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*THE EVOLUTION OF SINHALESE
FUNERAL RITES AND RITUALS.*

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UNIVERSITY OF PERADENIYA
FACULTY OF ARTS
25 OCT 2000
SENIOR ASSISTANT REGISTRAR

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Rev. Alahenegama Sumanarathana.

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(II) A B S T R A C T

Among a multiplicity of rites and rituals that could be seen in Sinhalese culture, those that are observed in funerals could be categorized as specific and unique. This study aims at discussing such rites and rituals in their historical perspective so that the background, the evolution and the significance of such observances could be brought into the limelight with the assistance of which a message could be put across to society. These funeral rites which exist among the Sinhalese even to date, have undergone tremendous change and flux for more than two thousand years. Many historical sources bear testimony to the above fact. Anyway one could see that these rituals have not developed on their own, on the contrary, they have been directly influenced by dominant religions in Sri Lanka; namely, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. Out of them, the influence of Buddhism is very distinctly visible. In the above context, a closer observation of such rituals reveals that those rituals and observances could hardly be taken as an isolated entity but closely akin to the Buddhist way of life.

The first chapter discusses the concept of 'DEATH' according to Buddhist philosophy and an attempt has been made to examine other ways of thinking as found in Vedic philosophy, without leaving out Christian, Hindu and Islamic theory.

An attempt has been made in the second chapter to examine the evolution of these funeral rites to see to what extent the Buddhist influence has been instrumental in their transition and for this purpose the guidance of 'Tripitaka' and other similar sources was sought.

The third chapter is devoted to analyze the Sinhalese funeral rites up to 1815 A.D. It also deals with the background of ancient information and the rituals observed by lay Buddhists and the clergy.

The fourth chapter endeavors itself to investigate how those rites have been observed by the laymen from 1815 A.D. up to the 20th century. Attention has been paid to analyze how these rituals have been observed by statesmen, the eminent and the commoners. Apart from that an attempt is made to examine the trends in contemporary funeral rites.

The fifth chapter discusses the methods followed by the Clergy at the passing away of the their members. There are occasions where there are deviations from the accepted norm when there is state involvement and the patrimonial practices of different religious sects.

In the sixth chapter attention is paid to see whether there has been any influence of Hinduism on Sinhaleses funeral rites and also to compare and contrast such features among the Sinhalese and the non-Sinhalese.

The penultimate chapter i.e. the seventh one is devoted to analyze

- a. The influence of modern development in traditional funeral rites.
- b. The preserving of the mortal remains for a longer period
- c. The keeping of the dead body in a vault in congested burial grounds.
- d. The publicity given to a funeral
- e. The methods employed to gather more people

Apart from the above mentioned points the conclusions arrived at in this study, include following:

- a. The evolution of funeral rites influenced by various sources.
- b. Their harmful and harmless effects.
- c. The benefits that could be reaped out of healthy features.
- d. The measures that could be employed to foster a healthy progress of society and to eradicate such effects that could be harmful.

Rev. Alahenegama Sumanaratana

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