

BUDDHIST MILITARISM BEYOND TEXTS: THE IMPORTANCE OF RITUAL DURING THE SRI LANKAN CIVIL WAR

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Abstract: This article addresses Buddhist militarism by exploring monastic-military ritual interactions during the Sri Lankan civil war, lasting from 1983 to 2009. Much has been written on the importance of Buddhism to Sinhala nationalism, the redefinition of the Buddhist monastic role in response to colonialism and the modernization process, as well as the development of a Buddhist just-war ideology. While these perspectives in various ways emphasize the importance of the Buddhist monastic order in pushing forward a Sinhala Buddhist nationalist agenda, little attention has been paid to the *performative* aspects of Buddhist militarism. Based on ethnographic data gathered during the Norwegian-facilitated peace talks (2000–2008), this article shows how rituals became crucial in conveying support to the state’s military efforts without compromising religious authority. By looking at Buddhist monastic ritual interaction in military institutions, this paper argues that the acceptance of the use of warfare is less anchored in systematized just-war thinking than the term “Buddhist just-war ideology” seems to suggest. Rather, through an anthropological approach to Buddhism and violence, this article shows that the term “Buddhist implicit militarism” better captures the rationale behind the broad monastic engagement with military institutions beyond minority positions of radical Buddhist militancy during a given “exception” in history. The essay concludes that monastic-military ritual interaction is a social field in which this “implicit militarism” is most clearly articulated.

Key Words: Buddhism, militarism, just-war, violence, Sri Lanka, rituals

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This article addresses Buddhist militarism² by exploring monastic-military interaction during the Sri Lankan civil war (1983–2009) between the Tamil Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL). Much has been written on the importance of Buddhism to Sinhala nationalism and the civil war,³ the redefinition of the Buddhist monastic role in response to colonialism and the modernization process,⁴ as well as the development of a Buddhist just-war ideology.⁵ Furthermore, it has been argued that subordination of the non-Buddhist “Other” constitutes a part of a particular Sinhala Buddhist ontology and that this subordination leads to violent exclusion of Tamil Hindus in the Sinhala Buddhist ritual domain.⁶

While these perspectives in various ways emphasize the importance of the Buddhist monastic order (the Sangha) in pushing forward a Sinhala Buddhist nationalist agenda in politics, as well as in Sinhala Buddhist society at large, little attention has been paid to the *performative* aspects of the role played by Buddhist monks in their support of military action against Tamil insurgents. Based upon field data gathered in Sri Lanka during the years of Norwegian-facilitated peace talks (2000–2008), the central concern of this paper is to show how rituals became an important means of communication of support to state military efforts without compromising monastic authority. This observation, I think, shows the importance of ethnographic fieldwork in unpacking the complex relationship between Buddhism and violence. Furthermore, it opens up new questions as to how we are to theorize the relationship between Buddhism, religious authority and violence.

DHAMMIC PACIFISM AND SAMBARIC MILITARISM

In some of my other work I have showed how the majority of Buddhist monks supported military action against the LTTE and that the great majority did not favor a politically negotiated solution to the civil war, at least not how peace talks were facilitated by the Norwegians.⁷ Most of the work on this—including my own—has focused on elite monastic voices who were vociferously against peace talks. By looking at elite Buddhist monastic voices in the political and public domains (for example monastic patriotic movements, press statements or electoral politics), general conclusions have been made about

²By militarism I refer to the belief that a country should have great military strength in order to defend national interests.

³Tambiah 1986 and 1992; Spencer 1990.

⁴Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988; Seneviratne 1999.

⁵Bartholomeusz 2002.

⁶Kapferer 1988.

⁷Frydenlund 2005 and 2013b.

the politicization of the Sangha, the subsequent militancy of Buddhist monks and the development of a Buddhist just-war ideology. Drawing on comparative just-war ethics, Charles Hallisey⁸ and the late Tessa Bartholomeusz⁹ argued that Buddhist ethics are best understood as a kind of ethical particularism, with no underlying moral theory, which allows for different *prima facie* duties that can be overridden if the context allows for that. This implies that violence might be permissible as an exception, particularly if Buddhism is perceived to be in peril.

The arguments about the perceived threat to Buddhism, the perception of decline of Buddhism (as an institution in this world, *sāsana*) and subsequent calls for defense are recurrent tropes in Buddhist history. These calls for the protection of Buddhism have also been used for political purposes at least as far back as the Lankan chronicle literature, dating from fourth century CE. The most famous among these chronicles, the *Mahāvamsa*, has come to have an enormous impact on contemporary Sinhala and Buddhist understandings of the island's history, and it is undoubtedly true that particular monks during the Sri Lankan civil war engaged in a form of Buddhist just-war ideology, the famous scholar-monk Walpola Rahula and the leader of the Jathika Hela Urumaya (Buddhist monks political party), Athuraliye Rathana, being among its most prolific exponents.

However, while this certainly holds true, it is also equally true that this focus on hegemonic monastic voices in Buddhist intellectual circles, as well as in politics, has created a blind spot in our understanding of Buddhist militarism. By looking at a broader spectrum of Buddhist monks and by looking at monastic-military interaction, my data indicate that monastic militarism was often less anchored in systematized just-war thinking than the concept of “Buddhist just war ideology” would suggest. Along the lines of Schmithausen,¹⁰ I argue elsewhere¹¹ that Theravāda Buddhist doctrines are ambiguous in relation to the use of force in public affairs, but that the monastic order by and large has accepted the use of force in order to protect the integrity of the state, to avoid anarchy, and ultimately, to protect Buddhism. This approach is important because it does not reduce the category of “Buddhism and violence” to states of exceptionalism (as the *prima facie* argument implies), as an extremist anomaly to be explained away—either as a regrettable outcome of twentieth-century nationalism or as the harsh realities of the civil war.

⁸Hallisey 1996.

⁹Bartholomeusz 2002.

¹⁰Schmithausen 1999.

¹¹Frydenlund 2013a and 2013b.

My argument is that in order to understand monastic acceptance of institutions of warfare we need to look beyond radical formulations of Buddhist just-war ideology and see monastic militarism as a general expression of acceptance of the state as institution, including its military powers. This is what I refer to as “implicit militarism,” here defined as the tacit acceptance of the institution of warfare. This perspective locates the acceptance of force in public affairs in the midst of the Theravāda Buddhist tradition as a regrettable, but necessary, condition for the survival of Buddhism as a socio-cultural entity in this world. This view, in turn, has to be understood against Buddhist cosmology in which the universe is divided into numerous worlds believed to have been evolved and then destroyed over vast periods of time (known as *kalpas*). Across the Buddhist world the notion is widespread that humans now live in a non-righteous (*a-dhammic*) world in which war is unavoidable. Consequently, non-violence as understood in political pacifist thinking (that the use of military means is always wrong) is only realizable in a future world where the eternal *dhamma* prevails and people behave morally. Monastic acceptance of military institutions—and monks’ (implicit) support for the use of armed force—can thus be understood through a Buddhist cosmological prism in which we can distinguish between “dhammic pacifism” and “samsaric militarism.” These two analytical categories, I suggest, capture the rationale behind the broad monastic engagement with military institutions beyond minority positions of radical Buddhist militancy during a given “exception” in history.

RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY AND THE QUESTION OF “BUDDHIST VIOLENCE”

In his book *Colors of the Robe: Religion, Identity, and Difference* (2002), Ananda Abeysekara puts forward the view that violence in Buddhist Sri Lanka cannot be explained away as “un-Buddhist.” His argument is based on ethnographic data showing that the categories of “violence” and “Buddhism” are discursively produced at certain points in history, and moreover, that such categories are defined according to interest groups. Abeysekara’s excellent study of monastic participation in the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) uprising (1987–1989) in Southern Sri Lanka is often cited to show that even Buddhist monks can participate in violent acts. However, while certainly recognizing the importance of change, flux and negotiation of boundaries, in my view this anti-essentialist perspective also presents challenges as it leaves the category of “Buddhism” (however defined) as an entirely open category and thus does not provide analytical tools for how we are to understand the particular ways in which Buddhists rationalize violence, or engage with institutions of violence and war.

In a recent article in the *Journal of Religion and Violence*, Michael Jerryson¹² argues that too much emphasis has been given to doctrine, and suggests that “[it] is important for scholars to include cultural forms of religious authority in order to better understand and to address Buddhist-inspired acts of violence.” A shift in focus to praxis rather than doctrine resonates with Abeysekara, as well as with my own research on Buddhist monks and the Sri Lankan civil war. Jerryson suggests that at the “heart of locating Buddhist *cultural* regulations of violence is a need to address authority that goes beyond texts and rituals.”¹³ It is beyond the scope here to engage in a debate about the extent to which one can separate “religion” from “culture” and where the line should be drawn in Theravāda Buddhist monastic contexts, but as the question about religious authority is crucial to my own argument about Buddhism militarism and ritual, I shall engage with the question of monastic authority a bit further.

I very much agree with Jerryson in his focus on religious authority and praxis, but the conclusion that “there is a deeper institutional charisma—being a monk—that becomes critical within the Burmese Buddhist mechanics of legitimating violence”¹⁴ does not really provide any further clues to our understanding of Buddhist monastic authority and the question of violence. Jerryson refers to U Wirathu of the 969/MaBaTha in Myanmar to argue that religious authority is constituted not with reference to text or ritual, but through the robe itself and the “correct representation of the religion,” thus giving priority to institutional charisma in his analysis of “Buddhist violence.” Surely, there is a high degree of institutional charisma at stake; people do pay enormous respect to the robe,¹⁵ but in my view, a closer look at U Wirathu would problematize the question of monastic authority and violence further. First, in the case of U Wirathu it is crucial to recognize that he is a highly controversial figure in Burmese Buddhism, which means that his religious authority—beyond the robe so to speak—is in fact questioned. There are certainly Buddhists in Myanmar who ask themselves how his anti-Muslim attacks stand against the *Dhamma*, or if calling the UN Special Rapporteur to Myanmar “a whore” would not be contrary to the monastic code, the *Vinaya*. It is also worth noticing that several Buddhist monks staged a protest *against* U Wirathu after his attack on the UN Rapporteur and that several monks went public arguing that such inflammatory speech was against how a good monk

¹²Jerryson 2015, 319.

¹³Jerryson 2015, 323. This view is further expanded upon in Walton and Jerryson 2016.

¹⁴Jerryson 2015, 323.

¹⁵This tradition to pay respect to the robe is linked to the Three Jewels (*triratna*): to pay respect to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha.

should behave.¹⁶ Second, to U Wirathu's supporters his authority is constituted both by his robe (institutional charisma), but also by the fact that he fulfills the role as "good Buddhist monk."

The "goodness" of his monkhood, I would argue, is constituted by his skills. For example, he holds the highest diploma in Buddhist teachings only passed by a very few each year, he resides in the prestigious New Masoyein monastery, he invokes classic tropes of the protection of Buddhism and he is considered to be a good *dhamma* preacher. In fact, his monastic authority—to either condone or limit violence—is very much based upon Buddhist text, ritual and tradition, fulfilling the Buddhist expectations of a "good monk." His inflammatory speech might be regarded as problematic—even among his supporters—but it is regarded as necessary in order to protect against perceived danger to Buddhism.¹⁷ It is worth noticing that in spite of U Wirathu's militant and discriminatory language he does not make direct calls for violent action. Thus, the relevant question is *how* religious authority is produced in a Theravāda Buddhist context and if, and how, this matters for Buddhist justifications of violence.

In the following, I will develop the argument that when it comes to violent action or outright justifications of violence, the space for negotiation in Buddhist monastic authority is in fact tight, even for U Wirathu, who time and again pushes the limits for what a good monk can do. The point I wish to make clear is that with a few exceptions, Theravāda Buddhist monks, be it in Sri Lanka, Thailand, or Myanmar, do *not* carry out violence themselves. They also hesitate to make explicit calls for violent action. In spite of a few exceptions—due to the hegemonic position of non-violence at the ritual, inter-personal and soteriological levels in Theravāda Buddhism—outright demands for violence, or military action, are generally considered inappropriate to make. Not surprisingly, therefore, to prove direct links between 969 hate speech and anti-Muslim violence have been difficult. It is my contention that Buddhist studies scholars so far have been too fascinated with radical formulations of just-war ideology—like that of the Thai monk Kittivuddho (who argued that killing communists was not a sin) or monastic participation in the JVP uprising in Sri Lanka—to recognize that these are not representative of a broader spectrum of Buddhist thought and practice. In fact, except for a radical minority, the great majority of Buddhist monks would rather ask for the *protection* of their religion and of their motherland, only implicitly calling for military action. Being a militant monk in contemporary Myanmar or Sri

¹⁶Nyein and Aung 2015.

¹⁷This analysis is based upon two interviews with U Wirathu and fieldwork in Myanmar in 2014, 2015, and 2016.

Lanka is *not* a matter of taking up arms or directly calling for violent action, but of showing tacit support to a military solution to external and internal threats. Finally, as long as the state is conceived as legitimately Buddhist, or at least moving in that direction, they will support the state's use of force in order to protect the state, as well as Buddhism.

Along similar lines, it should be noted that Theravāda Buddhism does not offer a fertile ground for holy warrior-ideology. A common interpretation is that the ultimate religious goal of *nirvāṇa* is incompatible with military activities. Moreover, monks would compromise their religious authority if they killed or instigated others to kill, both actions considered transgressions of the third *pārājika*, that is, rules that lead to expulsion from the order. The purity of the Sangha is also of concern to the laity, including politicians and generals, as the Sangha is considered to be a "field of merit" (*puññakkhetta*) for the Buddhist laity: the stricter the discipline, the more merit (*puñña*) lay donors would accumulate. In the words of the famous Sri Lankan monk Walpola Rahula, this implies that the Sangha is a place "where one could sow seeds of merit and reap a good harvest in the next world." However, "if the field was not fertile, the crop would be poor. . . . If the Sangha was impure, the charity bestowed upon them would bring poor results."¹⁸ Moreover, the *Vinaya* attempts to legally separate the Sangha from mundane activities. For example, disrobing is mandatory if a monk takes part in war. Moreover, the code explicitly states that monks should not watch military parades or maneuvers. These canonical injunctions against monastic involvement in army life explain, at least partly, why "monk soldiers" have not been common in contemporary Theravāda Buddhist societies. In short, "good monks" do not engage directly in "violence" as this would compromise their religious authority.

Nonetheless, monks in most Buddhist-majority states are closely attached to military institutions. How shall we understand this against the monastic code? The monastic code regulates monk-army relations, but the code provides several exceptions to the rule so that monks can stay with an army if deemed *necessary*. For example, the Buddha makes an exception for a monk to look after his sick uncle in the army.¹⁹ Thus, relations between monks and the army are not in themselves contrary to the monastic code. However, monks balance a fine line between serving military personnel (as lay Buddhists) while keeping the legal separation between the Sangha and the military, as the religious authority of each individual monk largely depends upon his abilities to keep the monastic code, and by that, keeping his monastic purity. Monks who get

¹⁸Rahula 1966, 259.

¹⁹*Pācittiya* XLVIII.

too involved in mundane affairs will always be at the risk for losing lay support and thus the material pre-condition for their role as monk. To sum up, the question of non-violence is constitutive for Buddhist monastic religious authority. The puzzle is that monastic discourses on Buddhism-as-non-violent may go hand-in hand with Buddhist militancy and militarism. This ambiguity is crucial, I would argue, for our understanding of how violence is justified without compromising monastic religious authority, and as I hope to show in this paper, the ritual domain becomes one important channel of communicating support for the use of armed force.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ETHNOGRAPHY TO THE STUDY OF “BUDDHISM AND VIOLENCE”

The argument put forward in this essay—that ritual communication is crucial to Buddhist militarism—rests on a particular theoretical and methodological perspective in the study of religion, namely praxis and “lived religion.” Lived religion is studied from a variety of academic disciplines; for our purpose here, the anthropology of Buddhism is the most relevant. This sub-discipline was long haunted by questions concerning the authenticity of lived Buddhist practice,²⁰ but is now concerned with studying lived Buddhism in its own right, focusing on ritual, power, politics, gender or medicine, and questioning previously-held boundaries between elite versus popular religion, monastic versus lay, or “great” and “little” traditions. The question of “true” or “authentic” Buddhism is now very much studied as an *emic* debate, not as a relevant academic question, although the position of “authentic Buddhism” as pacifist still holds its sway. Rather than investigating what Buddhist texts say about the use of military means, a “lived religion” approach to Buddhism and violence would explore the ways in which Buddhist monks and nuns act in relation to violence and war, and moreover, how they relate to institutions of violence like the military.

Obviously, a kaleidoscopic turn like this has methodological consequences. A small field observation from one of the significant temples in Vavuniya (close to then LTTE-held areas) during the Sri Lankan civil war provides us with data on relations between monks and military institutions that is not obtained through textual analysis of Pāli texts, through Buddhist monks’ press statements, or even through qualitative interviews with monks on their views of war and violence:

We were guided by the monk through one of the sleeping halls of the orphanage that he ran for war-affected children in the area. At the far end of the “hall,”

²⁰Gellner 1990.

we reached his spacious office. An elegant, dark-wooden sitting arrangement invited for informal meetings and the serving of tea. The room was decorated with more than 30 pictures of lay supporters of the temple: all were army officers and their wives. Twice during the interview we were interrupted by phone calls from army officers at the nearby air base. They wanted to make arrangements for the next *pōya* day activities, the monk explained. (Author's field notes, Vavuniya, Sri Lanka, 2005)

During the war Buddhist monks interacted with military, paramilitary and police institutions in numerous ways, particularly in the war-affected regions in the north and east where the Sinhala Buddhist community constituted a minority among Tamil and Muslim majorities. While such military-monastic interactions took place all over Sri Lanka, it was particularly accentuated in the war-affected regions and took on a particular quality of reciprocal protection: soldiers offered physical protection to the monks, while the monks offered spiritual protection through various ritual services to the soldiers.

My experiences described above reveal the daily workings between monks and the army. The army officers were the prime supporters of the temple, and the monk, in turn, served the religious needs of the army personnel. This temple thrived under the protection of the army, while at the same time being a locus for lay generosity to the Sangha. The monk told me that during war times the soldiers flocked to his temple, as it was located next to an air base, but that the soldiers had stopped coming after the ceasefire in 2002 as many were on leave. Ironically, perhaps, this Buddhist temple was to a large extent *dependent* upon war-activities for its survival. In the following I will analyze two main ritual domains in which Buddhist monastic militarism in Sri Lanka was expressed during the war: first, Buddhist rituals performed within the military domain, and second, Buddhist-military ritual interaction in the civilian domain.

BUDDHIST SOLDIERS AND BUDDHIST CHAPLAINS

While Sinhala Buddhists certainly constitute the majority population of Sri Lanka's population (nearly 70 percent), there are significant ethnic and religious minorities, the most dominant being the Tamil-speaking population. This diversity is not, however, reflected in the Sri Lankan Armed Forces, which are primarily comprised of Buddhists (all of whom would be Sinhalese). From the 1950s onwards, Buddhist symbols have systematically been integrated into the cultural universe of the military.²¹ Reference is made to the aforementioned chronicle, the *Mahāvamsa* which documents the warrior-king Duṭṭhagāmaṇi

²¹For more detail on the historical transformation of the army into a predominantly Buddhist army, see Frydenlund 2017.

in his victory over non-Buddhists, as seen by the name of one of the most prestigious regiments of the army, the so-called “Gemunu Watch.” Moreover, the Army Flag is decorated with a Dhamma Wheel (*dhammacakka*), the lyrics of the army song were jointly composed by a brigadier and a Buddhist monk, and Buddhist monks systematically interact with the army. Thus, through its demographic composition, its symbolic universe and through the ritual presence of Buddhist monks, military institutions in Sri Lanka express an overwhelmingly Buddhist identity. The ritual services provided by monks to soldiers are of particular concern here. Like in Myanmar and Thailand, Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka serve military personnel, although this service is not institutionalized in a formal military chaplaincy (i.e., religious service to a military institution).

The Royal Thai Armed Forces employs a Buddhist chaplaincy comprised of monks who disrobe *before* they become chaplains. This hybrid role is, by contrast, not to be found in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, where Buddhist ritual service to soldiers is less institutionalized, and the formal boundaries between the military and the Sangha are strictly kept. In Sri Lanka, therefore, Buddhist monks who provide ritual services and spiritual care to soldiers are not military chaplains in any strict sense. Nonetheless, their service *functions* in similar ways as a formalized military chaplaincy, namely to care for individual soldiers in times of extreme physical and ontological insecurity. Thus, while formally separated, the monastic and the military spheres meet in systematic interaction in one particular field, namely in the ritual domain, and Buddhist monks carry out religious services for the soldiers in the same manner as Christian chaplains would serve Christian soldiers.

MONASTIC-MILITARY RITUALS

Monastic ritual services to soldiers must be understood against the traditional role of Buddhist monks. At the heart of traditional Buddhism in Sri Lanka stands the “village monk,” whose primary role is to provide literary and ritual services *for* society.²² These services include teaching, preaching (*baṇa*), full moon (*pōya*) day rituals, the recitation of sacred texts (*paritta*) and officiating at funerals. Despite tendencies of secularization of the Sangha, that is, increasing monastic participation in lay society (for example, in civil society organizations or in formal politics), monks still occupy the traditional role as ritual specialists for lay people, including military personnel. During the

²²In contrast to the village monk, the forest-dwelling monk aims at following the Vinaya’s strict ideals of purity, distancing himself from the Sangha’s involvement with lay life. Thus, giving *dāna* to “forest monks” is deemed more meritorious than giving *dāna* to village monks.

Sri Lankan civil war, Buddhist monks went to army camps on *pōya* days, gave sermons (*baṇā*) to soldiers, or in other ways guided them spiritually. The purpose of military preaching was to console soldiers, who often showed concern about the karmic effects of their violent actions in the battlefield and henceforth their future rebirth.²³ One of the monks I interviewed in Vavuniya told me that the soldiers used to come to his temple in the afternoons. He was concerned about the soldiers' mental health: "They are not mentally balanced! I try to comfort them, and sometimes I preach *baṇā*."

The point about soteriological insecurity and mental unbalance is interesting for our discussion of Buddhist just-war ideology, for example expressed through the concept of holy war (*dharma yuddha*),²⁴ warfare should not be conceived as problematic at the individual level. Warfare is the duty carried out by professional soldiers, for the sake of "country, race and religion" (*raṭa, jāta, āgama*), as the nationalist slogan in Sri Lanka goes. The question of the moral standing of the soldier is an issue to the soldier himself, as he is concerned with the implications of his violent actions for his karmic distribution. Although carried out for the sake of the religion and the country, killing is regarded as problematic. Several of the monks I interviewed recounted that soldiers came to their temples for comfort and advice. This seems to indicate that many soldiers felt that the war could not be sanctioned by Buddhism in the sense that their actions on the battlefield would exempt them from individual responsibility. As pointed out by Daniel Kent²⁵ military preaching thus aimed at shaping the right intention of the soldiers while carrying out violent acts in the battlefield, so to minimize the negative karmic effects. To my knowledge, monks who engage with the military as preachers or ritual specialists would not address the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the army as such.

In addition to preaching, various forms of protective rituals were important to soldiers during the war. Individual regiments invited good preachers at special occasions, whether on *pōya* days or on Regiment Day. Moreover, specific functions were organized before large military operations, for example *pirit* recitals (Pāli: *paritta*, protective verses from the Pāli canon) for the protection of the army and the individual soldier. In contemporary Sri Lanka, *pirit* performance is almost a daily practice and recital is transmitted over loudspeakers in public space or broadcasted. Most often, *pirit* is sponsored by those to set upon a journey, a new challenging task, building a new house, or, in the case of the military, before dangerous operations in the battlefield.

²³See also Kent 2010.

²⁴Bartholomeusz 2002.

²⁵Kent 2010.

In such protective rituals, Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka recite stanzas from authoritative Buddhist texts, collected in the *Book of Protection* or *Pirit Pota*.

The time accorded to a *pirit* ritual can be short (15 minutes) or long (up to a fortnight) according to the occasion and the economy of the lay donor. Regardless of duration, *pirit* rituals share a common ritual structure: the presence of the Three Jewels of Buddhism, namely, the Buddha (in the form of a relic), the Dhamma (texts) and the Sangha (the monks). In order to facilitate the flow of the Three Jewels' protective power to the participants, a white thread (Sinh. *nul*) is used. The *pirit nul* connects the relic to the texts, to a pot of water (through the palms of reciting monks), and finally to the participants. *Pirit* recitation "produces" material objects, such as the *pirit nul* to be worn around the wrist and protective water (*pirit pæn*), both of which the participants can take home and share with their friends and family. During the war, such *pirit* rituals were conducted inside the military domain and monks residing close to the army camps were invited to perform; but in the case of more elaborate and costly events, famous monks from Colombo or Kandy would be called upon. During such *pirit* rituals, the power of the Three Jewels of Buddhism flows through the sacred thread to the soldiers, ritually connecting Buddhism (both in terms of eternal teachings as well as a social reality in this world) to the institution of warfare. During such occasions, I would argue, military camps become "Buddhist military" camps, which means that they assume a *temporary* Buddhist quality, but without becoming Buddhist sites in their own right.

If we move from individual pastoral care to the institutional level of the military, we find that ties between the army and certain groups of monks are formalized through the Buddhist Army Association at Panagoda, which serves as the headquarters of several regiments of the army. On the anniversary day of the founding of the Sri Lankan Army, a sermon is held at the Panagoda temple. Relatives of dead or wounded soldiers arrive from all over Sri Lanka; and during special ceremonies monks receive *dāna* (food offerings) or the eight requirements that monks need in their monastic life, and the monks transfer merit (Pāli *puñña*, Sinh *pin*) to dead soldiers. In this context, rituals connected with Buddhist soteriology are interwoven with the social formations of the military. While the power of the army remains undisputed, the ritual superiority of the monks is expressed through ritual interaction: monks are seated, while top army generals bow down to show their respect. While the Buddhist temple at Panagoda is physically separated from the army camp, its physical proximity to military space and its interconnectedness with the army through the Buddhist Army Association, transform this particular Buddhist space into a hybrid form between the monastic and military, in what I define as "Military Buddhist space." This is qualitatively different from the Thai

state's militarization of Buddhist space in Southern Thailand²⁶ in that the Sri Lankan army has not occupied monastery ground.

Similar intersections between monks and military personnel also took place *outside* of the military domain—what we may, for this analytical purpose, call “Buddhist civilian space.” With the exception of military preaching, that is, preaching that is adjusted to the specific context of the physical and ontological insecurity experienced by soldiers in combat, many of the same forms of ritual interaction took place within the military as in the Buddhist civilian domain.²⁷ Buddhist generals and soldiers would seek the ritual services of Buddhist monks residing in symbolically powerful Buddhist sites. For example, in times of military strategic significance, famous generals and leading military personnel received blessings in the shrine room of the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic in Kandy (Sri Daḷadā Māligāva), the prime symbol of Buddhist political power in Sri Lanka, and Buddhist monks tied *pirit nūl* around their wrists. Also, they would seek monastic ritual services after existentially threatening moments. On June 11 2008, three months after an attack on the Commander of the Army General Sarath Fonseka by a suicide bomber—of which he miraculously survived—Buddhist monks bestowed the blessings of the “Triple Gem” on the General when he reassumed office, monks recited *pirit* and the general made offerings to the monks.

Furthermore, army personnel—in their capacity as ordinary lay Buddhists—carried out their ordinary religious duties in the areas where they were stationed. One such activity is śramadāna (gift of labor) in temples. In Trincomalee, for example, soldiers in large numbers were engaged in maintenance work at temple grounds, and they contributed to post-tsunami reconstruction work. As the army was largely comprised of Buddhists, Buddhist temples were at the receiving end of such “gifts of labor,” further consolidating the close relations between monks and the army. Finally, one crucial element of lay-monastic ritual interaction is food offerings to monks, *dāna*, which is practiced throughout Buddhist Sri Lanka. In the war-affected regions this came to be imbued with a particular religious and ethnic significance as Buddhist monks constituted a minority in the northern and eastern regions. As most Buddhist temples were dependent upon material support from the nearby lay community for their survival, the fact that many of them were located among Muslim and Hindu communities would have made survival in these areas difficult, had it not been for *dāna* offerings by army personnel. As such, the army functioned as the monks' *dāyaka* communities. This symbiotic relationship was most important in cases where the temple

²⁶See Jerryson 2009.

²⁷That is, I have not come across military preaching in the Buddhist civilian domain.

did not have a *dāyaka* community in the nearby village, either because it was located in a forest area (attached to a recently discovered ruin), or because the temple was located next to a Tamil or a Muslim village. Some of the temples located next to military camps had particularly close relations, and often the monks were completely dependent upon the army for their survival. From a Tamil nationalist point of view, Buddhist monks in the north and east were generally considered to be “colonizers” and representatives of Sinhala appropriation of the Tamil homeland, which meant that Tamil material support to monks was rare.

It is worth noting that although local army camps and regiments exercised a great deal of local autonomy in their ritual interactions with local monks, it is also clear that as part of the preparations for escalation in war activities in the east and the north, orders to perform protective Buddhist rituals were sent from top military figures down the ranks. For example, prior to increased war efforts in 2007, a signal was sent out by Colonel K. R. P. Rowel to Security Forces Commanders, Divisional Commanders, Sector Commanders and Deputy Sector Commanders, which advised for the “Chanting of the Jaya Piritha and conducting of Bodi Pooja.”²⁸ The aim was to enable “the Army to conduct all its activities successfully and that lives of all soldiers including the Army Commander are protected.” The signal informed that the rituals might be performed inside the army camp, or at the main temple closest to the army camp. At this point, the army must have been anticipating intense fighting (and consequently the possibility of great loss) as the Colonel advised the “units to chant the Jaya Piritha and conduct Bodhi Pooja for a week long period continuously from March 2, 2007.” The “Jaya Piritha” refers to the *Jayamaṅgala Gāthā*, or the *Poem of Auspicious Victory*, which is widely used in *pirit* rituals Sri Lanka, including weddings. This stanza tells of the Buddha’s eight victories over his enemies, including the demon Mara, ensured through the Buddha’s wisdom, patience, psychic powers and self-control.

It is believed that if chanted with pure intention it will destroy negativity and ensure protection by attracting all good surrounding to the individual. Moreover, the colonel asked the army commanders to engage in *bōdhi pūjā*, which is a popular devotional ritual to the sacred Bō tree. The cult of the Bō tree brings together crucial elements of Sri Lankan Buddhism: first, it commemorates the Enlightenment of the Buddha (that took place under a Bō tree), second it commemorates the advent of Buddhism to the island (through a sapling brought by Mahinda, emperor Aśoka’s son) and third, the local tree is inhabited by various spirits that humans might engage with. Often, a so-called *pahan pūjā*, or “light offering” is also performed, to counter

²⁸Athas 2007.

evil planetary influences. The *bōdhi pūjā* has, according to Gombrich and Obeyesekere,²⁹ become “something of a national ritual for Sinhala Buddhists.” In their view—at least during the 1980s—the *bōdhi pūjā* was not associated with the state, although they also notice the use of this ritual by the army. The *bōdhi pūjā* was performed to secure military victory during the war, but is by no means a symbol of the state. However, it should be noted that the tree is closely linked to the spread of Buddhism, and can be considered a means for localization and territorialization of Buddhism. This point was not lost upon Tamil nationalists who during the war resisted the making of Bō trees in Tamil majority areas.

BUDDHIST RITUAL JUSTIFICATION OF VIOLENCE?

So far, I have argued that Therāvada monastic authority is linked to the question of violence/non-violence in ways that restrict outright demands for the use of military force (despite historical exceptions to this rule), and in ways that inhibit a formal Buddhist military chaplaincy. Moreover, I have for analytical purposes differentiated between “military Buddhist,” “Buddhist military,” and “Buddhist civilian” spaces. It should be noted, however, that the “religious” or “military” qualities of such spaces are by no means fixed: the Buddhist quality of a military space is contingent upon rituals and the presence of monks. Likewise, Buddhist sites do not assume a fixed militaristic quality through the temporary presence of military personnel. In the remainder of this article I wish to dwell on the question of how we are to think about Buddhist-military ritual interaction in relation to the question of Buddhist violence, or more precisely, of Buddhist monastic militarism.

The dominant academic position on rituals in early Buddhism has been that Buddhism emerged as a rejection of ritualism. However, as pointed out by Oliver Freiberger,³⁰ early Buddhist texts do not reject outright all forms of ritual activity; rather, they reject some Vedic rituals, while other rituals are reinterpreted ethically and spiritually. In particular, early Buddhism criticizes animal sacrifice, and there is a strong Buddhist self-identification with *ahimsā* (no-harm) in the ritual domain. The *Dīgha Nikāya*, for example, praises alternative sacrifice uses of oil and butter in rituals. The importance of rituals was long neglected in Buddhist studies. This changed as the anthropology of Buddhism grew in importance, but also as a new generation of textual scholars started to analyze rituals described in texts as well as the ritual use of text. Moreover, scholars such as Anne Blackburn and Jeffrey Samuels have shown how rituals matter for monastic training. Samuels, for example, shows

²⁹Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, 389.

³⁰Freiberger 1998.

the importance of the *pirit* ritual for monastic education in contemporary Sri Lanka, not only in terms of doctrine, but also in terms of ideal monastic behavior. Through *pirit* rituals, novice monks learn how to perform as “good monks,” by, for example, having clean bodies, shaven heads, proper dressing, eyes cast down and a soft voice, all of which constitutes the very basics of Theravādin monastic authority. This is but one out of numerous examples of the importance of praxis and rituals (*paṭipatti*) to monastic Buddhism. Buddhist monastic rituals, then, can be studied as sites for the construction (or negation) of Buddhist meaning.

Ritual theory has pointed out the polyphonic character of rituals, and the ways in which they communicate multiple meanings (or no-meaning) to the participants involved. The question of ritual meaning becomes particularly acute, I contend, in the study of Buddhist rituals in military contexts. If we accept that ritual meaning is stable and identifiable, then what is at stake in these rituals are questions concerning basic Buddhist teachings such as protection of individuals, securing of good rebirth and even questions relating to Buddhist soteriology, none of them easily combined with military action. But if we study meaning and action as closely interconnected, so that meaning is constructed through action itself, what happens then to the meaning of Buddhist rituals in military space? Do the military confines and the political context alter the meaning of “non-violent” rituals? Can they be understood as “violent rituals”?

On the one hand, exactly because these military-monastic ritual interactions are similar, if not identical, to *other* lay-monastic ritual interactions, they can be interpreted as ordinary ritual interaction with no militaristic quality attached to them. Moreover, from an *emic* point of view, the use of Buddhist symbols in military settings is about warding off evil, or what in the academic study of religion is referred to as apotropaic religion. The aim is to protect individuals from harm, not to harm others. As such, *dānā* rituals or *pirit* chantings are not complex ritual structures with esoteric or obscure meaning attributed to them, but rather they represent “everyday religion”: to provide protection and well-being in this and the next lives. Moreover, monastic-military rituals in and of themselves do not have important signifiers to violence, either by their structural, doctrinal or mythical elements. Surely, the *Jayamaṅgala Gāthā* engages with military metaphors (like many other Buddhist texts) in that it speaks of victory (*jaya*) over ignorance and danger, but the text speaks of how the Buddha through his wisdom and insight overcomes these obstacles without the use of violent means. Furthermore, at stake is not sacrificial violence, the enactment of the original act of violence, or violence controlled within the ritual domain. Rather, texts like the *Jayamaṅgala Gāthā* intend to protect *against* violence and danger through

magical power generated by the *Dhamma* and the words of the Buddha (*Buddhavacana*) through the *pirit* ritual.

On the other hand, the timing, location, and the particular political context of such rituals add new symbolic meanings to such rituals. For example, famous generals would seek the monks' ritual services in times of military strategic significance (for example before battles). Also, they would seek monastic ritual services at particular occasions, such as after the attack on General Fonseka by a LTTE suicide bomber, when a huge *dānā* was organized in Colombo. Thus, the very timing and the occasion of the military-monastic interaction would imbue the otherwise non-violent ritual with a certain militaristic and political quality within Buddhist sacred space. The recognition of the politics of rituals does not, it should be noted, imply that they are viewed as "political." In fact, Buddhist rituals were generally held to be "apolitical." This resonates with a point made by Ursula Rao³¹ in her study of Hindu rituals—the point that temple rituals are not held for political reasons, even though participants acknowledge that rituals also are forums for the negotiation of status positions. Rituals are dynamic processes, and as Michael Houseman³² points out in his relational approach to ritual, the ritual reorganizes distinct elements into interdependence within the new totality of a ritual performance. The ritual thus *produces* new relationships. So, while Buddhist monastic-lay ritual interactions are customary, when bringing together generals and monks, such rituals produce a particular military-monastic interdependence, and the rituals assume a particular militaristic symbolic quality.

Moreover, during the war, rituals that involved top generals were turned into special occasions—widely covered in the media, or through military websites—and thus served as Buddhist justifications of war in the public domain. Moreover, they reinforced the image of the military as primarily Buddhist, fighting non-Buddhist so-called "terrorists." Consequently, monastic-military rituals assumed the quality of public events by the state. As shown by Don Handelman,³³ public events to varying degrees represent the social order: those with little autonomy are weaker within themselves and mirror the social order to a greater extent than those with greater autonomy. Such rituals index and communicate to the public notions of, for example, nationhood, statehood and history. When a state institution, like the Sri Lankan Armed Forces, so consciously facilitated Buddhist rituals prior to battles, and furthermore communicated such rituals to the wider public through its media channels, the rituals were transformed into mirror of the (ideal) social

³¹Rao 2006, 154.

³²Houseman 2006.

³³Handelman 1990 and 2005.

order. Importantly, however, this social order was fragmented, contested and was by sections of the population considered illegitimate, so that Buddhist military rituals assumed different meanings to different ethnic and religious groups in Sri Lankan society.

During the war, what was regarded by the Buddhist majority as a legitimate act of protection against LTTE “terrorism,” was by Hindu or Tamil Catholic minorities regarded as misuse of Buddhism for militaristic purposes.³⁴ This would challenge a Durkheimian understanding of religion and ritual as social cohesion, integration, socio-cultural solidarity and conflict management. During the war, Buddhist military rituals were integrative for the majority population, but divisive and suppressive for minority communities as these Buddhist military rituals underscored these minorities’ marginalization in state institutions—and in the army in particular—since the Sinhalization policies of the 1950s. Moreover, such rituals were read against monastic arguments about Sri Lanka as a sacred and inseparable Buddhist land, unsuitable for a separate state or even a federal solution. Writing from a post-war perspective, the close association of Buddhist monks and the army in the conquered areas in the north and east gains another meaning: that of post-war Sinhala Buddhist triumphalism and subsequent denial of Tamil loss and grief. Thus, public rituals—and particularly those closely connected to state institutions in deeply divided societies—may reproduce and further accentuate difference and marginalization.

Nonetheless, it would be misleading to reduce monastic-military ritual interaction to a public event of display of state power and Sinhala Buddhist hegemony. These were not mere events of presentation, although their re-making through media representations in the public domain may have had that aim. Rather, they have a particular meaning that goes well beyond state ideology and militarism, producing new forms of social realities that are deeply meaningful to soldiers and monks alike. Monastic military rituals cannot be reduced to the state and its institutions of warfare in a Geertzian “model of—model for” perspective on ritual. Rather, although these rituals are not particularly complex, they nonetheless have a high degree of autonomy from their social surroundings—to speak with Handelman in mind—in that they cannot be reduced to contemporary social orders. Or put in other words, the military could not easily get rid of Buddhist ritual services for the soldiers. Perhaps such military-monastic rites gain their force despite changes in the socio-political orders precisely because they—to some degree—are independent of larger realities? At least this point is relevant to the question

³⁴This lamentation that “Sinhala extremists” misused the (alleged) pacifist Buddhist tradition was common in Tamil nationalist circles.

of monastic authority and violence. In my view, it is exactly because such rituals cannot be reduced to state institutions of warfare that monks are left with a polyvalent space of interaction that does not compromise their monastic authority. Does this imply that monastic ritual engagement with the military does not express at least some degrees of militarism?

The logical conclusion of my suggestion that monastic-military rituals communicate “implicit militarism” would be to say that all monks involved in ritual interaction with the military accepted (at least to some degree) the use of military means. Such a view is not warranted. Rather, I would argue that a distinction has to be made between individual and public levels of interpretation. Individual monks held—not surprisingly—differing views on war itself and on the means to end it. Except for a tiny minority of explicitly *pacifist* monks in Colombo who would avoid any engagement with military institutions (but accept soldiers as lay persons in their temples), monks would generally not hesitate to perform ritual services to soldiers in military camps. Regardless of their personal political views on the war and the on-going peace negotiations, monks engaged in ritual activities in the military domain. For example, one of the most active monks in interfaith work in the war zone was the then-chief monk in Vavuniya, Wimalasara. He was the most high-ranking monk who showed a particular commitment to peace activism and who cooperated with members of the Tamil political community, the LTTE, and other religious leaders in order to strengthen intercommunity dialogue in the region. He was among the very few who during the war was permitted free access into LTTE-controlled areas. His temple was located within army controlled areas in Vavuniya Town, but his lay supporters (*dāyaka*) were mostly Tamil. Tamils came for *pōya* days and *pirit* ceremonies, testifying to an extraordinary transgression of ethnic and religious boundaries during the heights of war. Nonetheless, Wimalasara would—in his capacity of being a senior monk in the region—also be invited to perform ritual services for the army, particularly on *pōya* days.

His ritual services to the military ensured his own security as well as carved out political space for local peace work, but it was also an important part of his monastic social service as a village monk. Therefore, even to an outstanding local peace activist such as Wimalasara, taking ritual care of soldiers was considered as a natural part of his duty as a monk, and he did not challenge the army as such. The point here is that state warfare was accepted as a regrettable, but unavoidable fact of this world, in a position I have defined as “samsaric militarism.” Following this definition all monks, except the tiny minority who resisted any engagement with the military, would (to varying degrees) accept the institution of warfare.

CONCLUSION: BUDDHIST IMPLICIT MILITARISM

The Sri Lankan context exemplifies a broader trend in Buddhist-majority states in Asia of Buddhism lending its legitimacy to state-organized violence. While individual monks might have clear views on Buddhism as nonviolent, they nonetheless carry out their religious duties in close relationship with state institutions, such as the army, in order to protect Buddhism.

During the Sri Lankan civil war, the close association of soldiers and monks was not considered an issue of debate: it was taken for granted that soldiers asked for spiritual guidance and ritual services—as any other lay person would do—and it was a matter of fact that many monks blessed the army, or decorated their temple offices with pictures of themselves together with leading army generals. In addition to pastoral care for soldiers, Buddhist military chaplains contributed—through preaching, rituals, sacred space, and through their position as religious *exemplars*—to Buddhist justifications for war, at least at the public level. Based on field observations and interviews with monks during the Sri Lankan civil war, I would challenge the notion that “doctrinal Buddhism,” however defined, cannot be associated with war-activities. Although soldiers may not pray directly to the Buddha for military success, there are other practices that *function* in similar ways. I hope to have shown that within the specific context of the Sri Lankan civil war, non-violent Buddhist rituals came to take on a militaristic quality, justifying state force in public affairs. The importance of rituals and symbols to military cohesion and justifications for war are unquestionable. Importantly, however, the multiple meanings of these rituals and their relative autonomy from the socio-political order allowed monks to go free of criticism for supporting violence: the monks just carried out their prescribed ritual duties. The hegemonic discourse of “dhammic pacifism” shaped monastic militarism in a certain way: due to the ways in which monastic authority is constituted, the rituals became an important social field where monastic acceptance of state military efforts was expressed.

As outright demands for violence would have made the monks object for critique, ritual communication became an important means to show patriotism without compromising monastic purity. Proposing a theory of “Buddhist ritual violence” would certainly be taking the argument too far. Nonetheless, the insight that rituals create new forms of interdependence between actors, and moreover, that ritual meaning is creatively produced, offers new theoretical perspectives on Buddhism and violence that move the question beyond “exceptionalism” and *prima facie* duties of radical formulations of just-war ideology.

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