



## Magic and Religion in Sinhalese Society

Hans-Dieter Evers

*American Anthropologist*, New Series, Volume 67, Issue 1 (Feb., 1965), 97-99.

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*American Anthropologist*

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such and should never be confounded with empirical and interpretative problems.

HARUMI BEFU  
*University of Michigan*

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## MAGIC AND RELIGION IN SINHALESE SOCIETY

In an excellent article on "Buddha and the Dancing Goblins: A Theory of Magic and Religion" (1964:75-82) Michael Ames has drawn attention to the fact that so far Sinhalese religion has been treated either as consisting of clearly distinguished systems (Buddhism, Hinduism and cults of deities and Hobgoblins) or as syncretistic. Ames, however, argues that Buddhism and the magic rituals are clearly distinguished in Sinhalese theory, but thoroughly intermeshed in their practices. It is just this ambiguous relationship between theory and practice which is important and significant for Sinhalese religion. Perhaps the following few facts may support or specify Ames's conclusions.

The theoretical distinction between the different religious systems (dogmas) is "clear-cut and unambiguous" in so far as different levels or classes of supernatural beings are clearly distinguished. Especially the Buddha is said to be of a completely different nature as the gods, demons, and spirits.

Four "strata" of supernatural beings are kept apart in Sinhalese theory though—according to the same theory—there do exist close connections between these strata. They are Buddha and the Bodhisattvas; the latter are partly considered to belong to the second class, the gods (*dēviyō*), the next lower class consists of the demons (*yakā*), the lowest class of the supernatural

beings is formed by the ghosts (*prētayā*). Obeyesekere (1963:142) suggests that the hierarchical structure of the Sinhalese pantheon is "consonant with a social structure based on a hierarchy of caste." But in the Sinhalese "social theory of the supernatural world," as it may be termed, the social interaction between all these classes is very vivid; for instance, certain demons have to obtain a licence from the Buddha or from the gods to inflict illness on human beings. The supernatural world is also closely connected with the human society as the mechanism of karma, and rebirth may result in social mobility from a human into a ghostly existence (Evers 1964:317). Each of these strata except the lowest has its own religious specialists, viz. the *Bhikkhu* (buddhist monk), the *Kapurāla* (in Ceylon sometimes called "peoples' priest") and the *Edurā* ("exorcist").

The second fact given by Ames, that "Buddhism and the magical healing rituals are closely intermingled" (1964:78) also needs some specification.

Though the religious specialists are differentiated and in line with the stratification of the supernatural society, the laymen are not. There are no sects worshipping one special god; there are no secret societies connected with the cult of one particular demon. Almost all Sinhalese call themselves *Theravada* Buddhists, but, nevertheless, take part in exorcist rites or visit the temples of the gods in case of illness or bad luck. It might be interesting to note that also among the intellectual Buddhists this practice is not discontinued, but, as Sir Lalita Rajapakse, the president of the All-Ceylon-Buddhist Congress has stated recently (*Weekly Times*, Colombo 30-1-1963) the practice of worshipping the gods is increasing. Doctrinal differences have, as a matter of fact, not led to social differentiation and the formation of sects, as has been the case in many other societies (notably the European). The "mediating role of magic," as stated by Ames is also clearly expressed in the homogenous Sinhalese socioreligious structure, as far as the laymen are concerned. The magical rites are performed in a way to strengthen the authority of gods and demons as well as the Buddha, allowing also a "good Buddhist" to take part in them. The religious specialists have, however, remained highly competitive among themselves, not only in the religious but also in the economic field. Lay donations of land to *dēvālas* (temples of gods) as well as to *vihāras* (Buddhist temples) have given considerable wealth and influence to these institutions and those in charge of them. The economic competition for donations may have stabilized the doctrinal differences. Though Buddhist monks do from time to time perform magical rites, purgatory movements in the Buddhist *Sangha* (order of monks) as the *Tāpasa Bhikkhus* (Valman 1962:215-328) and other reform movements have prevented the integration of magical practices into the functions of the Buddhist monks.

The aim of this comment was to specify Michael Ames's arguments from a sociological point of view. It has been shown that the division between magic and religion is distinct not only in theory but to a certain extent also in social reality as far as the religious specialists are concerned. In addition, some hints have been given as to why the differentiation of Sinhalese religious theory has

neither been abolished nor resulted in a social differentiation of the lay population.

HANS-DIETER EVERS

*Monash University Melbourne*

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COUVADE: RITUAL OR REAL ILLNESS<sup>1</sup>

It is my intent in this brief communication to point out some of the confusion which surrounds our usage of the term *couvade* and hence impairs our understanding of the phenomena to which it refers. Traditionally we have understood the *couvade* to be a bizarre institution in which the father of the infant retires to his bed at the time of delivery and/or observes various interdictions associated with diet, work, or other aspects of his daily routine.

The literature is rich with generalized normative descriptions of the practice. For example, "the father takes to his bed, simulates the pain of childbirth and otherwise comports himself as though he instead of the woman were delivered of the child" (Miller 1928:24). As well as describing the paternal behavior, other writers speak of its purpose. This rite protects or facilitates delivery (van Gennep 1960:49). *Couvade* is purported to be widespread in South America and is present among the Black Carib of British Honduras. For one South American society it is said that the infant has a stronger supernatural link to his father than to his mother. Consequently after the child is born the father resorts to his hammock for a number of days and refrains from all activities in order, it is believed, to avoid evil influences which might act to the detriment of the child (Steward and Faron 1959:303).

In addition to presenting the existential reasons for the *couvade* certain general functions of it are postulated. *Couvade* calls attention to a new status for the father as well as to assure the progenitor that he can be of assistance to his mate in time of crisis (Honigsmann 1959:565). In a later publication the same author suggests that an added function is noted in the fact that "the *couvade* takes up slack time and gives the father something to do" (Honigsmann 1963:259). These descriptions and analyses of *couvade* all imply that it is a ritual, is predictable, and, as such, has purpose, and manifest and latent