

DOES THE BUDDHA WEAR YELLOW?: CUSTODIAL ORIENTALISM, CONVENTUAL *DASA SIL MATAS*, AND THE BUDDHIST REVIVAL IN CEYLON AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Buddhism in Ceylon, especially in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, became a battleground upon which European theists, deists and atheists fought for intellectual primacy. Their interpretations of Buddhism were accommodated by their attenuating visions of the world.¹ Most historically significant English responses to Buddhism were attended by a distinctive notion of decline, that was partly informed by prevailing colonial discourses that constructed a bifurcated system of East and West, where the West was emblemized by progress, masculinity, and domination, and the East embodied decay, femininity, and submission to Western ascendancy.² Emerging out of this dialogical process in the last century of colonial rule in Ceylon³ was what has been commonly termed a Buddhist 'revival' among upper and middle class Sinhalese, which has been fully appropriated into Buddhist historiography about the period. The term 'revival,' however, has never been problematized, allowing it to contribute to the concretizing of Orientalist values of decay and ascendancy that, borrowing from Said's notion of *idées reçues*, have been received through a century of the religious historiography of Buddhism.⁴ "Revival" implies preceding decline, which served as one of the discursive marking posts that helped the British, in particular, to justify, rationalize and organize their pursuit of cultural and economic hegemony over South and South East Asia. Much of historical and recent scholarship has focussed on the Western impetus to 'save' or 'resurrect' Buddhism in late nineteenth-century Ceylon through various scholarly and theosophical endeavours, which we might term *custodial Orientalism*, resulting in the outpouring of a Sinhala Buddhist revival based on an appropriation of a broadly

¹ See for example, Philip C. Almond. *The British Discovery of Buddhism*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 33-42

² Edward Said, *Orientalism*. (New York: Pantheon, 1978); and Mrinalini Sinha. *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century*. (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), 1-6.

³ For purposes of clarity, I will here on in refer to Sri Lanka as Ceylon when discussing it in the colonial context, which is the name used by the British for the island in the period we are considering. When discussing pre or post Colonial Sri Lanka, I will revert to Sri Lanka.

⁴ Said, 326.

Christian ethic. Kitisri Malalgoda points out, for example, that many contemporary observers of Buddhism at the end of the nineteenth century, “traced the beginnings of the revival to the arrival of the Theosophists in Ceylon in 1880,” resulting in a common assumption that “Buddhists were relatively inactive until they were stirred into activity by their friends from overseas.” Instead, Malalgoda insists that theosophists and scholars “were enthusiastically welcomed and absorbed into the Buddhist movement *because* the Buddhists were already active at the time of their arrival.”⁵ While the impact of custodial Orientalism on the Buddhism practiced by the middle class Sinhalese of the late nineteenth century cannot be denied, there are also non-Christian and more importantly, non-Orientalist, influences to which attention must be paid. The language used to engage in colonial discourse changed on the part of middle class Buddhists, allowing them to speak in a voice that European theosophists and scholars were willing to hear because it suited more recognizably their own concretized understanding of ‘Buddhism’ in its perceived ‘classical’ or ‘primitive’ forms. Although these changes could easily be construed as an imported and Christianized Buddhism, there are also observable indigenous Buddhistic elements at play that challenge George Bond’s suggestion that the Buddhist laity were “inactive before 1880.”⁶ This reification, or concretization of the period that privileges custodial Orientalism has been applied to the study of conventual *dasa sil matas*, or Ten Precept Mothers, as well, positioning the growth of cloistered female renunciation and the ancient and extinct *bhikkhuni sangha* as historically isolated and polarized across the gulf of a millennium of veritable silence. The notion of a discrete revival of Buddhist nuns in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Ceylon is informed partly on this reified notion of revival that has been typified particularly by the involvement of custodial Orientalism and the attending concretization of “Protestant Buddhism” in late twentieth-century scholarship.⁷

Tessa Bartholomeusz, in her treatment of Buddhist nuns in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries has characterized the ‘revival’ in Sri Lanka as “a response to centuries of colonial rule” that served as “a seed-bed for experimentation and innovation” where many Sinhala Buddhists “responded to [a] sense of decline in the island by attempting to return Buddhism to an ‘ideal’ pristine,

⁵ Kitisri Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society, 1750-1900*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), 256. My emphasis.

⁶ George D. Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka*. (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1988), 48.

⁷ The suggestion that “Protestant Buddhism” is a reified term was first advanced by John C. Holt in “Protestant Buddhism?” *Religious Studies Review* 17, 4 (October 1991): 307-312.

or pure form.”⁸ The conventualization of *dasa sil matas*, or Ten Precept Mothers, who were neither nuns nor laywomen⁹, represents one of these innovations, which is said to be modelled on the extinct form of conventual renunciation of the *bhikkhuni sangha*. For those British who took a keen interest in Buddhism during this period, many of whom were themselves women, there was a marked association between the paucity of the *bhikkhuni sangha* before this period and the decline of Buddhism in South Asia. The result, for Western scholarship, has been a tendency to position the motion of historical agency in the hands of various European Orientalisms linked most often to the Pali Text Society and the Buddhist Theosophical Society. This helped to construct late nineteenth century Buddhist responses to Christianity as largely reactive in nature, while underplaying the indigenous Buddhist construction of Buddhism.¹⁰ This notion of a sort of punctuated equilibrium of religious evolution becomes problematic, however, because ‘Buddhism’ as an accumulation of cultural and religious traditions is always developing and necessarily contains ambiguities that make the tradition and the particular movements within it very difficult to define.¹¹ This punctuated model of Buddhist evolution is also problematic because it is mediated, to a large extent, by an inherited tradition of Western scholarship that has written itself into the image of Buddhism it projected. It becomes difficult to negotiate between indigenous and colonial projections of spirituality; where indigenous culture is informing colonial identity construction, and where each party is speaking for itself or being interpreted

⁸ Tessa Bartholomeusz. *Women Under the Bo Tree*. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁰ Gananath Obeyesekere “Religious Symbolism and Political Change in Ceylon.” ed. Bardwell Smith *Two Wheels of Dharma: Essays on the Theravada Tradition in India and Ceylon*. (Chambersburg: American Academy of Religion, 1972, 58-78); and Philip C. Almond *The British Discovery of Buddhism*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Jonathan Silk challenges Almond’s assumption that the creation of Buddhism and the Victorian responses to it originated from a purely Western origination. See Jonathan A. Silk. “The Victorian Creation of Buddhism.” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 22 (1994): 171-196. In the same vein, Charles Hallisley challenges Said’s construction of Orientalism in the same way, nuancing it to include “Eastern” agency as well. See Charles Hallisley “Roads Taken and Not Taken in the Study of Theravada Buddhism.” in ed. Donald S. Lopez. *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism Under Colonialism*. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995, 31-61). Mrinalini Sinha’s thesis also reflects this nuance, see especially pp. 1-24.

See also Holt, 307-312 for a redaction of the term “Protestant Buddhism” since 1970.

¹¹ George D. Bond. *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1988), 22-3.

by another. In the case of the study of Buddhist 'nuns' at the turn of the century, these distinctions are further obfuscated by the pluralities and ambiguities in the nomenclature of feminine renunciation, which likely rendered definition as problematic at the turn of the twentieth century as it does for scholars today.¹² As such, it becomes difficult to distinguish indigenous from imported movements from within the larger system. One model that may work would be to search for long standing continuities that might evince signs of longer standing traditions within the broader system. While there is certainly a strong correlation between the emergence of claustrated¹³ female lay renunciation, Christianity, and Orientalist fascination with Buddhism, one might also suggest that the *dasa sil matas* belonged to an indigenous continuum of feminine religiosity and religious expression that outstrides European interest in the resurrection of Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka. Far from being an entirely new innovation, this movement evolved as a form of protest and religious practice. The first part of this essay will examine the construction of Buddhism in the Western imagination, paying particular attention to the work of female custodial Orientalists. The second part will look more specifically at Catherine de Alwis, known later as Sudharmacari, and how rather than responding to custodial Orientalist sympathies, she was more likely a member of a long standing continuum of indigenous protest and traditional feminine religious expressions.

Custodial Orientalism and the historical construction of Buddhism

The emergence of conventual *dasa sil matas* has been linked in modern scholarship to two concomitant and related forces widely referred to as 'Orientalism' and

¹² Nirmala S. Salgado. "Religious Identities of Buddhist Nuns: Training Precepts, Renunciation Attire, and Nomenclature in Theravada Buddhism." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. 72, 4 (Dec., 2004), 946. For the purposes of this study, I will refer to the extinct lineage of fully ordained nuns as the *bhikkhuni sangha*, while electing to adopt *dasa sil mata*, or ten precept mother, as a more accurate reflection of the lay monasticism practiced by *Sanghamitta* and *Sudharmacari* at the turn of the twentieth century as ten training precept renunciants, which also likely correlates to many of the pre-conventual *dasa sil matas* in Sri Lanka. Conventual *dasa sil matas* refer to those ten precept mothers who resided in community at a hermitage or convent, while non-conventual *dasa sil matas* typically refers to ten precept mothers who live either as homeless (*pabajja*) ascetics or as householders (*gihi*) but still observe ascetic comportments such as a shaved head and white robes. See Salgado, 937-943.

¹³ I use the term 'claustration' loosely, as it is not meant to echo strict or active enclosure represented in the varieties of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox conventual monasticism. At no point has my reading given me any indication that either the *bhikkhuni sangha* or the conventual *dasa sil matas* practiced monastic stability.

'Protestant Buddhism.' According to modern scholarship, these two forces, which each operate as related interlocutors in the larger discourse of Empire, contributed to a 'revival' of Buddhism in the closing century of British rule in Sri Lanka. Orientalism, which functions predominantly in the construction of Western discourse about the imagined East, was tempered, in large part, by the notion of a long decline in oriental culture.¹⁴ As long as the East was in a state of extended decay, it would be incumbent upon the Orientalist, who saw him or herself as sympathizer, to speak for the Orient because the Orient, in all its docility, femininity and submission, was incapable of speaking for itself.¹⁵ Scholastic endeavour, therefore, focussed not only on speaking *for* the Orient, through the Pali Text Society, for example, but also provoked a fascination with the study of Oriental history and religion by punctuating Buddhism into three broad periods that were usually classified as 'origins', or 'primitive', the 'classical period', and 'decline'. The period of decline, which culminated in and was emblematic of the modern period, was "marked by decay and impotence" that resulted in the feminization and subordination of Oriental culture, and, hence, aided Western justification of European colonialism and cultural hegemony.¹⁶ Kumari Jayawardena proposes that among female Orientalists two broad categories of scholarship emerged in the nineteenth century. The first were the 'romantics' who "celebrated tradition and were unabashedly romantic," glorifying the Indian sati, and typifying South Asia as a "land of gold and sunshine...sparkling with precious gems and fabrics."¹⁷ The second can be placed under the umbrella of *custodial Orientalism*, and advocated "social reform and found a liberating message for women in the early texts and highlighted their 'feminist' content." These women also categorized modern Buddhism as emerging from a long decline and adopted a custodial attitude towards

¹⁴ Said, 322-5., the idea of the Orient itself demonstrated an essentializing and constructive tendency among many European and American thinkers that fails to recognize the multivocality and plurality of those cultures termed to belong to the East.

¹⁵ Donald S. Lopez Jr. "Introduction." in ed. Donald S. Lopez. *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism Under Colonialism*. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995, 1-30), 13.

¹⁶ Ibid. See also Sinha, especially 1-33, for a discussion of gender construction in South Asia, particularly in late 19th century Bengal. While not actively justifying representing a justification of European custodialism over Buddhist Asia, some modern scholarship still reflects this tendency, dividing twenty five centuries of Buddhist history into three discrete eras of 'early canonical,' 'post-Asokan,' and 'modern.' see, for example, Bond, 33.

¹⁷ David Cannadine has called this 'ornamentalism', punning Said's use of the term Orientalism. see David Cannadine. *Ornamentalism : how the British saw their empire*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

Buddhists, especially women, often against not only indigenous misogynies but also the Empire itself.¹⁸ Many people, men and women, who might be identified as custodial Orientalists and who aimed to improve Buddhism through the reintroduction of classical Buddhist ideas to South Asia, organized themselves into two spheres that orbited either the scholarship representative of the Pali Text Society or the Buddhist Theosophical Society.¹⁹ Self-identified Feminists were attracted to both groups.

Between the Theosophists and scholars, the women associated with the Pali Text Society have had the largest impact on contemporary and current scholarship.²⁰ By and large, male and female custodial Orientalists from both camps condemned Christian missionary activity as the work of “ignorant and impudent intruders,”²¹ while self-identified scholars and Theosophists tended generally to see each other as opponents, the former accusing the latter of eschewing the natural rationalities and ethics of ‘Classical Buddhism’ for the spiritualism and superstition associated with post-Classical Buddhism.²² What is perhaps most striking is the importance that Europeans, of all stripes, placed in their own impact on the changing religious landscapes of Buddhism in South Asia. A survey of Ceylon under the British Empire suggested, for example, that the demand for self-government in Ceylon and India was due largely to the civilizing influence of a British education.²³ Sir Henry Steele Olcott, who with the help of Madame Helena Blavatsky, formed the Buddhist Theosophical Society in the United States in 1875. “cheerily accepted his share in the Buddhist revival.”²⁴ Countess Miranda de Souza Carnavaro, who converted to Buddhism 1897 and initiated the first conventual order of *dasa sil matas* in 1898 under the supervision of Anagarika Dharmapala, suggested that “there is work to be done in Ceylon re-establishing the order of nuns in the Island” because the “women of India have lapsed from the Buddhist faith.”²⁵ Custodial Orientalism has helped to shape our understanding and categorization of Buddhist practice in the late

¹⁸ Kumari Jayawardena. *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia During British Colonial Rule*. (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 158.

¹⁹ Richard Gombrich. *Precept and Practice: Traditional Buddhism in the Rural Highlands of Ceylon*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 54.

²⁰ Jayawardena, 158-9.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

²² Gombrich, 52-54.

²³ Lennox A. Mills *Ceylon under British Rule, 1795-1932*. 2nd Ed. (London: Frank Cass, 1964, rpr. Oxford, 1933), 266.

²⁴ Malalgoda, 256-7.

²⁵ “Buddha's Fair Pale Convert,” *New York Journal* 31 (August 1899), quoted from Bartholomeusz, 54.

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It both constructed and responded to a Buddhism that promised much in its primitive and classical forms but needed their guiding touch to breathe life into its modern manifestations.

Partially as a result of this custodial reading of Buddhist history, Buddhist historiography has often interpreted the changes encountered by English-educated city Buddhists in Sri Lanka during this period in terms largely allied with Western custodialism. Proponents of the 'Protestant Buddhist' thesis have offered the most significant treatment of the Buddhist 'revival,' in this way. The understanding that Europeans imported knowledge of Buddhism through their texts and provided the momentum for a revival of Buddhism in Ceylon can perhaps best be illustrated by Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere's assertion that "strong missionary influences in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have led to a Buddhist Renaissance in Sinhalese society that is manifesting itself today in a particular form of 'Buddhist Protestantism.'²⁶ Furthermore, Gombrich and Obeyesekere suggest that the translation of the Pali canon into English by the Pali Text Society, which was founded by T. W. Rhys Davids in 1881, provided the backbone of religious understanding for English educated Sinhalese.²⁷ In a later redaction of this thesis, Obeyesekere asserts that:²⁸

One of the fascinating problems in the history of Modern Theravada Buddhism is the manner in which the Western scholarly definition of that religion has been appropriated, albeit with a variety of modifications, by the Buddhists of Sri Lanka.

While there is little doubt that Buddhist religious change was impacted by the presence of three successive waves of foreign power, Christian missionary activity, and the increasing availability of Pali texts in English and Sinhala, the major thesis of Protestant Buddhism still hinges on a trajectory of change that sweeps from West to East, effectively stripping middle class Buddhists of historical agency.²⁹ Given

²⁶ Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere. *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 252.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 210.

²⁸ Gananath Obeyesekere. "Buddhism and Conscience," *Daedalus*. 120 (1991), 219.

²⁹ Middle class Buddhists in Ceylon have been typically associated with Protestant Buddhism and the Buddhist revival. The common understanding is that custodial Orientalists typically addressed their reformative concerns, such as Henry Steele Olcott's Buddhist Catechism of 1881 (see Bond, 50), and the Pali Text Society's English translations of the Pali canon, toward this class. In general, the Sinhala middle class can be identified as

that most major works investigating the religious changes in the last quarter of the nineteenth and the first quarter of the twentieth centuries in Ceylon have incorporated this thesis to some extent, there may be some major lacunae that do not fall into this representation of 'revival' Buddhism in the treatment of the rise of conventual *dasa sil matas* that need to be addressed.³⁰

At the centre of the historical and modern discussions about the resurrection of conventual female monasticism in Sri Lanka is the story of *Sanghamitta*. According to the legends of the *Mahavamsa* and *Dipavamsa*, *Sanghamitta* was the daughter of the Indian emperor Asoka.³¹ She came to Sri Lanka with a branch of the Bo tree in the third century BCE and founded the first lineage of *bhikkhuni sangha* with a group of five hundred waiting Sri Lankan novices, alongside her brother, Mahinda, the founder of the order of *bhikkhu sangha*.³² For the custodial Orientalist interested in resurrecting the former glories of Buddhism, *Sanghamitta* represents the classical age and the height of Buddhist endeavour as well as the ancillary decline in Buddhist practice in Ceylon. Between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, the lineage founded by *Sanghamitta* became extinct, and the order collapsed, having fewer than the ten *bhikkhuni* required to form a quorum for ordination.³³ They were unable to rebuild the order because the only other Theravada lineage still in existence at the time, situated in Burma, was also undergoing a process of extinction.³⁴ The *dasa sil matas* of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are often associated with the extinct *bhikkhuni sangha* and compared favourably to them,³⁵ above the ten precept renunciants who either concentrated their spirituality inside the home, or who appear to have chosen homelessness as an outlet for ascetic practice. The construction of a stronger corollary between the *bhikkhuni sangha* and the conventual *dasa sil matas*, than

English educated, were centred around Colombo, were often members of the Mudali class and were typified as civil servants working for the Colonial government (See Malalgoda, 208).

³⁰ Malalgoda – who actually argues for Buddhist agency within a framework of Protestant Buddhism, Bloss, Bartholomeusz, and Bond, for example, appropriate Protestant Buddhism as a model and distinct period in Buddhist history.

³¹ Bartholomeusz, 17.

³² *Ibid.*, xviii, and Edith Blake. "A Buddhist Nun," *The Buddhist Review*. 7, 6 (1915), 51.

³³ Bartholomeusz, 15.

³⁴ Bartholomeusz, (15), suggests that the order collapsed by the 11th century, while Lowell Bloss, "The Female Renunciants of Sri Lanka: The Dasasilamattawa," in ed. Paul Williams. *Buddhism: Critical Concepts in Religious Studies*. Vol. VII: *Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 2, provides a later estimate, suggesting this took place during the twelfth or thirteenth century.

³⁵ Bartholomeusz, Bloss, Salgado, Malalgoda, Bond, all suggest this.

between that of the conventual *dasa sil matas* and ten precept lay renunciants is based partially on the Orientalist scholarship of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that focused on the disparate notions of glory and decay in the study of Buddhist religious history. While there are certainly corollary elements between the *bhikkhuni sangha* and the first conventual *dasa sil matas*, this relationship does not provide a satisfactory answer for the development of the conventual *dasa sil matas* at the turn of the twentieth century. We should remain cautious of the formative nature of Western textualism and involvement in the creation of Buddhism, especially as a mimesis of European Christianity, being careful not to overemphasize it against the genitive power of indigenous Buddhism.

Given this caution against overemphasizing the European creation of Buddhism, and the conventual *dasa sil mata* movement in particular, it might be of use to examine why the West, and especially British and American women, turned to Sri Lankan Buddhism as an object of study leading up to and including the turn of the twentieth century. The fact that Europeans were suddenly noticing Sri Lankan Buddhism and *how* they were noticing it and its female adherents especially, may help to shed light on how the activities of these women were attributed to custodial Orientalism that was later appropriated into the model of Protestant Buddhism. There are two major factors that might help to explain why Ceylonese Buddhism stood out for European observers and scholars. The first factor is chiefly economic and helps to explain why Ceylon, in particular, stood out within the larger framework of the British Empire. During the middle part of the nineteenth century, coffee served as one of the chief exports from Ceylon to the West.³⁶ Tea, which for the British home markets served as a more valuable commodity, had traditionally been exported from China. While coffee served as an important mercantile export for the island, it never really achieved dominance over the world coffee market because neither the soil nor the climate of Ceylon was entirely suited to the cultivation of coffee beans. Crop disease decimated the coffee crop in 1868, "when it was at the height of its prosperity," and never really recovered.³⁷ Tea was eventually replaced as the majority cultivation commodity because it was far more

³⁶ In 1845, William Knighton suggested that the "increase in value of the exports" toward the middle part of the century "is chiefly caused by the quantities of coffee now produced in the island," concluding optimistically that "[p]erhaps no country in the world is better adapted for the growth of coffee (367)." See William Knighton *The History of Ceylon*. (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1845). K. M. de Silva notes that coffee experienced its peak as a "preponderant" crop between 1850 and 1880. See K. M de Silva *A History of Sri Lanka*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981). 282.

³⁷ Lennox Mills, 245-7.

sued to the unpredictable climate of Ceylon as it produced a hardier plant.³⁸ Ceylon tea became an almost immediate success, becoming the “plantation crop *par excellence*.”³⁹ Between 1884 and 1896 the acreage of Ceylon tea quadrupled, eclipsing even the once dominant Chinese tea market.⁴⁰ If one takes in to account the Victorian affinity for tea, it does not take any stretch of the imagination to estimate the impact that tea would have had in making Ceylon a household name.

There were also social factors that might indicate why there was a shift in secular interests in Ceylon Buddhism. Jayawardena notes a correlation between the rise of the “new woman” informed by a proto-feminist understanding of the shifts in the European political landscape with successive revolutionary activity on the continent and the rising popularity in these circles in the study of the Orient. The ‘feminist’ study of the ‘Orient’ was sometimes associated with anti-establishment emancipation from Church, state and patriarchy that bred a ‘universalism’ or ‘sisterhood’ of women that extended to a sense of custodial responsibilities for women of the East that was accompanied by nostalgia for primitive and elemental egalitarianism.⁴¹ Beginning substantively as an academic fascination in Britain in the first part of the nineteenth century, emancipative scholarship, which often included at least a passing interest in the Orient, spread to the United States by mid-century and was eventually disseminated to women in both America and Britain.⁴² They were looking for a primordial hinterland of equality and equanimity and sought it in the primitive and classical East.⁴³ Some of these women developed a fascination with Buddhism noting a distinction between the imagined equanimity and emancipative spirit of ‘primitive’ Buddhism that contrasted sharply against the decline appreciated by many people in the West. Women Orientalist scholars and theosophists alike pursued this search for the ‘new’ East of ‘old.’⁴⁴

Buddhist women’s religious experience, then, might naturally have been subordinated to this classical ideal, prompting western women to construct an arcane model of Buddhist practice as an expression of their own desire for emancipation. This fits very nicely with the Orientalist understanding of Eastern decline that contrasted Western ascendancy. As Donald Lopez argues, it allowed the custodial Orientalist the chance to resurrect a primordial egalitarianism that mirrored the ideal of European standards and could substitute a Victorian ethic that was “a present self

³⁸ Ibid., 249.

³⁹ de Silva, 290.

⁴⁰ Mills, 250.

⁴¹ Jayawardena, 9-11.

⁴² Ibid., 110-113.

⁴³ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

long ago in the very heart of the Orient” representing a “vitality that had long since vanished in India and lately manifested in Europe.”⁴⁵ Thus, these women could protest their own culture, while avoiding a total challenge to its supremacy, as they were indeed the products of an occidental culture that would rescue less advantaged women of the Orient. Caroline Augusta Foley Rhys Davids (C. A. F Rhys Davids), the wife of T. W. Rhys Davids and co-founder of the Pali Text Society, codified this association of the ‘new woman’ with the primitive East in a translation of the *Therigatha*, or *Verses of the Elders*, that she called *Psalms of the Sisters*. The *Therigatha* are a collection of songs about women stimulated to the discipleship of the Buddha, dating to the second century CE. Rhys Davids identified with the women portrayed in the *Therigatha*, saying of one woman that her audience was “stirred to enthusiasm by this *new woman’s* eloquence.”⁴⁶ What is also interesting to note is that Rhys Davids recognizes that *Therigatha* translates loosely as *Verses of the Elder Women*, yet adopts *Psalms of the Sisters* as her title.⁴⁷ The term ‘sisters’ is infused with a double meaning, referring first, to Rhys Davids’ contention that all the women represented in the *Therigatha* are Buddhist nuns, and second, to Rhys Davids’ belief that she was representing the ‘sisterhood of womankind.’⁴⁸ Having published the translation of the *Therigatha* in 1909, Rhys Davids is also demonstrating an extant understanding among European women that the *bhikkhuni sangha* provide the most legitimate form of primitive Buddhist religious expression.

Emerging under the influence of the Pali Text Society and Caroline Rhys Davids in particular was I.B. Horner, who published the first monograph written by a woman about Buddhist women that drew heavily upon Rhys Davids’ translation and analysis of the *Therigatha*.⁴⁹ Publishing *Women under Primitive Buddhism* in 1930, Horner received accolades from Rhys Davids, who authored the preface to the book, commending Horner for her thesis that women under primitive Buddhism joined the *bhikkhuni sangha* in order to escape the drudgery and degradation normally associated with womanhood.⁵⁰ In the preface, Rhys Davids refers to

⁴⁵ Lopez, 6, commenting on Charles Hallsley’s thesis, also published in *Curators of the Buddha*.

⁴⁶ C.A.F. Rhys Davids *Psalms of the Sisters*, xxxvi, quoted from Jayawardena, 160. My emphasis.

⁴⁷ C.A.F. Rhys Davids “Psalms of the Sisters (1909),” in *Poems of Early Buddhist Nuns* (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1997), 5.

⁴⁸ Jayawardena, 159-61.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 161, and Kathryn Blackstone “Standing Outside the Gates: A Study of Women’s Ordination in the Pali Vinaya.” PhD Diss. (Hamilton: McMaster University, 1995), 116-7.

⁵⁰ C.A.F. Rhys Davids. “Preface.” in I. B. Horner *Women under Primitive Buddhism: Laywomen and Almswomen*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975, rpr. London, 1930), xiii.

Psalms of the Sisters, commenting that women's lives were spiritually unfulfilling and sapping to the mind and body and that by joining the *bhikkhuni sangha*, the nun, "expanded side by side with men, as religieuse, and the Anthology [of *Therigatha*] in which some of this self-articulation is collected, is a treasure unique perhaps in literature."⁵¹ On the one hand, this speaks to Rhys Davids' association of the women of the *Therigatha* with her own cause. On the other, it demonstrates a conviction that Buddhist society without a *bhikkhuni sangha* limits women to drudgery and degradation, ignoring lay renunciation as an appropriate avenue for feminine religious expression and unconsciously promoting the notion of the modern decline of Buddhism.⁵² Particularly noteworthy are Rhys Davids' and Horner's impact on the historiography of women in Buddhism that promoted primitive egalitarianism, and therefore, its attendant focus on conventual monasticism, which, according to Kathryn Blackstone, was not challenged substantively until her own work emerged in the 1990's.⁵³

Tessa Bartholomeusz notes that European accounts of contemporary and historical Buddhism from the nineteenth century make no mention of *bhikkhunis* or *dasa sil matas*, though there is much focus on the 'classical' renunciation of *Sanghamitta*, the daughter of Asoka.⁵⁴ If the focus of work disseminating European and, presumably American, markets focussed almost entirely on the 'primitive' and 'classical' stages of Buddhist development, concentrating especially on *Sanghamitta*, then it is hardly any surprise that the focus of Western women's attention on women in Buddhism would almost strictly entail their contributions to primitive and classical monasticism. Such concentration on the monastic ideal would necessarily have limited their legitimation of historical feminine religiosity to the conventual life. It should come as no surprise, given this channelled understanding that, in the twilight of the nineteenth century, the first white woman to convert to Buddhism and pursue renunciation would enter a convent and rename herself *Sanghamitta*.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, xiii.

⁵² See Seemanthini Niranjani. *Gender and Pace: Femininity, sexualization and the female body*. (New Delhi: Sage, 2001), 25, for her suggestion that "assumptions of a universal (male) oppression and a universal sisterhood have been called into question by contemporary studies highlighting the differences – of race, nation, caste and class – amongst women themselves." Jayawardena makes a similar suggestion, offering that Western women were not necessarily imagined as feminine with regard to Oriental discourse that constructed a gendered bifurcation between West and East (Jayawardena 3).

⁵³ Blackstone, "Standing outside the Gates," 116-7.

⁵⁴ Bartholomeusz, 26-8.

Countess Miranda de Souza Carnavarro, who was briefly known as Sanghamitta, was an American theosophist and wealthy socialite who converted to Buddhism in 1897 under the discipleship of Anagarika Dharmapala. Under Dharmapala's tutelage, she sponsored and opened the first conventual *dasa sil mata* hermitage, called the *Sanghamitta Upasikaramaya*, and girl's school in Ceylon in 1898, becoming the self-titled 'mother superior' of the order.⁵⁵ The *Sanghamitta Upasikaramaya* and school for girls remained open for only one year before closing due to scandal and irreconcilable differences between Dharmapala and his erstwhile charge.⁵⁶ According to the Countess, there was a serious need to re-establish the order of nuns in Sri Lanka as Buddhist women had lapsed from their faith.⁵⁷ The Countess had clearly appropriated an impression similarly maintained by both Rhys Davids and Horner, that Buddhist women's spirituality was most legitimately directed toward conventual monasticism. The Countess and Dharmapala each shared a mutual affinity for reforming the other. While the Countess hoped to restore Buddhism through her lineage of nuns, Dharmapala recorded in his diary of 1897 that he wanted to "save her" from her superstition and confusion.⁵⁸ Dharmapala was not interested in reviving the *bhikkhuni* because there was no method of reviving a lineage that had been extinct for nearly a thousand years. Instead, he opted to apply the ten training precepts often taken by lay renunciants, rendering the Countess a *dasa sil mata*, or ten precept mother, and not a *bhikkhuni*. The distinction between these two lifestyles is sharp. The *bhikkhuni* is officially a member of the *Sangha*, follows the ten precepts, an additional 311 monastic rules of the ordained, and is permitted to wear yellow robes sewn together from separate pieces of cloth (*kada kapala*), as stipulated in *Vinaya* regulation.⁵⁹ The *dasa sil mata* is still a member of the laity, follows either the ten householder training precepts or the ten training precepts, and wears a cloth of white or later, white with another colour, that is sewn from a single bolt of fabric.⁶⁰ The most significant change that Dharmapala applied was in placing the Countess and her sisters in an *upasikaramaya*, or lay hermitage, effectively rendering them as neither fully *Sangha*, nor lay.⁶¹ While Dharmapala was interested in reviving Buddhist practice by institutionalizing the *dasa sil matas* into a conventual order of lay sisters, the Countess believed that she and her sisters were legitimate *bhikkhunis* based on "the

⁵⁵ Bartholomeusz, 47-48.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 77-9, and Jayawardena, 167.

⁵⁷ Bartholomeusz, 54.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 74-5, and Salgado, 944.

⁶⁰ Salgado, 936, and 942-5.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 54-79.

code of the ancient ordained nun.”⁶² Misunderstanding Dharmapala’s application of the ten precepts, she believed that the precepts were all she required to be an ordained nun. Interestingly, she also complained that the precepts were too ‘narrow’ and ascetic.⁶³ Unfortunately for both Dharmapala and the Countess, in 1899, the sisters dispersed and the hermitage closed its doors only a few months after the Countess had finally accepted the rules for her order.⁶⁴

Indigenous Buddhist Pieties: Conventual *dasa sil matas* and historical continuity

In 1907, less than a decade following the closure of the *Sanghamitta Upasikaramaya*, a second hermitage was opened under the leadership of a *dasa sil mata* of Sinhalese descent. Sister Sudharmacari Upasika Maniyanvahanse, or Sudharmacari, was born Catherine de Alwis, in 1849 to a prominent Anglican-Sinhalese family.⁶⁵ She was educated in English and also read Pali, though; there is no indication when she began studying the latter.⁶⁶ According to her extant biographies, which are both written in Sinhala, she lost her mother at an early age. Her father died in 1874 when she was only twenty-five, leaving her orphaned. According to her biographies, both of which are post-mortem and likely hagiographical, in the month following her father’s death, while she was still technically an Anglican, she invited some Buddhist monks to her family’s home in order to offer *dana* to them. The chief monk would not accept the *dana* until someone in the household took the five precepts. She did this, effectively converting to Buddhism. Soon after her conversion, she reportedly moved from Colombo to Kandy to continue her Buddhist studies. There, she met a group of Burmese renunciants, led by Sein Don, the former queen of Burma, on pilgrimage to the Temple of the Tooth, eventually accompanying them back to Burma, where she took the ten householder precepts.⁶⁷ In either 1903 or 1905, she returned to Kandy, took the ten training precepts, and opened the doors of Lady Blake Hermitage in 1907.⁶⁸ She was related to several prominent people associated with both the

⁶² Ibid., 74.

⁶³ Bartholomeusz, 74.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 75.

⁶⁵ Bloss, 2.

⁶⁶ Blake, “A Buddhist Nun,” 52-3.

⁶⁷ Salgado, 944, and Blake “A Buddhist Nun,” 52.

⁶⁸ Bloss (2-3), Salgado (944), and Bartholomeusz (92-5) agree that Sudharmacari returned to Kandy from Rangoon in 1905, while Senerat Wijayasundara suggests 1903. Wijayasundara also places her birth in 1885, making her thirty-six years younger than Bartholomeusz suggests. This seems unlikely, as it would have made her only eighteen years old upon returning from Burma when all indications suggest she was more mature than that. Lady

Anglican-Sinhala establishment and the Buddhist revival in Sri Lanka, including her pro-Buddhist disestablishment uncle, James de Alwis⁶⁹, and Don Solomon Dias Bandaranaike, who likely introduced her to her British benefactor, Lady Edith Blake.⁷⁰ According to Lady Blake, describing them in 1907, Sudharmacari and her sisters, comprised "lay sisters and professed nuns," which likely refers to *atasil* (eight precept) and *dasa sil* (ten precept) renunciants, respectively. They were all "clad alike in a white robe over which one of pale salmon colour was folded over the left shoulder," with shaven heads and bare feet.⁷¹ Though unlike the Countess, Lady Blake recognized that the *dasa sil mata*'s under Sudharmacari's care were not actually recipients of full ordination, she does still compare them favourably to the *bhikkhuni sangha*, either choosing to underemphasize or not notice the relationship between non-conventual *dasa sil matas* and the conventual *dasa sil matas* at Lady Blake's. Interestingly, a footnote in her 1915 article, "A Buddhist Nun," indicates that the Buddha's reluctance to admit women to the Order serves as a later monastic redaction and does not reflect the Buddha's sentiments on the matter. This editorial reflection echoes the thesis advanced by Rhys Davids in 1909 and later expanded by Horner in 1930 that primitive Buddhism was inherently egalitarian and suggests that Blake may have self-identified as a "new woman," in the same fashion as Rhys Davids and Horner.⁷² Blake came to the Sri Lanka with her husband, Henry Arthur Blake, who served as the colonial Governor of Ceylon from 1903 to 1907.⁷³ Unlike her predecessors, Blake took an active interest in local issues, among which was the "restoration of Buddhist culture in Ceylon."⁷⁴ Dharmapala had unsuccessfully solicited the aid of the wives of Governor's Havelock and Ridgeway, in 1893 and 1897/8, respectively. Both women were reportedly concerned with being associated with the Theosophical society.⁷⁵ It is highly doubtful that Blake was a theosophist and there is no indication that she knew Dharmapala. Her vast knowledge of Buddhist history, however, suggests that she may have been associated with the

Edith Blake, for example, published two articles in which she claims having had eyewitness accounts of Sudharmacari and she never mentions her as being exceedingly young.

See Senarat Wijayasundara. "Restoring the Order of Nuns in the Theravada Tradition." in ed. Bhikkhuni Karma Lekshe Tsomo. *Buddhist Women Across Cultures: Realizations*. (Albany: State University of New York, 1999, 79-90), 80.

⁶⁹ Malalgoda, 174.

⁷⁰ Bloss, 2-3.

⁷¹ Edith Blake. "The Sacred Bo Tree." *The Nineteenth Century and After*. 76 (Sept. 1914), 671.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 51, n.1

⁷³ Bartholomeusz, 96.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

scholarly Orientalism professed by Rhys Davids and Horner.⁷⁶ Blake's 1914 and 1915 articles detailing some of her experiences of Sudharmacari in 1907, suggest a knowledge of the *Mahavamsa*, and *Vinayapitaka*, a reverence for Pali scholarship and a sensitivity to the restorative efforts related to the foundation of conventual *dasa sil matas* in Sri Lanka.⁷⁷

Blake gives a short history of Buddhist nuns leading up to the present community at Lady Blake's, referring first to Mahaprajapati (the first named *bhikkhuni* to take the eight precepts according to the *Vinayapitaka*⁷⁸) and *sanghamitta*. She links the 'nuns' under Sudharmacari's authority with the extinct order of nuns, adding that "in due course of time either the eight regulations [given from Buddha to Mahaprajapati] were deemed too weighty, or religious zeal amongst Buddhist women must have grown faint," adding that while "priestesses are no longer to be found" in Ceylon, Siam and Burmah, "*Upasikas* (which may be translated Deaconesses) are still an institution in Burmah and Ceylon, and are generally known as Buddhist nuns."⁷⁹ Blake translates *upasika* as deaconess, but *upasika*, according to Salgado, refers more accurately to the householder renunciant, or devoted "lay woman."⁸⁰

Blake's informed use of the term *upasika* to refer to the first conventual *dasa sil matas* when taking into account the history of lay renunciation in Sri Lanka is not insignificant. The robe represents one of the most potent symbols and indicators of the varieties of Buddhist renunciation. The yellow or saffron robe, even into more recent controversies about Buddhist nuns, represents the ascetic attire reserved exclusively for members of the *Sangha*.⁸¹ There are also references in canonical literature that allude to renunciant householders (*gihi*) and celibate renunciant householders (sometimes distinguished as *brahmacari*) dressing in white. Salgado suggests that historically, while most of these female lay devotees, or *upasikas*, observed the Five Training Precepts (*pañcasila*), many also likely observed more.⁸² As will be recalled, Sudharmacari and her sisters wore "a white robe over which one of pale salmon colour was folded over the left shoulder," together with bare feet and a shaven head, which is reminiscent of the white dress of

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁷⁷ Blake "A Buddhist Nun," 47-51; and Blake "The Sacred Bo Tree," 660-665.

⁷⁸ Kate Blackstone. "Damming the Dhamma: Problems with *Bhikkhunis* in the Pali Vinaya." *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*. 6 (1999), 293-4.

⁷⁹ Blake, "A Buddhist Nun," 51. The emphasis and parenthetical gloss are Blake's

⁸⁰ Blake, "A Buddhist Nun," 51, and Salgado, 946.

⁸¹ Salgado, 943.

⁸² *Ibid.*

the traditional *upasika*.⁸³ At the turn of the century, there were controversies over the colour of robe that *upasakas* (male laymen) ought to have worn. Ballagama Subhodaṇanda, who would eventually become a forerunner of Sri Lanka's forest monks, asserted in 1898 that *upasakas* and *upasikas* ought to wear yellow robes. He asserted that:⁸⁴

You can see from the old documents that there were in the past thousands of people who abided by the ten precepts while in lay life; they more yellow robes...others...received their livelihood from going on begging rounds while in lay life...Since white clothes and the things like them are liked and pleasing to everyone, they should lead us to the five passions. Thus we should wear yellow robes even in lay life: The white clothes are also an obstruction to the austerities. They are not suitable for us.

What is more important to note, however, is that Subhodaṇanda is advocating the use of the colour yellow for *upasikas*, which would also include, we might imagine, *dasa sil matas* and their conventual counterparts. Sudharmacari, however, chose a white robe with a salmon robe slung over one shoulder. Indeed Subhodaṇanda may have been appealing to the importation of ancient monastic values to the laity that is also reminiscent of Edith Blake's observation that the *upasikas* were deaconesses who were consciously replacing the extinct order of *bhikkhuni sangha*. It seems Sudharmacari, on the other hand, quite consciously was not doing this, at least in relation to her ascetic attire. Furthermore, Subhodaṇanda's letter was published in 1898, nine years before the official opening of Lady Blake's hermitage and seven years before Sudharmacari's return to Sri Lanka. Subhodaṇanda was likely responding to a debate issuing among Sinhalese city Buddhists at the time. Either Sudharmacari was unaware of the debate because she had been overseas, or she was consciously taking an opposing side to the one offered by Subhodaṇanda. Later in 1898, one S. W. G Pragnaṛatna argued that *upasakas* and *upasikas* ought not to wear yellow but remain in their traditional white attire:⁸⁵

⁸³ Blake, "The Sacred Bo Tree," 671.

⁸⁴ Ballagama Subhodaṇanda. "Letter to the Editor," *Lakminipahana*. (6 August, 1898), quoted in Bartholomeusz, 34-5. Subhodaṇanda is describing the kind of 'this-worldly' asceticism often associated with 'Protestant Buddhism.'

⁸⁵ S. W. G Pragnaṛatna, "Questions which should be addressed," *Sarasavisandenesa* (23 Dec. 1898), quoted in Bartholomeusz, 39.

I have not seen pious laymen and pious laywomen from Siam, Burma, Tibet, Cambodia or other Buddhist countries wearing orange robes. Nor do pious laymen and pious laywomen from other countries who visit Ceylon wear yellow robes. In fact for the past two thousand years, the laity has not worn the yellow robes...Yellow robes donned by the monks is a great possession and people accept that the monks who wear the robes are worthy of them.

Pragñaratna is arguing for continuity of ascetic dress. Either Sudharmacari, or the monk to whom she professed the Ten Precepts, decided she ought to remain dressed in a core of white, signalling an appeal to a continuity of ascetic dress. Pragñaratna has also described Sudharmacari's situation – she received her training as a *dasa sil mata* from a group of Burmese *upasikas* who likely also wore white as a primary colour, just as Pragñaratna suggests. Regardless, Sudharmacari, just as Pragñaratna, was distinguishing herself from the *bhikkhuni*, choosing instead to model her dress after more traditional modes of lay ascetic costume.

This raises an important question about the continuity of Buddhist practice in Sri Lanka. Malalgoda has argued that despite efforts on the part of the British government to disestablish Buddhism through a two-pronged attack against the *Sangha* and a Christianizing effort that challenged Sinhalese to sever ties with Buddhism in order to gain any access to civil rights, that Buddhists continued to either resist or challenge missionary activity throughout the era of British colonial activity.⁸⁶ Indeed, Malalgoda goes so far as to suggest that for a large portion of elite Anglicized Sinhalese, Christianity was accepted only nominally, using it as a political and legal means to an end, suggesting that a Buddhist under-current may have lain under the surface for most of the colonial period.⁸⁷

Concomitant with the disestablishment of Buddhism is the assertion that these English educated Sinhalese needed external motivation for reform. Accordingly, it has been pointed out that they had no access to Pali texts until the concerted translation effort of the Pali Text Society started to make English texts available after 1881, and that the Buddhist Theosophical Society, coming to the island in 1880, was formatively indispensable in the fomentation of a Buddhist

⁸⁶ Malalgoda, 191-232. See Bond, chapter one and Malalgoda, chapters six and seven for a detailed exposition of the concerted missionary and government effort to challenge Buddhism as the dominant religion practiced in Sri Lanka, especially with regard to the Convention of 1815, the disposition of the Temple of the Tooth in 1847 and the establishment of Christian only access to civic rights and responsibilities in 1868.

⁸⁷ Malalgoda, 206-8.

reformation later spear-headed by Dharmapala.⁸⁸ While the Pali Text Society and the Buddhist Theosophical Society certainly did have an impact, there was still a cogent interest in Buddhism and its maintenance before these groups inaugurated their custodial efforts. Missionary militancy and revival are embedded in the long history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, and do not reflect only a new protest against Christianity.⁸⁹ Protest against British missionary efforts in Sri Lanka go back as early as 1818, only a generation after the British take-over of the island's coastal regions in 1796.⁹⁰ Mohottavatte Gunananda instigated one such protest in 1862 with the launch of the Society for the Propagation of Buddhism, in direct conflict with the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, founded in 1840.⁹¹ Dodanduve Piyaratana founded the first non-Monastic Buddhist school in Ceylon in 1869, when Dharmapala was only five years old.⁹² While the Buddhist schools, which increased slowly in number from 1869 to 1880, had difficulty competing with Christian mission schools, this still demonstrated a cogent effort on the part of Sinhalese to maintain Buddhism before custodial efforts from Europe and North America were focused on the island.⁹³ Finally, the Buddhist laity, contrary to Bond's assertion that they were essentially inactive before 1880⁹⁴, in addition to some enrolment in the Buddhist schools, also directed resources to the cause through a concerted focus of *dana* giving to popular monastic fraternities.⁹⁵

It would not be inconsistent to suggest that Sudharmacari was responding not merely to a custodial revival of Buddhism, given the emergence of a non-custodial protest against Christianity within a larger continuum of Buddhist practice. Bartholomeusz notes that William Knighton in *History of Ceylon* (1845) 'meticulously' accounts the impact of *Sanghamitta* on the history of Ceylon. She asserts that what is "glaringly absent from Knighton's meticulous account of *Sanghamitta*'s contribution to Ceylonese culture, is mention of a similar tradition during his tenure in Ceylon" and that if there "had been a tradition of female renunciation" in 1845, "he surely would have mentioned it in his accounts."⁹⁶ Would

⁸⁸ Gombrich and Obeyesekere, 210; and Seneviratne, 27.

⁸⁹ Holt 310, and Gombrich 32, who talks about a revival in the 11th century, Blackstone "Standing Outside the Gates," 4, n.4, talks of a revival of *Bhikkhu* ordination in the seventeenth century.

⁹⁰ Malalgoda, 213.

⁹¹ Malalgoda, 220.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 234.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 235.

⁹⁴ Bond, 48.

⁹⁵ Malalgoda, 237-243.

⁹⁶ Bartholomeusz, 27.

he? Unfortunately, Knighton devotes only two paragraphs of his history to *Sanghamitta*, mentioning nothing of her legacy but the establishment of a “convent of female devotees” who like her “had abjured the world.”⁹⁷ He makes a fleeting reference to ‘priestesses’ in regard to a general monastic austerity shared by Christian friars and nuns and the “priests and priestesses of Buddha.”⁹⁸ Otherwise aspects of feminine piety in Buddhist and Ceylonese history were left all but unmentioned. If Knighton understood female renunciation as being at all parallel to the nuns of Sangamitta’s time, there is no guarantee that he would have seen a non-monastic ascetic and immediately understood her as a renunciant, especially if he expected a ‘nun’ to reside in a convent as in many forms of Christian practice. While this suggestion is speculative, assuming that Knighton’s neglect to mention *upasikas* implies a total lack is also hypothetical, especially given his lack of interest in providing an analysis of women throughout the history of Ceylon. Bishop Reginald Stephen Copleston, in his 1891 observation of the “devotee of dasasil” commented that “a considerable number of women, generally old, are to be seen around the temples, especially in Kandy, or on the way to Adam’s Peak,” usually carrying “bowls as if for begging, and their shaven heads and dirty white dresses give them a pathetic appearance, and one...would naturally suppose them to be nuns,” but are “only ‘upasikas’.”⁹⁹ Knighton also mentions pilgrims at Adam’s Peak in 1845, but unfortunately he refrains from offering any physical description of the people he encountered.¹⁰⁰ Additionally, Copleston notes at a different point that “the community of nuns was never in practice a very important part of Buddhism, either in the primitive Indian system or in Ceylon,” which suggests that he did not correlate *Sanghamitta* and the ten precept *upasika* as corollary members of a longstanding tradition, as Bartholomeusz expects Knighton to have done.¹⁰¹ While Copleston’s observations might point to a presence of *dasasil upasikas* in 1891 where there were none before, it might also point to a dramatic growth in the practice, or a change in European reflections on the status of female renunciants.

Copleston’s remarks suggest that in 1891, there was an observable *dasa sil mata* presence in Ceylon. Copleston’s observations are concomitant with the institutionalization of periodic lay renunciation that occurred approximately between 1885 and 1915. This periodic lay renunciation, known as ‘taking *sil*’ involved the donning of white clothes and was likely standardized by Dharmapala and Olcott

⁹⁷ Knighton, 27-28.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁹⁹ Reginald Stephen Copleston. *Primitive Buddhism in Magadha and in Ceylon*. 2nd Ed. (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1908, rpt. of London, 1892), 279.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 397.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 132.

through the institutionalization of the monthly Poya festival.¹⁰² Continuous lay renunciation involving the addition of the shaving of the head, such as that observed by Copleston and practiced by Sudharmacari and her sisters, may have developed, in part, either from or alongside periodic lay renunciation such as that described above.¹⁰³ While lay renunciation was institutionalized during this period, it belongs to a longer continuum of Buddhist practice. Lowell Bloss postulates that non-conventual *dasa sil matas*, while experiencing a definite resurgence in the last part of the nineteenth-century, have always figured as an extant mode of feminine religious expression in Buddhist Sri Lanka.¹⁰⁴ The idea of the *upasika* announces itself in Pali literature, demonstrating that non-*bhikkhuni* renunciants must have existed during the period of authorship of the texts. The Pali Pitakas make reference to laypeople 'taking precepts,'¹⁰⁵ which may indicate a corollary practice to some forms of lay renunciation observed in the nineteenth century. Arvind Sharma has pointed out that not all the women of the *Therigatha* were *bhikkhuni* at their attainment of arhathood. Sukka, for example, became a lay devotee, which might point to an initial renunciation as a *dasasil upasika* or an *atasil*.¹⁰⁶ Bhadda's narrative begins with a physical description that is very reminiscent of the *dasasil upasikas* described by Copleston. Her narrative comments that "with hair cut off, wearing dust, formerly I wandered having only one robe."¹⁰⁷ There is some extra-canonical evidence that women took an active part in public formulae of Buddhist expression that did not necessarily involve conventual monasticism. Kapila Pathirana Vimaladharmasugata suggests, in his study of women in the Kandyan kingdom, that there was at least a very limited feminine presence within the temple context. He explains that, around 1767, shortly following the Dutch invasion of Kandy, there is at least one reference to two women fulfilling the role of Kariyakarana-rala, or lay-superintendent, of the Temple of the Tooth.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, he proposes that women performed similar functions as Pattini-ammās in minor devales to Pattini,

¹⁰² Benjamin Schonthal. Electronic mail correspondence. 9 December, 2006.

¹⁰³ The suggestion that these practices may have been related was first presented to me by John C. Holt. For a brief description of modern poya festivals see A.G S. Kariyawasam. *Buddhist Ceremonies and Rituals of Sri Lanka*. (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1995), 25-31.

¹⁰⁴ Bloss, 2.

¹⁰⁵ Schonthal.

¹⁰⁶ Arvind Sharma. "How and Why Did the Women in Ancient India Become Buddhist Nuns?" *Sociological Analysis* 38, 3 (1977), 230, and 242.

¹⁰⁷ "Bhadda," in K. R. Norman, "Elders' Verses II" in ed. K. R. Norman *Poems of Early Buddhist Nuns*. (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1997, 165-228), 182.

¹⁰⁸ Kapila Pathirana Vimaladharmasugata. *Women in the Kandyan Kingdom of the Seventeenth Century Sri Lanka*. (Kandy: Varuna, 2003), 126-7.

the goddess of chastity and conjugal fidelity.¹⁰⁹ Edith Blake, in describing the duties of Sudharmacari's conventual *dasa sil matas*, mentions that the sisters "assist in the charge of the Malagawa (the Temple of the Tooth relic), daily resort to the temple, sweep out the sacred precincts, decorate the shrines with flowers and tapers," suggesting a certain historical continuity between devoted lay women's traditional functions and Sudharmacari's sisters.¹¹⁰ Unfortunately, there is no indication in either the canonical or non-canonical context if any or all of these women adopted a new name after becoming involved in public forms of renunciations and religious service. In the late seventeenth-century, at a period of monastic decline, a group of conventual laymen surfaced to replace the diminishing ranks of the *Sangha*. These men were known as *ganinnanses* and took the Ten Precepts and often changed their names without receiving full ordination and did not necessarily reside in a monastery, and sometimes wore yellow, which was distinguished from the yellow monastic robe.¹¹¹ The *ganinnanses* may have also provided a comparison for feminine renunciation either contemporaneously or in later manifestations of the practice among women.¹¹² In 1899 there were reports of one or more women preachers dressed in yellow, who were reputed to have wandered Ceylon preaching and collecting alms for it.¹¹³ Additionally, in March of 1907, four months before Lady Blake Hermitage opened in July, a young woman, known only as the daughter of *Upasaka* Mr. Silva, was ordained in a Burmese order of *dasa sil matas* at the Borella Burmese Avasaya.¹¹⁴ This suggests that Sudharmacari was not only one woman belonging to a larger movement, but her hermitage for *dasa sil matas* was not the first on the island. It also points, alongside the Burmese provenance of Sudharmacari's own vocation, to a long standing tradition of exchange between Burma and Sri Lanka that predates even European contact. Bartholomeusz notes that cultural and religious exchange between the two countries has existed for well over a millennium beginning perhaps with the exportation of the first *sangha* lineages from Sri Lanka to Burma. Similar exchanges have been documented in 1070, 1476, 1803, and 1863 respectively.¹¹⁵ Finally, Sudharmacari's teacher, Sein

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 127.

¹¹⁰ Blake, "A Buddhist Nun," 51.

¹¹¹ Malalgoda, 57-8, and Bartholomeusz, 40-41. Malalgoda remarks that the *ganinnanses* quickly began to disregard the formalities of lay renunciation, often keeping their families and wives near them, gaining little or no knowledge of 'canonical' monastic sources.

¹¹² Bartholomeusz, 40-41.

¹¹³ Ibid., 36-8.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 102.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 25 and 91, n. 2; and Gombrich, 32.

Don, urged her not to admit women under the age of forty.¹¹⁶ This suggests that renunciant women in Burma were generally older. Sudharmacari was, herself, fifty-eight years old when Lady Blake's opened its doors and, in the very beginning, took in mostly old and destitute women.¹¹⁷ This is consistent with Copleston's observation that *dasasil upasikas* were generally older, and may speak to an older tradition observed in both Burma and Ceylon. Gombrich and Obeyesekere note that in present day Sri Lanka, most nuns now wear yellow, some, especially old women, dress in white and stay at home as householder renunciants. Others "live singly or in pairs in caves, or in cells in their children's back gardens," not completely unlike the homeless women described above.¹¹⁸ This may speak to an older tradition that predates the rise of conventual *dasa sil matas*, upon which Sudharmacari may also have partly based her own vocation.

In addition to belonging to a longer continuum of protest and renunciative practice that predated Sinhalese contact with custodial Orientalists, it is very likely that Sudharmacari's decision to embrace Buddhism had little if anything to do with the work of custodial Orientalism. According to Sudharmacari's 1939 biography, the death of her father when she was twenty-five years old in 1874 left her "deeply distressed and disgusted with the nature of *samsara*."¹¹⁹ In 1874, Sudharmacari, then still known as Catherine de Alwis, was technically an Anglican. But like many of her contemporaries, she may have reserved an undisclosed affinity for Buddhism.¹²⁰ Bloss asserts, based on her 1939 and 1949 biographies, that her interest in Buddhism became a public pursuit in the weeks following her father's death when she took the Five Precepts, signally her official conversion, in order that *bhikkhus* might accept *Dana* on her father's behalf.¹²¹ If this account is accurate, then it would place her conversion one full year prior to the formation of the Buddhist Theosophical Society, six years before Olcott and Blavatsky came to Sri Lanka, and seven years before the formation of the Pali Text Society. This would imply that her interest in Buddhism and perhaps even her decision to undertake a renunciative vocation was rooted more in indigenous protest and practice and less in the well-meaning program of custodial Orientalism.

¹¹⁶ Bloss, 4.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. It was only later that she began taking in younger women. This also correlates to a later change in the order that fully incorporated the *bhikkhuni* ideal into conventual *dasa sil mata* practice that is not immediately evident in 1907. See Bartholomeusz, 99-108.

¹¹⁸ Gombrich and Obeyesekere, 275.

¹¹⁹ Bartholomeusz, 93.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 206-7

¹²¹ Bloss, 2.

In conclusion, while there are certainly observable impressions that had been left on Sinhalese society in the last decades of the nineteenth-century by custodial Orientalism marked especially in proponents of the Pali Text Society and the Buddhist Theosophical Society, there were also definitely strong indigenous undercurrents at work as well that speak to a longer continuum of religious expression. These undercurrents may have contributed more to shape the initial motives behind Catherine de Alwis' decision to embrace Buddhism and accept a vocation of conventual *dasa sil mata* renunciation. Much of the focus Western input as a source for Buddhist revival in this period has relied on the impressions left by custodial Orientalists who saw it as their prerogative and province to reform Buddhism in Ceylon. This feeling of obligation was informed partly on colonial notions of Western ascendancy that contrasted to Eastern decline. It was further nuanced by women Orientalists who proposed that Buddhism boasted a primitive egalitarianism for which they yearned and with which they identified. The result was an over-emphasis in the primitive and classical models of feminine religious expression that may have undercut other traditional and extant models.

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