engaged Buddhism, Suu Kyi now confounds liberal expectations in her consistent defense of military and Buddhist nationalist violence against ethnic minorities. My point here then is that even as we find the positions such lay women take disturbing, or even contradictory, these women's political and civic lives still ought to force us to understand their lives in their own terms, rather than through liberal understandings of where they ought to be heading in the progressive feminist goal of emancipatory politics.

This ethnography thus opens up a space for a historically and contextually sensitive understanding of elite lay Buddhist women in Sri Lanka, bringing a "critical yet empathetic look" (Rambukwella 2018) at their participation in ethno-nationalist Sinhala Buddhist hegemony. Such an orientation helps us to critically think about contemporary political contexts such as ethno-religious violence in Buddhist countries like Myanmar and Sri Lanka, where many questions are raised about how "Buddhists can behave so badly."

The *Mahā Upsikawas*

As in other South and Southeast Asian cultures, a dominant image of women in Sinhala culture is that of the mother (*amma*). There is a particular sacredness associated with the role of the mother as expressed by the popular Sinhala adage "*gedara budun amma*," which translates to "she who is Enlightened at home." Her domestic role, however, is not simply limited to her role as the reproducer and nurturer of her biological family, but also extends to purported moral duties towards the *sangha* and by extension, the Buddhist religion. These ideals shape how women in different social classes are evaluated. For laywomen with wealth and social capital in particular, their patronage of the *sangha* through *dāna* can enhance her esteem and exemplary qualities as mothers.

Within the cosmology of Theravada Buddhism, *dāna* and merit-making have been frequently emphasized as important aspects of religious virtue, especially endowments to the *sangha*, such as building *ceityas* (shrines), supporting religious festivals, and giving alms. *Dāna* has also played an important social role in creating bonds of solidarity within a hierarchical society. For instance, after a period of Buddhist decline on the island during the medieval period, Sri Lankan monks evidently

reached out to the laity for *dāna*, emphasizing its meritorious benefits, as “part of a rebuilding process that ultimately led to a much stronger sense of Sinhala identity, encompassing ordinary people as well as rulers” (Andaya 2002: 9). Offering of gifts such as food, robes, and financial support to the monastic order enabled ordinary people with little expertise in spiritual matters, and ignorant of text-based knowledge, to become participants in religious ritual (Andaya 2002). *Dāna* in Theravada thought is the first of three exemplary acts of the lay Buddhists – generosity, virtue, meditation (*dāna, sila, bhavana*). It expresses, as Maria Heim (Heim 2004) has argued, some of the highest ideals within Theravada culture about what constitutes civility and noble character. Its crucial role is the cultivation of *śraddhā*, or what Heim has described as an “ethic of esteem” that “fills one with respect for both the tradition and the recipient at the same time” (Heim 2004: 51). Moreover, *dāna* brought power, status, prestige, and generated moral virtues.

Within this particular imaginary, therefore, laywomen’s patronage comes to represent ideals of femininity and civility that a Buddhist woman (especially with considerable wealth) ought to aspire to in this *laukika* (mundane) life. Renunciation, although a more supreme aspiration, is less within immediate reach in the course of her everyday responsibilities of her domestic life. Andaya (2002) has highlighted the numerous queens, princesses, and noblewomen cited in medieval Buddhist literature in Southeast Asia who acted as great patrons to monasteries in their local Thai regions such as in the Shan State or Pagan. She argues that the “maternal metaphor” is a prominent theme in Buddhist texts, and “the interaction between motherhood and merit-making” was a key reason for the successful translation of Theravada Buddhism from Sri Lanka to early Southeast Asia, for it “provided new opportunities for laywomen to display their piety and strengthened their links with the monkhood” (Andaya 2002: 1). In the context of pre-colonial and early colonial times in Sri Lanka, as Carla Risseuw (1991) has shown, women were “economically significant as landowners and workers and had considerable authority within the family unit” (Risseuw 1991, in Salgado 2013: 188). This access to land and income may have conceivably enabled some women to play the role of the Buddhist benefactress to the *sangha* and affirm her position in society.

In contemporary Sri Lanka, motherhood and merit-making continue to provide lay Buddhist women (particularly those with wealth and social capital) opportunities to cultivate piety. An observer of a temple in Sri Lanka will be struck by the overwhelming presence of women, who present food and other necessities to the *sangha*. During special occasions, such as birthdays and anniversaries, families, including extended kin, participate in *dāna* ceremonies which involve women playing key roles in ritual and tradition. They often sponsor various infrastructure projects in their local temples—including the building of *kuti* (monks living quarters), wells, *ceitya* construction, or, more recently, provision of computers and books for young monks in *pirivenas* (monastic college). It is not uncommon for these laywomen to be called ‘*amma*’ or mother by the monks they patronize.

Women thus play a significant role in the lay-sangha relationship. This aspect is deeply embedded in the popular consciousness in the Sinhala Theravāda culture. Take, for example, the obituary of a middle-class Buddhist woman, Chitra De Silva, published in *The Island*, a prominent Sinhala and English language daily newspaper (Warusawithana, Sept 20, 2016):

A truly inspirational lady, who loved life, loved her children, loved her friends and most of all was devoted with immeasurable kindness to the Maha (great) Sangha. Hers was a life of caring, sharing and giving. Magnanimity surely was her other name. Large was her bounty, large was her heart that had room enough for everyone whose lives she touched - a 'maha upasika' - if there was one in this day and age. Her home was a haven of peace and quiet...a veritable temple. It was an abode that could be called a 'pinwatte' - place of wholesome, meritorious deeds, where one would frequently see preparations for a dāna meal offering to the Maha Sangha just like Visakha Maha Upasikawa's home in the days of the Buddha. A simple, healthy meal devoid of flourishes and fancy dishes which she herself prepared with her own deft hands, ever mindful of the well being of the bhikkhus.

The writer's identification of her friend Chitra De Silva with Vishaka, a prominent figure in Buddhist historical narrative, is significant. Vishaka, a wealthy aristocratic woman who lived during the time of the historical Buddha, is famous as the chief female benefactor and female lay disciple (*Maha upasika*) of the Buddha. On numerous occasions in the Vinaya Piṭaka of the Pāli Canon, the Buddha extols Vishaka for her exemplary love of giving to the *Sangha*. Buddha identifies her as the ideal benefactor; as someone with abundant wealth to give coupled with a love of giving (Willis 1985; Falk 1990). Visaka also introduced her father-in-law, a wealthy treasurer named Migara, to the Buddha. According to the Pāli Canon, this act of moral education and enablement of the spiritual attainment of a powerful man transforms her from the more subordinate status of daughter-in-law of Migara to that of the pious figure of Migaramata (mother of Migara).

Special mention of de Silva's frequent preparation of meals for the *sangha* resonates with other Buddhist historical figures such as Sujātā, the daughter of a village chief, who became the first female lay disciple of the Buddha when she presented the fasting Buddha with *dāna*, a dish of rice and milk, thus ending his period of extreme asceticism. The preparation and presentation of particular kinds of foods to the *sangha* is a laywoman's expression of devotion, esteem, and piety and motherly care (Van Esterik 1986). Today, food is typically prepared by domestic helpers in the households of many middle-class and elite urban families, but the female heads of households will assist in preparing the *dāna* meal.

Dāna is "a one-way gesture, usually vertical and aimed upward to the religious elite," Maria Heim writes. "It gives rise to a relationship that cannot be defined according to the values of equality, mutuality, and balance cherished in modern perspectives" (Heim 2004). Instead, through *dāna* the giver seeks to cultivate a disposition of reverence and what Heim has described as an "ethic of esteem" (*śraddhā*) to the *triratana* (Triple Refuge of the Buddha, *Dhamma*, and *Sangha*), where "the very act of giving creates moral agency" (Heim 2004: 77). Laywomen's religious giving to the *sangha* may be understood similarly. They encourage us to consider agency, as Saba Mahmood has noted elsewhere on her work on Islamic women's piety, as a "capacity for action that specific relations of subordination *create* and *enable*" (Mahmood 2001, p.210, her emphasis). In this particular context, the specific relations of subordination that women enact through *dāna* is the cultivation of piety and *śraddhā* towards the Buddha, *Dhamma*, and the *Sangha*.

The Badhramahila

In Sinhala Theravāda culture, women's domestic and maternal responsibilities are often envisioned as including the care of the *sangha*. These responsibilities attribute a particular virtue and piety to women who partake in giving *dāna*. Sri Lanka's experience of colonial modernity and post-colonial nationalist movements introduce a further dimension to Buddhist women's responsibilities: as protectors and nurturers of the nation, vis-a-vis her guardianship of the Buddhist heritage as national culture.

The development of a collective ethnic and religious identity among Sinhala Buddhists elites was at the heart of the nationalist struggle against British colonialism. This identity posited cultural superiority and separateness from other minority communities; crucially, one that also enshrined a natural right to the island. Sinhala nationalists and reformists saw it as their duty to protect the island as a bastion of Buddha Dharma. Historical texts were foundational for this; in particular the *Mahāvamsa*, authored by the *sangha*, promoted the concept of *dhammadīpa*; the idea that “the island of Ceylon was destined by the Buddha to be the repository of the true doctrine, where the *Sangha* and the *Sāsana* would be firmly established and shine in glory” (Malalgoda 1976, p.22). It was an ideology that in the context of colonial agitation entailed a romanticization of a past in which an authentic Buddhist *dharmarājya* (morally righteous Buddhist governance) prevailed on the island, only to be lost to the depredations of over 400 years of colonialism and “foreign” threats, such as Tamil nationalism and Christian missionizing. The Sinhala colonial bourgeoisie saw it as their sacred duty to preserve and revitalize Buddhism to its original pristine state.

Realizing this destiny called for constitutional arrangements: a clause placed in the Sri Lankan constitution in 1972 enshrined Buddhism the “foremost place” among the religions in the country, making it the “duty of the state to protect and foster Buddhism in the island.” It also called upon individual Sinhala men and women, particularly the bourgeois elite and middle class, to partake in gendered ways to sustain the Sinhala Buddhist ethno-nationalist ideology and identity (Jayawardena 1986; Jayawardena and De Alwis 1996).

Sinhala Buddhist womanhood emerged as a critically important construct in the nationalist imagination. Anti-colonial nationalist claims to sovereign identity had to negotiate between conflicting stakes, such as adjusting to and compromising with Western modernity while at the same time claiming a “traditional” identity as the basis for independence (Chatterjee 1989; Debrix 1998). Women, especially urban middle-class and elite women, were viewed as the repositories as well as signifiers of culture and tradition. Their primary responsibility was thought to be the preservation and propagation of Buddhism. Partha Chatterjee discusses similar trajectories underway in colonial Bengal. In that context, he elucidates how colonial bourgeoisie woman—whom he identifies as the *badhramahila* (respectable woman)—were being defined by their role in the “inner domain” of the home, as mother and wife, to protect and nurture the “spiritual quality of the national culture” (Chatterjee 1989: 627).

For the Sinhala, the spiritual core of this national culture was Theravāda Buddhism. The home in this nationalist project was a zone in which the spiritual quality could be cultivated and imagined as untouched by Western influence. Here, on the one hand, Western (read: Victorian) norms about

womanhood—docile, asexual, nurturing—were adopted in the construction of the modern “new woman” of Sinhala Buddhist consciousness, yet on the other hand, women were also to serve as “guardians of national culture, indigenous religion and family traditions” (Jayawardena 1986).

Even as this guardianship of the national culture was an entirely new gender construct, and it subjected women to a new form of (nationalist) patriarchy, these responsibilities resonate in some crucial ways with earlier discourses about motherhood already existing in the local Theravāda culture. According to these discourses, women have the capacity to garner honor and esteem by enacting maternal responsibilities to the *sangha*. Post-colonial Sinhala Buddhist nationalist aspirations afforded middle-class women with new opportunities in their role as “culture bearers” for the imagined Buddhist nation. Women could expand upon their maternalized responsibilities of caring for *sangha*, to include protecting and nurturing the Buddhist nation.

Existing scholarship has documented the implications of these nationalist gender constructs for the experiences of women in postcolonial Sri Lanka (Jayawardena 1992; Jayawardena and De Alwis 1996; Jayawardena 1986; De Alwis 2009; Lynch 2007; Marecek 2012; Samarasinghe 2000; Bartholomeusz 1994). I build on these works to understand how the ideas of maternal responsibility have shaped some women’s roles in the arena of social welfare and social development work in the rural countryside among poor Sinhala communities.

The rural countryside occupies a special place in the construction of the Sinhala Buddhist imaginary. The rural countryside—popularly imagined as “the village”—is considered a repository of Sinhala authenticity (Rambukwella 2018). Despite numerous invasions and colonial occupations, an essential idea of Sinhalaness and authentic Buddhist spiritual life is thought to survive there. Yet, the village has also been considered a site of vulnerability, for its failure to realize this romanticized vision of cultural authenticity. Indeed, peripheral non-urban communities have always been a site of religious, linguistic and ethnic pluralism and hybridity, with little fidelity to assumptions of cultural authenticity held by the urban elite (Rajasingham-Senanayake 2011). In post-independence Sri Lanka, these anxieties have time and again promoted national development work in order to “rehabilitate” these sites in which authenticity is thought to reside (Rambukwella 2018).

A recurring theme in this narrative is a desire to reclaim Buddhism as the moral civilizing compass of the island. Take, for example, the concept of *Dharmistha Samājaya* (righteous society) advocated by Sinhala Buddhist activists both during the colonial and post-colonial era. Driven by a fear that the Sinhala rural peasantry were straying from their Buddhist moral moorings, the idea of a “righteous society” asserted that adherence to Buddhist morality will strengthen the people’s commitment to “righteous” conduct and ultimately contribute to the social and economic development of the Sinhala Buddhist nation as a whole (Berkwitz 2008).

In such elite nationalist discourse, the Sinhala village and the rural family is, on the one hand, idealized as the location of tradition, where the sacred home prevails; and on the other hand, it is a major source of vulnerability because of a failure to fully internalize Buddhist moral precepts. This hinders the Buddhist nation from realizing a perfect *Dharmistha Samājaya*. Other political leaders, including prime ministers, presidents, and socially engaged Buddhist reformers since independence

have continued to draw upon this narrative of reclaiming Buddhism to revitalize and re-awaken the village (Tennekoon 1988; Brow 1990; Woost 1999; Schonthal 2016, Rambukwella 2018).

Although there is extensive literature already tracing the dissemination of Sinhala Buddhist hegemonic discourse through village upliftment schemes, much of this commentary revolves around the careers and rhetoric of elite nationalist men. Indeed, elite male politicians and monastic leaders have been the prominent public figures in the so-called *deshapremi* (patriotic) groups who have most vociferously promoted these ideals (Matthews 2008; Deegalle 2004; Devotta 2007). Yet, the voices and actions of their female counterparts in these nation-building projects have gone largely unnoticed.

Existing scholarship has called attention to how some Sinhala Buddhist women “have elected to position themselves as public mothers and as guardians of the national morality” as political leaders, with “legions of women not standing apart from nationalistic projects but instead being deeply implicated in them” (Marecek 2012, p.153; See also Jayawardena and De Alwis 1996). These accounts highlight how discourses of Sinhala Buddhist womanhood have figured into the construction of authentic Sinhala identity, as well as elucidated how women have stepped outside of the pre-scripted roles and resisted patriarchal norms (Lynch 2007; De Alwis 1999).

In contrast, I endeavor to show that through their public activism, women become more than biological and ideological reproducers and “cultural carriers” of the Sinhala Buddhist nation; rather they become architects in the construction of a nationalist imagination. They derive their power and agency in these nation-building efforts not through feminist struggles to liberate or raise feminist consciousness within the oppressive patriarchal nationalist project. Instead Sinhala middle-class lay Buddhist women enact their own privileged place in Sri Lankan society by shoring up culturally prescribed notions of motherhood for the purpose of the elite nationalist aspirations to realize a “righteous society.”

Mother-Warrior

Since the early 1990’s, a number of Buddhist monks and lay Buddhist activist groups had been raising concerns about Christian Evangelicals allegedly proselytizing to impoverished Sinhala Buddhists by offering them financial incentives. With the growth of evangelical prosperity gospels globally, a subset of Sri Lankan Buddhist activists were looking to galvanize populist resistance against those they deemed as heretics, frauds, and anti-nationalists (Mahadev 2018). Anxieties around the alleged use of Christian charity as cover for religious conversion ran particularly high in the context of the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 and the three-decade long war between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam, which drew a heavy international presence of international NGOs involved in humanitarian and redevelopment work. Foreign NGOs were accused of partnering with Christian missionary organizations to offer money and jobs to people who would convert to Christianity, with the ultimate goal of establishing a Christian government (Munasinghe 2004, 8; in Berkwitz 2008).

Such anxieties mixed with a longstanding mistrust towards Christian charity. As Neena Mahadev has noted, “charity in Sri Lanka has long been situated within anti-colonial, anti-missionary, nationalist discourses not as a straightforward instantiation of generosity but rather as

a mechanism for attracting vulnerable people to Christianity” (Mahadev 2018: 666; see also Mahadev 2014). As a response to these claims, there emerged a group of local Buddhist NGOs that sought to counter these alleged conversions, and through a form of “competitive charity” to target populations by developing parallel social development organizations and networks. Jayagrahanaya was one such organization. First established in Kandy in the early 1990s by lay and clerical Buddhists, Jayagrahanaya-Kandy was formed as an organization to oppose “unethical conversion” through awareness raising programs, that included the distribution of publications to inform the public (Waha 2018). A few years later, a sister organization was established in Colombo, with Dr. Anula Wijesundara at its helm. She transformed the organization from one that focused primarily on advocacy to one that was aimed at galvanizing the charitable contributions of Sinhala Buddhists to directly compete with what were seen as the financial allurements of evangelical groups.

Drawing upon her social standing as a leading physician in Colombo (she is currently the President of the Sri Lanka Medical Association), and her alumni ties to the leading Buddhist girls school (Visaka College), as well as the prominence of her family among elite Sinhala Buddhist circles, she rallied a large cohort of women and men to volunteer and donate to the cause of Jayagrahanaya. Other prominent female figures in Sinhala Buddhist urban society were instrumental to the organization’s founding, including Dr. Hema Goonatilleka, an academic with a specialization in Buddhist studies, as well as gender and culture in Southeast Asia. She was a key layperson instrumental in reinstating the Bhikkunī ordination in Sri Lanka, the founder of the Center for Women’s Research, and an office bearer of the All Ceylon Women’s Buddhist Congress. She was also the editor of the *Buddhist Times*, which was particularly vocal in denouncing and publicizing instances where Christian evangelicals and NGOs have engaged in unethical conversions (Berkwitz 2014).

Jayagrahanaya was also part of a broader movement called the Jathika Chintanaya (loosely translated as “nationalist consciousness”) that claims a natural and sacred right of the Sinhala populace to political power. The organization’s leaders and volunteer constituents were strong supporters of the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) Party—Sinhala National Heritage Party—a Sinhala Buddhist political party comprised of Buddhist monks advocating for the *sangha* to engage in active politics. Although women were not in positions of official leadership in the organization, women such as Drs. Goonatilleka and Wijesundara were prominent players in political organizing. They were key authors and architects of the Prohibition of Forcible Conversion bill in 2004, presented by the JHU to legislate laws criminalizing proselytization by “force, fraud, and allurement.” Although the bill itself failed, women from Jayagrahanaya and the Red Lotus Organization played a significant and active role in advocating for it.

To financially support these initiatives women of Jayagrahanaya leveraged a wide network of national and international charity. Many of these women had close professional, familial, and friendship ties to the Sinhala diaspora, particularly to those living in countries such as Australia, England, the United States and the Middle East. Families in Colombo would contribute by donating clothes, schoolbooks, and shoes, which the organization distributed to their beneficiaries.

To the members of Jayagrahanaya, the issue of unethical conversions was not merely caused by the economic allurements allegedly offered by the missionaries; it also struck at the heart of a

consistent concern among the elites of Sinhala Buddhist society regarding the moral failings of Sinhala families in the rural countryside. This anxiety galvanized these women activists to extend their maternal role in caring for the *sangha* to include the care of the nation, vis-a-vis the moral upliftment and renewal of the poor.

Motherhood has been a key focus of militant nationalist projects that have taken place in many parts of the world. A growing number of feminist scholars have analyzed how nationalist projects have deployed the figure of the mother and the feminized space of the home as a site of defense of the national homeland (Grewal 1996; Bedi 2006; Koonz 1988; Bacchetta and Power 2013). This literature has directed feminist attention to how tropes of female domesticity and icons of feminine goodness have been invoked by various women leaders of right-wing movements in the exercise and legitimization of militancy against the perceived Other. The Sinhala Buddhist women who participated through Jayagrahanaya in promoting nationalist ideology also invoked these gender ideologies in their moral education efforts to curb the influence of Christian proselytism.

This was illustrated on one of the occasions I accompanied the women of Jayagrahanaya to a border village where they were to carry out a medical-camp. Such a camp consisted of setting up a temporary medical clinic and pharmacy in one of the public spaces in a village (like a school or a temple), where volunteer medical professionals would see patients from the village and provide them with free medicine. The organization worked on the assumption that the dearth of medical professionals in these locations makes the villagers susceptible to Christian faith-healers introduced through evangelizing church groups. Providing free monthly medical camps was considered a way of combating purported conversions.

On this day, in October 2009, Dr. Wijesundara, the President of Jayagrahanaya, was holding a *janahamuwa* (people's meeting) prior to the medical camp as a mean to educate the villagers regarding "unethical conversions." Facing an audience of women, men, and children who had attended that day's meeting, Dr. Wijesundara gave a forceful speech in Sinhala to a large gathering of residents from a village in Vavuniya in northern Sri Lanka (Gajaweera fieldnotes, October 31, 2009):

"I'm sure they have approached your communities. Organizations like World Vision will promise to rebuild your houses, your roads, wells, and schools.² They will offer to share with you the local church motorbike. But do not be tricked. Do not convert."

Speaking directly to the women in the audience, she resumed:

"Mothers, sisters, you were the warriors of the nation; as your sons and husbands gave their eyes, head, flesh, and blood (*aes, his, mas, leh*) as *dāna* to the nation. You became donors (*dayakayo vuna*).

"Do not lose the victory that your sons have secured...if they (the evangelists) come to your house, show them the door, chase them out with a broomstick! Tell them our (*apē*) ancestors

² Although difficult to assess these claims, World Vision, has been the target of the anti-conversion rhetoric for its alleged aggressive methods of proselytizing (Berkwitz 2014).

preserved this tradition, and that we will not sacrifice it. When we convert like this, they want us, the Sinhala Buddhist, to lose our force (*ape balaya nathi karanna*)."

She deploys the popular formula, *aes, his, mas, leh*, which denote in Theravada Buddhism a special category of meritorious giving referred to as *dāna paramita* (extraordinary bodily sacrifices made by the Buddha in previous lives as recorded in Jataka tales) to describe the sacrifice of sons and husbands to the nation. The rhetoric of selfless sacrifice was a common theme used by nationalists in memorializing for Sri Lankan war dead (Kent 2010). Next, Dr. Wijesundara sees the woman's role as a *dayikava* (donor, or more commonly the donor to the Buddhist temple) complimentary with the sacrifice of the sons and husbands. These comments were meant to galvanize the women to conceive of their role vis-a-vis male sacrifice to the nation as part of a grander national obligation as members of a collective Buddhist polity. Dr. Wijesundara called upon the broomstick, a familiar symbol of women's domesticity, to be used as a weapon to guard against the encroachment of the evangelical outsider. She invoked a powerful image of a unified "us" (*apē*)—that homogenizes deep class inequalities between the urban and the rural Sinhala—as a unique cultural force (*balaya*) in defense against an equally unambiguous "them." "They," the figure of the Christian missionary in the guise of the World Vision NGO worker, are to be chased out, like dirt, dust, and waste from the home.

In order to marshal rural women for her organization's anti-conversion mission, Dr. Wijesundara utilizes a gendered ideology about women typically used by men in their political rhetoric. The image of the "mother-warrior," the female figure morally devoted to the nationalist cause, has been a common trope in Sinhala Buddhist rhetoric (De Alwis 2004). The woman represents the vanguard of the nation and its borders, militantly resisting the encroachment of the Other. It is a powerful metaphor articulating the "nationalist motherhood project" (Grewal 1996). It reflected the responsibility of the mother as "warrior" to militantly safeguard and defend her home and, by extension, her motherland (*mauwbima*).

In addition to asking women to be more assertive in guarding the family, another physician volunteer, Kanthi, told the audience—this time, men, women, and children: it was "the duty of every parent to live like good Buddhists, abstaining from the *pas pau* (five sins) and abiding by the Buddhist teachings to bring up our children as patriots." The "*pas pau*" that Kanthi was commenting on referred to the five sinful deeds according to Theravada Buddhism: abstinence from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and consumption of intoxicants. It alluded to broader elite concerns over the moral integrity as Buddhists of the rural Sinhala family. Couched as moral guidance, these comments insinuated that the rural poor were falling behind on their moral responsibilities to uphold the Buddhist integrity of the nation and thereby to uphold Buddhist moral culture.

These assertions resonate closely with the rhetoric used by Buddhist reformers like the late Gangodawila Soma Thero (1948–2003), a charismatic Buddhist monk who first flagged the threat of Christian evangelical NGOs and unethical conversions. He also denounced the lack of moral integrity in the Sinhala household. Soma viewed the family and the sphere of the home as sites of societal dysfunction, and he identified them as primary sites in which moral degradation was to be combated. He claimed that the "family is the most important group in Sri Lankan society," and he

“gave primacy to the family as the ideal social space around which the righteous Buddhist society should be conceived and composed” (Berkwitz 2008: 19). Soma’s comments about the Sinhala people’s failure to follow the Buddhist precepts were mostly directed towards the lower classes (Uyangoda 2004; cited in Matthews:1988: 662 n.18). According to Soma and many other reformers who preceded him like Madihe Pannasiha, it was the failure of the Sinhala families to grasp the significance of this Buddhist morality that hindered the Buddhist nation from realizing a “righteous society”.

As elite and middle-class educated urban women with financial and social capital, members of Jayagrahanaya borrowed a paternalistic discourse from prominent male figures and positioned themselves in the role of civilizing the poor Sinhala through the message of the Buddha’s doctrine. The problem of the Buddhist nation was thus not only the encroachment of Christians into these communities, but a concern over the morality of the village Sinhala family. These women’s charitable activities in service of Sinhala communities that inhabited border village areas offered these women an opportunity to extend their nurturing and organizing roles in the religious sphere into the arena of civilizing and protecting the nation, and thereby partake in the broader nationalist agenda of realizing a “righteous society.” In enacting traditional roles associated with motherhood within these male-dominated institutions, these women garnered esteem, respectability, and admiration as nurturers of the Buddhist *sangha*. Crucially, feminine responsibility here is not limited to the “maternalized” care of the *sangha*, but extended to the task of preserving the Sinhala Buddhist national imaginary by way of cultivating the moral integrity of the Sinhala villager.

Conclusion

The nation-building exercise of the postcolonial Sinhala Buddhist elite imagination subscribes to the hegemonic parameters of the modern nation-state, yet it is also animated by a historical consciousness that, as Serena Tennekoon has put it, is “cyclical rather than linear, insofar as the past is imagined as realizable in the future” (Tennekoon 1988: 297). This imagined community of the Sinhala Buddhist state is one that reclaims a romanticized Theravāda Buddhist *dharmishta samajaya* of the past for the future; though it homogenizes the past and elides the multiplicity of socio-political formations and ethno-cultural identities that have shaped the Sri Lankan pre-colonial and post-colonial experience (Silva 2002). This hegemonic nation-building aspiration, which can be characterized as “simultaneously past-ward and forward” (Tennekoon 1988), resists commitment to the kind of historicity normatively (and hegemonically) expected within the Western tradition of liberal modernity. This latter is a historicity, that as Asad has argued, is based on assumptions of a linear “temporal movement of social life” where “the future” pulls us forward: a future that “can be anticipated and *should* be desired” and in which “those who act on a different assumption are thought of as being either morally blameworthy or practically self-defeating—or both” (Asad 1998, emphasis in original).

How might we account for agency—that is, the capacity to act—in the context of the lives and goals of contemporary Buddhist women situated in this maelstrom of various hegemonic formations? A liberal feminist understanding of agency that informs Buddhist modernism is inadequate. Namely, because the assumptions of agency in liberal feminism compel an evaluation of agency in terms of

women's capacity or potential to realize freedom in relation to patriarchal norms, mainly through resistance to or subversion of them.

This potential, as Salgado has argued, is typically understood “as a kind of social (educational, economic, etc.,) advancement or as a religious self-realization” (Salgado 2013: 52). If we judge the professional and personal lives of the middle-class and elite women who are the protagonists of my account according to this mainstream liberal feminist position, we may unequivocally celebrate them for their accomplishments in terms of these freedoms. They were educationally accomplished, recognized leaders in their professions, and key champions of women's rights in terms of education and work.

Yet, at the same time, they embodied and advocated for notions of motherhood that would be deemed from a liberal perspective as parochial, “traditional,” out of step with progressive modernity, and indeed, even self-defeating. In many ways, they represent the ideal “respectable women” produced out of the South Asian experience of colonial modernity. Moreover, the moralistic discourses on righteous society they deployed through their charitable projects for nationalist ends encouraged the reproduction of paternalistic views of moral motherhood and womanhood.

These Sinhala Buddhist women's aspirations to be mothers of the nation through *dāna* and charity, posit a conception of agency and power that do not neatly overlap with the liberal feminist paradigm preoccupied with autonomy and resistance in relation to patriarchy, family, and the paternalism of the nation-state. Instead, they call attention to how women's agency is situated within specific hegemonic formations, various historicities and oppressions (class, racial, national, religious, colonial, and other identities). Indeed, leaving aside the dominant paradigm's evaluation of women's agency in relation to liberal conceptions of freedom, I suggest, can offer a path forward for investigating the diversity of motivations that move contemporary women to join Buddhist organizations that might not necessarily be consolidated by the patriarchal nationalism described here. These motivations can include spiritual, emotional, and cosmological dispositions that intersect in complex ways with public and political forms of agency.

Borrowing from Harshana Rambukwella's recent work (2018) on the genealogy of Sinhala nationalism, I opened this essay with a proposition to bring a “critical yet empathetic look” at elite lay Buddhist women's participation in ethno-nationalist Sinhala Buddhist hegemony. In the context of my study, empathy is needed to pay attention to the lived agency that lay Buddhist women enact within these various hegemonic formations. Yet this view is tempered by a critical spirit that accounts for how such agency can *enable* other forms of oppression; in this case, the elite oppression of both the Sinhala subaltern and those deemed Other and foreign to the construction of a Sinhala Buddhist nation-state.

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