

BUDDHISM AND BRITISH COLONIAL POLICY  
IN CEYLON, 1815-1875

HANS-DIETER EVERS\*

I

THE BUDDHIST MONKS OF CEYLON HAVE NEVER BEEN A BHIKKHU *Sangha*, a fraternity of beggars. As Max Weber has already observed, "the decisive feature of Ceylonese Buddhism was a monastic landlordism."<sup>1</sup> The famous Ceylonese chronicle, the *Mahāvamsa*, gives extensive evidence of vast tracts of land which has been dedicated to Buddhist monasteries by the Sinhalese kings and noblemen.<sup>2</sup> This tradition has been continued after the decline of the Sinhalese empire in the 14th century and was still in use when the British took Kandy, the last stronghold of the Sinhalese kings, in 1815.

But landlordism was not confined to the Buddhist monasteries. As has been argued elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> Sinhalese religion cannot be viewed as being Hinayana Buddhism with a few relics of Hinduism and Animism. It forms an integrated system from the point of view of the Sinhalese, in which the function of mediating between this world and the other, between men and supernatural beings has not been monopolized by one group of religious specialists. Besides the *vihāra*, the Buddhist temple, exists the *devāle*,

---

\* The assistance of the following institutions during field studies in Ceylon and Southeast Asia in 1958-59, 1961, and 1963 is gratefully acknowledged: German Academic Exchange Service (Bonn), Arnold-Bergstraesser-Institute (Freiburg/Br.), UNESCO (Paris), Volkswagen Foundation (Hannover), and George-Washington-Foundation for Comparative Social Sciences (Stuttgart). The Mannheim School of Economics gave a grant to enable work on colonial documents in London in 1964.

<sup>1</sup> Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, Bd. 2 (Tübingen, 1927). See also *The Religions of India, the Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*, translated into English and edited by Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale (New York, 1958), p. 257.

<sup>2</sup> *The Mahāvamsa or The Great Chronicle of Ceylon*, translated into English by Wilhelm Geiger, 4th edition (Colombo, 1960). The second part of the *Mahāvamsa* is termed *Culavamsa* by Geiger.

<sup>3</sup> H.D. Evers, "Die soziale Organisation der singhalesischen Religion" (The Social Organization of Sinhalese Religion), *Kolner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, XVI (1964).

the temple of the gods, as well as temporary huts established for exorcist rites and demon worship.

To both *vihāras and devāle*, land was dedicated for their maintenance and for the organization of religious festivals. The dedications of land to the *Sangha* based on the idea of gaining merit for the improvement of one's *kamma*,<sup>4</sup> led to the paradox situation that the *Bhikkhu Sangha*, the "fraternity of beggars," became one of the richest landlords in the Kandyan provinces of Ceylon. As estimated by an author in 1844 "one third of all the paddy lands in the Kandyan provinces are ostensibly in the possession of temples, together with large tracts of adjoining forests, numerous villages, and a large population who do them suit and service for their lands."<sup>5</sup>

## II

Another paradox situation was created in 1815 when the British took possession of the kingdom of Kandy in the interior of Ceylon, taking advantage of a revolt which had been staged by a Kandyan chief. To legalize the annexation and to pacify the chiefs, the British drafted a treaty, the "Kandyan Convention," which was signed by Governor Sir Robert Browning and the Kandyan chiefs. This convention contained a clause saying, that "The Religion of Boodho professed by the Chiefs and Inhabitants of these Provinces is declared inviolable, and its Rites, Ministers, and Places of Worship are to be maintained and protected."<sup>6</sup> That meant that the British Government became the legal successor of the king of Kandy, not only in political but also in religious matters, and the Sovereign of Great Britain became the defender and protector of the Buddhist faith in Ceylon.

The practical implications of this connection between Buddhism and Colonial Government became apparent after the Kandyan revolt which started when "in September 1817 a strange priest

---

<sup>4</sup> M. Ames, "Magical Animism and Buddhism: A Structural Analysis of the Sinhalese Religious System," *Journal of Asian Studies*, XXIII (1964), pp. 30, 43. See also H. D. Evers, "Buddhistische Gesellschaftsordnung und buddhistischer Wohlfahrtsstaat — religionssoziologische Grundlagen des ceylonesischen Nationalismus" (Buddhist Society and Buddhist Welfare State — the socio-religious Basis of Ceylonese Nationalism), *Moderne Welt, Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Geistesgeschichtliche und Sozialwissenschaftliche Forschung*, 3 (1963), p. 275.

<sup>5</sup> C. Pridham, *An Historical, Political, and Statistical Account of Ceylon and its Dependencies* (London, 1844), p. 403.

<sup>6</sup> "Kandyan Convention," Proclamation of 2nd March, 1815.

appeared in the jungle . . . posing as a member of the royal family." After the rebellion was successfully suppressed in November 1818, a proclamation was issued, amending the Kandyan Convention.<sup>8</sup> The Governor, most probably aware of the importance of religious matters, emphasized that the exercise of power of the British Government since 1815 was marked by the strictest attention to the protection and maintenance of the Rites, Ministers and Places of Worship of the Religion of Boodho." It was further enacted that "As well the Priests as all the Ceremonies and Processions of the Boodho Religion shall receive the Respect which in former times was shown them" (Art. 16). Moreover, Article 21 provided that "The Governor desirous of shewing the adherence of Government to its stipulation in favour of the Religion and the People, exempts all Lands which are the Property of Temples from all Taxation whatever." Whereas many changes were to take place in the administrative system, the traditional system of temple administration was explicitly exempted from these changes, such as in Art. 17: "The Governor abolishes all fees payable for Appointments either to Government or to any Chiefs, excepting for Appointments in the Temple Villages, which will be made by the Resident on the recommendation of the *Dewe Nileme* or *Basnaike Nileme* (Temple officials) appointed by the Governor; the *Dewe Nileme* or *Basnaike Nileme* receiving the usual Fee." It was also explicitly stated that the services rendered by temple tenants were to be continued: "The Attendance on the Great Feast<sup>9</sup> which certain Persons were bound to give be continued to be given punctually and gratuitously. The Washermen also shall continue to put up white cloths in the Temples and for the Chiefs gratuitously." (Art. 30)

In the succeeding years up to 1847, the Governor appointed the *Basnaike Nilames*, the lay officials of the temples, and the chief priests of the Buddhist *Sangha*, the *Mahanayake Theros* of the Malwatte and the *Asgiriya Chapters* at Kandy;<sup>10</sup> the government guarded the sacred tooth relic at Kandy and paid for religious ceremonies, Buddhist as well as magical-animist. In 1844 a sum of 310 pounds was given to Buddhist temples, a great portion

<sup>7</sup> H.W. Codrington, *A Short History of Ceylon*, Rev. Edition (London, 1939), p. 175.

<sup>8</sup> "Kandyan Insurrection," Proclamation of 21st Nov., 1818.

<sup>9</sup> The Kandy Perehera, an annual religious festival.

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, the appointment of the Mahanayake Thero of Asgiriya on 9th Sept., 1835, reprinted in *Sessional Papers*, No. 4 (1907), p. 186.

of this amount was paid "in trifling pensions to old Priests."<sup>11</sup> This connection between the British Government and the Buddhist church was in no way objectionable to the two parties directly concerned. The Governor, from a pragmatic point of view, wanted the Kandyan chiefs and people to keep quiet and to avoid insurrections and rebellions; to the Buddhist priests, it was only natural that the king should protect them, or as one *Mahanayake Thero* put it: "Religious matters always were under the king, and the royal ministers appointed the priests."<sup>12</sup>

The situation, however, seemed to be a paradox to Christian circles in England and Ceylon who were influenced by the Protestant revival which became widespread in England after the end of the Napoleonic War in 1815. The steady infiltration of religious consciousness into all classes of society, not excepting the highest, and the success of Wilberforce's anti-slavery movement<sup>13</sup> led to activities against the connection between the British Government and the "Idoltrous System of Religion" in Ceylon.<sup>14</sup>

The two mentioned paradoxes of a Christian government which were as much linked to the ideal of spreading Protestantism and Christian civilization as to the ideal of non-interference in religious matters and of having to protect and to maintain the Buddhist church (in spite of heavy pressure from public opinion) and a Buddhist order of monks (forced by their rules not to engage in financial matters but owning vast tracks of land) have posed a never-ending problem. Generations of Ceylon Civil Servants have been kept until today to conduct investigations, submit reports, and receive petitions and memorials on the "Buddhist Temporalities."

We shall now continue to give a brief account of the temple land question or the "Buddhist Temporalities Question," as it was later called until the middle of the nineteenth century. The picture drawn is, however, one-sided as this paper is based on govern-

<sup>11</sup> Despatch of 24th Jan., 1844, Governor Sir Colin Campbell to Secretary of State.

<sup>12</sup> Protocol of a conference between Governor Sir G.W. Anderson and Kandyan Chiefs and Priests, Kandy, 3rd April, 1853. Ms. in the Library of the Royal Commonwealth Society, London. See also H.D. Evers, *Kulturwandel in Ceylon* (Cultural Change in Ceylon) (Baden-Baden, 1964), Chapter II.

<sup>13</sup> G.M. Trevelyan, *English Social History* (London, 1961), pp. 492-497.

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, the well documented pamphlet of B.V. Boake, *A Brief Account of the Origin and Nature of the Connection between the British Government and the Idoltrous System of Religion in Ceylon*, n. d. (1854), pp. 252

ment reports, laws, official correspondence, and petitions submitted to the government. No attempt has been made to my knowledge so far, to evaluate Sinhalese sources on these problems.

### III

As has been cited above, all temple lands were exempted from taxation according to the "Kandyan Insurrection Proclamation" of 1818.<sup>15</sup> The British thus followed the custom of the Sinhalese kingdom where the tenants of temple property had been free from tax and service to the government.<sup>16</sup> But it was by no means clear to what lands the different temples had a proved title. This was due to the fact that temples from time to time had fallen into disuse and the land originally dedicated to these temples was reclaimed by the original owners or their heirs, or became crown property.<sup>17</sup> Later, the land (or part of it) might have been re-dedicated thus making it very difficult to assess the present extent of temple property. Therefore, a proclamation was issued in 1819 enacting "that the persons having the charge of the revenue of every temple, whether *Wihara*, *Dewale*, or under any other denomination and whether such persons be the Priests, *Dewe-Nileme*, *Basnaike Nileme*, *Kapurale*, or by what other description they may be called, shall, and they are hereby required to, deliver in to the Revenue Commissioner, or the Agent of Government in the several Provinces and Districts, according as the Lands are situated . . . a list of all Lands, of all descriptions which did belong to the said Temples under their respective charge at the date of the said Proclamation . . ." (of 21st Nov. 1818).<sup>18</sup> This deadline for registration of temple land was, however, prolonged to October 1822 by another proclamation.<sup>19</sup>

The first register of temple land was finished in 1820-21. It was partly based on two older registers (Lekarn-miti), compiled in 1810-11 during the reign of the last Kandyan king Sri Vikama Rājasinha (1798-1815).<sup>20</sup> Later investigations, however, showed that the "Old Temple Register" of 1820 was incorrect in many in-

<sup>15</sup> Proclamation of 21st Nov., 1818, Art. 21.

<sup>16</sup> Ralph Piers, *Sinhalese Social Organization, the Kandyan Period* (Colombo, 1956), p. 73.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Proclamation of 18th Sept., 1819.

<sup>19</sup> Proclamation of 21st May, 1822.

<sup>20</sup> Report of the Temple Land Commissioners, 1859, p. 7. The two Kandyan registers were the *kat-hal lekam mitiya* or register of pingé (load of rice) dues and the *hi lekam mitiya* or register of ploughed lands. For a detailed description see R. Piers, *op. cit.* (1956), pp. 119-123.

stances, as it had been difficult to ascertain which really was temple property and what was only declared to be so to evade taxation. Therefore, a new registration was started in 1831 by the then Government Agent at Kandy, Mr. Turneur, but was never completed.

In the following years the Colebrooke Commission investigated the administration of the colony.<sup>21</sup> As a result of its report, compulsory labor was abolished in 1832-33 excepting, however, services due to temples.<sup>22</sup> This created the remarkable and somewhat strange situation that the feudal system of the Kandyan provinces was completely abolished, that the administration was reorganized on modern lines, but that an island — in fact a quite substantial island—of the ancient forms of administration and the old customs was left untouched, amidst a new system of government patterned after English ideas of that time.

In 1844 the temple land question was taken up again. Secretary of State, Lord Stanley, wrote in Despatch No. 210 of July 24th, 1844, to Governor Sir Colin Campbell after a review of the situation: "I should further wish to receive from you a full report as to the extent and value of the Temple Lands in all parts of the Island . . . ."

This request was put into practice by an ordinance in 1856,<sup>23</sup> which, supposing that "great doubts exist as to what lands belong to the said temples," called for the appointment of commissioners for the registration of temple lands. The governor appointed E. Rawdon Power, the Government Agent of the Central Province, P. W. Braybrooke, the Acting Government Agent of the same Province, and A. Young Adams, Temple Land Commissioners, in February 1857. Their report submitted to the Colonial Secretary in July 1859 is one of the most valuable sources on the land tenure system of Sinhalese temples in the early British period.<sup>24</sup> It does not only list the temple lands claimed by the different religious authorities but also gives detailed facts or, as the commissioners modestly state, "a few particulars with reference to the tenures of

---

<sup>21</sup> G.C. Mendis (ed.). *The Colebrooke-Cameron Papers. Documents on British Colonial Policy in Ceylon, 1796-1833* (Oxford, 1956), 2 Vols.

<sup>22</sup> Despatch of 24th July 1844, Lord Stanley to Governor Sir Colin Campbell, "The Service Tenure Ordinance," Ordinance No. 4, 1870.

<sup>23</sup> Ordinance No. 10, 1856.

<sup>24</sup> Report of the Temple Land Commissioners on the Progress and Results of the Commission from its constitution, in February, 1857, to the end of 1858.

Temple Lands, and the degree in which the relations between the Temples and their tenants have been affected by the great social and Governmental changes, which have taken place since the British accession."<sup>25</sup>

The registration of all the temple lands of the Kandyan provinces took all of nine years. After the first report, other seven reports have been published, containing lists of temple lands claimed, registered, and rejected as well as notes on the working of the commission and on problems encountered when deciding on land claims.<sup>26</sup> The material on the land tenure system and the administration of Sinhalese temples contained in these reports will, however, be evaluated in another context.<sup>27</sup>

On the basis of these reports, it was decided which lands were to be exempted from taxation. Though the temple land commissioner had been very critical in accepting proofs for land titles and rejected many claims, thus diminishing the amount of landed property of *devāles* and *vihāras* (according to a Buddhist source—by more than 50,000 acres for the *vihāras* alone<sup>28</sup>) their work seems to have stabilized the whole system as "temple and monastic landlordism" was confirmed, sanctioned, and backed by the authority of the colonial government.

#### IV

As we have already pointed out, the colonial government was in various ways connected with the institutions of Sinhalese religion, namely, (1) the support of religious rites, including the custody of the sacred tooth relic at Kandy, the appointment of the high ranking *bhikkhus* and *devāle* officials, and (2) the supervision of the management of landed property belonging to the temples. In 1844 Lord Stanley wrote in a despatch to the Governor of Ceylon: "Upon the first point I think the time is now come when the British Government may, without breach of faith, and

<sup>25</sup> Report of the Temple Land Commissioners, 1859, p. 14. See also, H.W. Tambiah, "Buddhist Ecclesiastical Law," *Journal of the Ceylon Branch, Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. VIII, Pt. 1 (1962).

<sup>26</sup> *Sessional Papers*, No. 2 (1861), No. 1 (1862), No. 10 (1862), No. 11 (1863), No. 9 (1864), No. 10 (1865), and No. 19 (1866).

<sup>27</sup> A study on social change of Sinhalese religious institutions is in progress.

<sup>28</sup> Petition of the High Priests, Anunayake Priests and other Priests of the Malwatta and Asgiriya Vihāras of Kandy... to the President and Members of the Legislative Council of Ceylon, *Sessional Papers*, No. 13 (1888).

without risk to the tranquility of the Colony, (retire?) itself from all connexion with Idolatry."<sup>29</sup>

Lord Stanley directed the Governor

(1) To withdraw from interference with the appointment of the priests and temple servants, and to frame such Ordinance as should be necessary for that purpose.

(2) To make over the custody of Buddha's tooth to the priests, and to take no part in its exhibition.

(3) To discontinue (if possible without breach of faith) a certain annual grant of money towards "devil dances" and other idolatrous ceremonies.

(4) To consider the possibility of providing for the commutation of the "services" of the temple tenants.

(5) Of applying any part of the commutation money to the establishment of an English seminary for the education of the natives — a suggestion made by Sir W. Colebrooke in 1831.<sup>30</sup>

The announcement of these proposals by Governor Sir Colin Campbell caused great dissatisfaction in Ceylon not only among the local Buddhists but also among the Ceylon Civil Servants.<sup>31</sup> Mr. C. R. Buller, the Government Agent of the Central Province (which after the administrative reorganization following the Colebrooke Report in 1833 comprised the heart lands of the former Kingdom of Kandy) and Mr. Wodehouse, the former G.A., seemed to be worried about the effects of the new proposals and considered the planned withdrawal from Buddhism as a breach of the Kandyan Convention. This view, however, was not shared by the Secretary of State in London: "I also decline to admit that the Convention of the 2nd March, 1815, is capable of such a construction (as put forward by Buddhist memorialists, claiming that the British Government had consented to protect and foster the Buddhist religion). That Convention declares that the religion of Buddha is inviolable, and that its rites, ministers, and places of worship are to be maintained and protected. The obvious meaning of these words is that the Buddhists should be free to celebrate their religious rites and to hold all the places and property devoted to their worship without molestation from their new Sovereign or from any one else. The stipulation was little else than a copy of the language usually employed during the last war in every capitula-

<sup>29</sup> Despatch No. 210 of July 24, 1844. Receipt acknowledged by Governor Sir Colin Campbell by despatch No. 158 of Sept. 24, 1844; (retire?) — not readable in the original ms., C.O. 55:85.

<sup>30</sup> Report from Mr. F. Rogers to the Right Hon. W.E. Gladstone on June 25, 1846.

<sup>31</sup> Report from Mr. F. Rogers, see footnote 30.

tion to the British arms. It is a form of which the meaning is at first sight sufficiently obvious, and which usage in a great variety of cases has exempted from all ambiguity. But if I was compelled to admit such a construction put on these words, I should then deny that such an engagement would be valid or binding."<sup>32</sup>

According to the instructions received from London an ordinance was worked out, laid before the Legislative Council, and passed in 1846.<sup>33</sup> It provided for an appointment of a committee of 16 persons, namely the *Mahānayakes* of Malwatte and Asgiriya, the *Basnayake Nilames* of the major *devāles*, *bhikkhus* and laymen of higher official ranks. This committee was to possess all ecclesiastical authority vested in the British government by the Kandyan Convention of 1815. The quite substantial powers of the committee would have been: (1) To remove any *bhikkhu* or *Basnayake Nilame* for misconduct. This decision would, however, be subject to an appeal to the District Court; (2) to eject any temple tenant from his land on refusal of services or payment of duties; (3) to authorize any sale of temple land. Unfortunately enough for the Buddhist Sangha, this ordinance was disallowed by the London government in 1847 "as giving a dangerous organization to the Buddhist hierarchy."<sup>34</sup>

This decision might have been influenced by various revolts in the Kandyan provinces in which *bhikkhus* were said to have played a major role. Only in 1843 a *bhikkhu* had been convicted for treason at Badulla.<sup>35</sup> The Governor, and even more the Government Agent at Kandy, being well aware of the dangerous situation on the eve of the Kandyan revolution of 1848—the so-called "Matale Rebellion"—were thus placed in a difficult position. In trying to carry on the usual procedure of appointing the chief priests and temple officials, they were heavily criticized by Christian circles in England and Ceylon who urged the Government to

<sup>32</sup> Despatch No. 2 of April 13, 1847, Lord Grey to Governor Viscount Torrington.

<sup>33</sup> Ordinance No. 2 of 1846 (not published).

<sup>34</sup> Despatch of April 13, 1847, Lord Grey to Governor Viscount Torrington. See also the address of Governor Sir Arthur H. Gordon on opening the sessions of the Legislative Council of Ceylon for 1888, reprinted in *Sessional Papers*, No. 4 (1907).

<sup>35</sup> Sir James Emerson Torment, *Ceylon*, Vol. I (4. rev. edition) (London, 1860), p. 94.

give up its connection and "support" of Buddhist and other religious institutions:<sup>36</sup>

And believing it to be our duty as a Christian nation, both toward Almighty God and also to those whom His providence has placed under British rule... your Memorialists feel constrained to appeal to your Excellency with the earnest prayer, that all interference whatsoever in the arrangement of Buddhist affairs may be at once withdrawn, that certificates of every kind may be dispensed with, and that all claims to the Dalada relic may be relinquished, in strict accordance with her gracious Majesty's expressed wishes.<sup>37</sup>

Governor Sir G. W. Anderson nevertheless tried to continue to appoint the Buddhist High Priests and the temple officials. This practice was reluctantly confirmed by the Secretary of State in 1851, who expressively referred to the complaints made by the Christians in Ceylon.<sup>38</sup> In 1853, however, the government had to dissociate itself from the administration of Sinhalese ecclesiastical affairs, and the Tooth Relic—guarded by the British since the rebellion of 1817—was handed over to the *Mahānāyakas* of the Malwatte and *Asgiriya Vihāras*. This withdrawal of government protection—very much resented by the Buddhist priests<sup>39</sup>—proved to be disastrous for the Sinhalese temples and monasteries. While the colonial government did not allow the establishment of a central authority for the administration of temple property, it also refused to safeguard the rights of the traditional administrative bodies.<sup>40</sup> This situation gave ample scope for corruption and mismanagement, unchecked by any authority. It became, therefore, necessary again for the government to take action. In 1876 a Commission of In-

<sup>36</sup> See, for instance, Memorial of the Archdeacon of Colombo and eight other clergymen to the Hon. the Colonial Secretary, Colombo, Dec. 4, 1851. See also Petition of Christians residing in Ceylon to H.M. the Queen, mentioned in despatch No. 123 of Dec. 4, 1852 from John S. Pekington to Sir George Anderson, Governor of Ceylon; B. Boake, *op. cit.*

<sup>37</sup> Memorial to H.E. Sir George William Anderson, K.C.B., Governor of Ceylon, sent by Christian inhabitants of Ceylon (1853), cited in B. Boake, *op. cit.*, pp. 130-131. See also I.G. Da Curba in his "Memoir of the History of the Techthfolls of Ceylon (London, 1875), p. 65: "that owing to the remonstrances of the Christian societies in England, the connection of the existing Government with the shrine has ceased."

<sup>38</sup> Despatch No. 123 of Dec. 4, 1852.

<sup>39</sup> Protocol of a conference between the Governor and the chiefs and priests at Kandy on March 3, 1853.

<sup>40</sup> See, for instance, the case of the high priests and the lay official at Amuradhapura, whom the *Mahānāyakā* of Malwatte wanted to depose. The Temple Land Commissioner "felt no hesitation in placing a copy" of a letter in his hands "to prove to him that the Malwatte establishment had no power to interfere," and he informed him "that if such interference arose, it was a matter in which the Government would take no part." *Sessional Papers*, No. 10 (1865).

quiry was appointed which reported on "the necessity for the intervention of Government to put a stop to the scandalous misappropriation of temple revenues, and to the widespread corruption and systematic fraud . . ." <sup>41</sup> This report marked the beginning of a new era of the relationship between the Government and Buddhism. This paper shows the beginning of a conflict which continued to remain an important and never-solved problem of Ceylonese politics up to the present day.

---

<sup>41</sup> Ceylon Legislative Council Debates, Oct. 5, 1922, p. 662. Statement of H.W. Codrington.