

Deakin Anthropology Seminars 2020

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The Turn to Benevolence: Buddhicism in Post Conflict Sri Lanka

Buddhist myths, rituals and images are part of everyday Sri Lankan life at different scalar levels, from individual expressions of devotion through to the aesthetics of infrastructure. This paper draws on anthropological research conducted at three sites between 2016 and 2017. Polonnaruwa, in the North Central Province, offered a key vantage point for investigating the turn to benevolence in post-conflict Sri Lanka. Once an ancient hydraulic polity (and now the hometown of former President Sirisena) development in this district activates tropes of Sinhala history concerned with vanquishing the enemy and restoration of order. The second site, a Pilgrimage-route, witnessed a growing Sinhala Buddhist interest in providing sustenance for the predominantly Tamil Hindu pilgrims. Once only common at Kataragama, the core and terminus of the pilgrimage, this is now also seen at the periphery, indicating Buddhicism at the margins. The third site, Colombo, is a long-standing home to Sri Lanka's ethnic and religious minorities. It has been increasingly conditioned by the Buddhist majority since the country's independence from the British in 1948. Today, Sri Lanka's most powerful international benefactor, China, employs Buddhist imagery in its infrastructural renewal of the capital. Benevolent Buddhicism is a striking commonality in these three diverse ethnographic contexts. A multifaceted assembly of historical ideals and cosmological processes, enacted by state and non-state actors, motivates this material magnanimity.

This presentation is drawn from research on the ARC project 'Religious Innovation and Social Reform in Sri Lanka', led by Rohan Bastin. **Ben Vecchiet's** recently submitted PhD, 'Pada Yatra: The Tamil Hindu Pilgrim and Pilgrimage in Post-War Sri Lanka' is an ethnographic study of the Kataragama Pilgrimage within the Tamil Hindu community of Sri Lanka in the aftermath of the recent civil war (1983-2009). The thesis examines the relationship between pilgrimage, social organization, temple ritual, and the larger ethnic issues associated with the conflict. **Samson Keam's** thesis, 'Hydraulic state: A study of local political leadership in drought' explores the nexus of local political leadership and hydro-infrastructure and considers how regimes of power are made and unmade in crisis. **Catherine West's** thesis 'Colombo Transformed: Social change, religion and the city', considers the foundational social and spatial impact of religion on the formation of Colombo and argues that urban multireligion is a vital element of Sri Lanka's past and present.

Thursday 1 October, 4.00-5.30pm
via zoom. Please register here:

<https://www.eventbrite.com.au/e/the-turn-to-benevolence-buddhicism-in-post-conflict-sri-lanka-tickets-121312429743>

Zoom log in details will be circulated on the day.

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