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"Monastic Landlordism" in Ceylon:

A TRADITIONAL SYSTEM IN A MODERN SETTING

HANS-DIETER EVERS

STUDIES on social and political change tend to emphasize factors promoting change rather than factors maintaining or reenforcing an existing or a "traditional" social and political system. Among the topics studied from this point of view in Ceylon are the "disintegrating village" (Sarkar and Tambiah 1957), the caste system, a "system in transition" (Ryan 1953), the impact of population growth and colonial legislation on "land tenure in Village Ceylon" (Obeyesekere 1966 and Leach 1961), the development of a western political system and the newly "emerging elite" (Singer 1964), and the impact of industrialization and economic development on the Ceylonese community and caste structure and the "emergence of a class of industrial entrepreneurs" (Evers 1964).¹ In all these booklength studies traditional Sinhalese institutions and values are depicted as disintegrating under the pressure of various factors of change and only limited attention is paid to institutions which effectively counteract westernization, modernization, and possibly change. It is perhaps interesting to note that in line with this way of arguing, the renaissance of Buddhism and the emergence of a strong Buddhist Sinhalese nationalism is viewed as a reaction to western influences rather than an autonomous development of Sinhalese society and culture.²

Whereas the colonial administration, the modern bureaucracy, parliamentary democracy, and the new industries are primarily agencies of social change contributing to the development of new groupings and social structures some other institutions are maintaining the existing social structure. One of the most important institutions of this kind is the temple system of the Kandyan Provinces of Ceylon, which derives its stability to a large extent from its economic base, temple lands and temple services. This system, which was termed "monastic landlordism" by Max Weber³ and "Buddhist temporalities" by British officials, has survived the onslaught of British colonialism more or less by default, has regained strength and importance

Hans-Dieter Evers is Associate Professor of Sociology at Yale University. Research for this study was made possible by grants from the Arnold Bergstraesser Institute, Freiburg, Germany; Monash University, Melbourne; ACLS-SSRC and the Yale Concilium on International and Area Studies.

¹ Sarkar, N. K. and S. J. Tambiah, *The Disintegrating Village*, (Colombo: The Ceylon University Press Board, 1957); Ryan, Bryce, *Caste in Modern Ceylon, The Sinhalese System in Transition*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953); Obeyesekere, Gananath, *Land Tenure in Village Ceylon*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1966); Leach, E. R., *Pul Eliya*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1961); Singer, Marshall, R., *The Emerging Elite*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1964); Evers, Hans-Dieter, *Kulturwandel in Ceylon, eine Untersuchung ueber die Entstehung einer Industrie-Unterschicht* (Social Change in Ceylon, a Study on the Emergence of a Class of Industrial Entrepreneurs), (Baden-Baden, Germany: Lutzeyer, 1964).

² So in Benz, Ernst, *Buddhism or Communism: Which Holds the Future of Asia?* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1965), pp. 37-45. A different view is taken by Heinz Bechert who gives a detailed and balanced report in his *Buddhismus Staat und gesellschaft in den Laendern des Therawāda Buddhismus*, Volume I, (Frankfurt and Berlin: Alfred Metzner Verlag, 1966).

³ Max Weber, *The Religions of India*, (New York: Free Press, 1958), p. 257.

with the economic development of the Ceylon up-country, and is now a major focus of Kandyan Sinhalese social structure maintaining the feudal aristocracy, perpetuating caste distinctions, stalling reforms of the Sangha, and playing a distinctive role in nationalist politics. A short analysis of this system will be the purpose of this paper.

The Development of "Monastic Landlordism." The driving force behind the development of "monastic landlordism" was the desire of Buddhist laymen to earn "merit" by donating land to the Sangha. The first landgrant is reported in a Sinhalese Chronicle as far back as the first century B.C.⁴ Especially with the growing power of the Buddhist god-king in a "hydraulic society" the legitimization through merit-gaining donations became more and more important.⁵ Towards the end of the Anurādhapura period in the tenth century A.D. Buddhist monasteries must have owned a fair proportion of all irrigated ricelands. The administration of Buddhist monasteries and monastic property was, however, highly rationalized and bureaucratized during this period and the term "monastic landlordism" is not yet appropriate.⁶

In fact "monastic capitalism" might be more useful to characterize the social and economic organization of large monasteries at that time. Accounts were kept and regularly audited, many lay officials and servants of the monasteries were paid in cash (gold) and interest from capital endowments were used to maintain monk scholars and monastic establishments very much in the same way American Ivy League Universities are operated today.⁷ Frequent warnings against private use of monastic property found in stone inscriptions indicate, however, inherent dangers and future developments. An attempt to secure control over temple property by individual monks is also evidenced by the emergence of a "rule of pupillary succession" which is mentioned for the first time in a tenth century stone inscription.⁸ This rule, which regulates the inheritance of monastic property today, gives an "owner" of a monastery the right to determine his successor and heir to the monastic property. The appropriation of monastic property by individual monks and the transmission of this property from pupil to pupil within the same family along an ordination lineage (*paramparāva*)⁹ created from the late Polonnaruva up to the Kandyan period the system which most appropriately might be called "monastic landlordism."

That "monastic landlordism" has survived up to the present despite all the forces of change which have swept Ceylon since that fatal morning in 1505 when a Portuguese ship appeared on her shores is due to two major mistakes or miscalculations.

⁴ Mahavamsa 33: 38ff.

⁵ Hans-Dieter Evers, "Buddhistische Gesellschaftsordnung und buddhistischer Wohlfahrtsstaat" (Buddhist Society and Buddhist Welfarestate), *Moderne Welt*, Volume IV, No. 3 (1963), 265-77.

⁶ Max Weber is perhaps not to be blamed in this case. His term "Klostergrundherrschaft" does not convey the same meaning as "monastic landlordism," namely that there is an individual, a landlord, who owns land and commands tenants.

⁷ See e.g. the Tablets of Mahinda IV, 956-972 A.D., *Epigraphia Zeylanica*, Volume I (1904-12), 75-113 and other inscriptions. The system is described by the ven. Walpola Rahula, *History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, (Colombo: M. D. Gunasena, 1956).

⁸ Buddhanehāla Pillar Inscription, *Epigraphia Zeylanica*, Volume I (1904-12), 191-200.

⁹ These ordination lineages are described in Hans-Dieter Evers, "Kinship and Property Rights in a Buddhist Monastery in Central Ceylon," *American Anthropologist*, LXIX (1967), 703-10. See also Bechert, *op. cit.*, pp. 225-26 and Hans-Dieter Evers, "The Buddhist Sangha in Ceylon and Thailand: A Comparative Study of Formal Organizations in Two Non-Industrial Societies," *Sociologus*, N. S. Volume XVIII, No. 1 (1968), 20-35.

The first were made by King Kirti Sri Rajasingha (1747-80) who helped to revive Buddhism by reintroducing the ordination tradition from Thailand. A history of the Kandyan Kingdom has not yet been written and the following thought is therefore nothing more than a tentative hypothesis: Kirti Sri, a King of South Indian origin, tried to strengthen the Buddhist Sangha in order to weaken the Sinhalese aristocracy. The Sangha was, however, quickly "infiltrated" by the Kandyan aristocracy, and monastic landlords (*vihārādhipati*) gained power with the accumulation of lands, donated or redonated by the king. An attempt in 1760 to assassinate the king in the Malvatta monastery during a religious ceremony made his miscalculation apparent.¹⁰

Kirti Sri Rajasingha had thus strengthened monastic landlordism and with it, unwillingly, the Kandyan aristocracy and the Kandyan caste system. Another misjudgment hindered the destruction of monastic landlordism during the nineteenth century: Christian missionaries brought pressure on the British government to avoid interference with matters concerning the "idolatrous system of religion in Ceylon." It was argued that Buddhism would collapse and Christian missionary efforts triumph, if only the pledge of the Kandyan Convention of 1815 would be broken and government protection withdrawn. The colonial administration adjusted its policies accordingly.¹¹ However, the long term results were not anticipated: the reforms abolishing the Kandyan feudal administration in the eighteen-thirties exempted the religious sphere. Consequently, monastic landlordism not only survived, but was strengthened. Lack of government control made widespread "corruption," that is, further appropriation and personal use of temple lands by individual monks and temple lords, possible. The colonial government eventually intervened in the latter part of the nineteenth century by appointing a temple land commission.¹² As Buddhist nationalists have bemoaned ever since, the registration of temple lands and temple services deprived the temples of claims to about half their lands. On the other hand, the system for the first time was systematically formalized and put down in writing with the result that "monastic landlordism" was officially recognized, stabilized, and strengthened by colonial law enforcement agencies.

Two major miscalculations of the then ruling powers made it possible for a part of Kandyan feudal organization to survive its eclipse, and it continued to function as a vestige of traditional values in a modernizing society and a democratic political system. We shall now have a brief look at "monastic landlordism" in present-day Central Ceylon.

"Monastic landlordism" in modern Ceylon. The extent of land owned by Buddhist monasteries in Ceylon is difficult to ascertain; an accurate figure has never been

¹⁰ P. E. E. Fernando, "India Office Land Grant of King Kirti Sri Rājasīṃha," *Ceylon Journal of Historical and Social Studies*, Volume III, No. 1 (1960), 79 and Hans-Dieter Evers, "The Rebellion of 1760 against Kirti Sri Rājasīṃha," unpublished manuscript, 1967. One is tempted to draw comparisons with the assassination of Prime-Minister S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike in 1959. In both cases an alliance between a chief monk of an important monastery and high ranking government officials was formed with the intention to murder the head of the government who happened in both cases to be a strong supporter of Buddhism and Buddhist revival.

¹¹ Hans-Dieter Evers, "Buddhism and British Colonial Policy in Ceylon, 1815-1875," *Asian Studies*, Volume II, No. 3 (1964), 323-33 and *Sessional Paper I* of 1956.

¹² In contrast to the position taken here, the actions of the British Government are usually seen as highly destructive for Buddhism and the Buddhist Sangha. See Tennakoon Vimalananda, *Buddhism in Ceylon under the Christian Powers*, (Colombo: M. D. Gunasena, 1963).

compiled. I would estimate that there are some 135,000 acres (or less) *vihāragam* in Central Ceylon (by Central Ceylon are meant the formerly Kandyan provinces), and that about 10 per cent of all paddy land in this area is *vihāragam*.¹³

Vihāragam is land attached to Buddhist monasteries (e.g. the well-known Rīdi Vihāra) or temples (e.g., the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy). A somewhat higher acreage of land, the *dēvālagam*, belongs to temples of Sinhalese gods. There are two basic categories of temple lands, usually referred to as *bandāra* lands and as *paravēni*

TABLE 1—DISTRIBUTION OF VIHĀRAGAM AND DĒVĀLAGAM IN CEYLON:
Paravēni panguvas subject to *rājākāriya*
(Hereditary lands subject to temple service)

District	Vihāragam		Dēvālagam	
	Number of Villages	Extent* <i>a — p — k</i>	Number of Villages	Extent* <i>a — p — k</i>
Kandy.....	226	1,817-3-6	58	989-2-3
Matale.....	54	1,830-1-4	9	276-0-5
Nuwara Eliya...	9	157-3-9	23	476-3-2
Badulla.....	29	179-3-4	144	1,325-3-1
Ratnapura.....	12	1,361-0-9	46	4,378-0-0
Kegalla.....	35	714-3-2	80	2,296-1-6
Kurunegala.....	132	3,235-1-9	152	2,970-3-4
Anuradhapura	46	229-0-3	5	16-2-5
Polonnaruwa....	2	70-3-5	—	—
Matarā.....	1	55-2-3	—	—
TOTAL	546	9,653-0-4	517	12,730-0-6

* *a* = amunu (Sinhalese measure of land in sowing extent. One amuna can equal between 2 to 40 acres according to location.)

p = pāl

k = kuruni

Source: Sessional Paper I, 1956, pp. 28-29. Exact registers of *bandāra* lands are not available

pangu. *Bandāra* lands are owned by a particular monastery (*vihāraya*) and are controlled by its chief monk or incumbent. The chief monk (*vihārādhipati*) farms out these lands to sharecroppers on three year contracts, has them worked by temple servants, or in the case of some highlands rents them to tea, rubber, or coconut estates on long term leases. Some estates are directly managed by chief monks who hire overseers and teapluckers or rubbertappers and sell their products to tea or rubber factories (see Table 3 for an example). The income from these lands do not accrue to the Buddhist order of monks (*Sangha*) or the Buddhist church, but to the individual monastery and its chief monk. Though in the case of larger monasteries estimates of income and expenditure have to be submitted to the Public Trustee in Colombo, effective financial control is not exercised. Income from *bandāra* lands can therefore be used for capital formation and investment in business enterprises or political campaigns, as well as for religious festivals or temple renovation. An example

¹³ These figures are based on a preliminary evaluation of materials collected in the Ceylon Government Archives and the Record Room of the Kandy Katcheri. One major difficulty was the recalculation of Sinhalese landmeasures whose acre-equivalent changes from district to district.

TABLE 2—BUDDHIST MONASTERIES AND TEMPLES WITH A DECLARED ANNUAL CASH INCOME OF RS. 10,000 AND MORE, 1962-63*

	Rs.
1. Śrīpādashānaya (Adam's Peak)	182,929.48
2. Koṣavenigama Raja Maha Vihāraya	65,811.18
3. Kiriālla Nādun Vihāraya	51,716.49
4. Śrī Daḷadā Māligāva (Temple of the Tooth)	58,214.67
5. Tissamahārāma Vihāraya	35,671.39
6. Rājōpavanārāmaya, Pēradeniya	31,719.61
7. Kāḷani Raja Maha Vihāraya	28,948.62
8. Mahiyaṅgana Raja Maha Vihāraya	23,829.88
9. Pāpiliyāna Raja Maha Vihāraya	21,749.12
10. Dambulla Raja Maha Vihāraya	20,289.34
11. Niyangampaya Vihāraya	17,579.36
12. Degaldoruva Raja Maha Vihāraya	17,072.29
13. Aṭamasthānaya (Anurādhapura)	16,480.64
14. Pusulpiṭiya Vihāraya	16,017.69
15. Māddēvela Raja Maha Vihāraya	15,906.00
16. Biṅgiriya Vihāraya	15,818.22
17. Huduhumpola Vihāraya	14,194.10
18. Mutiyaṅgana Raja Maha Vihāraya	14,040.72
19. Yaṭāla Māṅik Vihāraya	13,387.43
20. Rambukpota Raja Maha Vihāraya	12,601.47
21. Khettārāma Kandē Vihāraya	11,878.01
22. Ridi Vihāraya	11,069.82
23. Budumuttāva Raja Maha Vihāraya	10,631.55
24. Kobbākaduva Vihāraya	10,196.99
TOTAL	717,754.07

* It should be noted that temple income is not necessarily derived from land. Especially the centers of pilgrimage, like the Adam's Peak or the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy receive large sums from offerings.

Source: Administration Report of the Public Trustee for 1962-63, B. S. C. Ratwatte, Esq., (Colombo: Government Press, 1964).

of the excessive use of monastic income for business ventures and political campaigns is documented in the proceedings of the Bandaranaike murder case against Buddhārakkhita Thero, a chief monk of the Kelaniya Vihāra.¹⁴

The extent of modern "monastic capitalism" is difficult to assess. There are at least twenty-four monasteries and Buddhist temples with a declared annual income of over 10,000 Rs., their combined income ran to Rs. 717,754.07 in 1963. (See Table 2)

The chief monks of major monasteries are therefore extremely powerful. They are landlords controlling large tracts of land, accumulating considerable funds and having authority over many monks and temple tenants. All chief monks in Central Ceylon belong to the Goyigama caste, many of them to the Radala subcaste, the Kandyan aristocracy. Together with the temple lords (*basnāyaka nilamē*) of the devales, almost all of whom are Radala, and other landlords they perpetuate the

¹⁴ See Donald E. Smith, ed., *South Asian Politics and Religion*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 498; Heinz Bechert, *op. cit.*, p. 344; Hans-Dieter Evers, *Kulturwandel in Ceylon*, p. 102.

TABLE 3—ACCOUNTS OF A BUDDHIST MONASTERY IN CENTRAL CEYLON. DECLARED INCOME FROM BANDĀRA LANDS AND ESTIMATED EXPENDITURES

INCOME	Rs.	
Rents (<i>badu mila</i>)	1,532.—	
Paddy	6,720.—	
Coconuts	360.—	
Tea	11,040.—	
Kurakkan	2,250.—	
Other products	576.—	
Offerings	—	
	<hr/>	
TOTAL INCOME		22,478.—
EXPENDITURES		
Maintenance of buildings and roads	600.—	
Lighting	490.—	
Food, medical attendance and clothing of monks, feeding of attendants and servants	4,560.—	
Offerings to the Buddha	365.—	
Temple festivals	800.—	
Salaries and wages	1,860.—	
Wages for tea plucking etc.	7,870.—	
Travelling expenses of chief monk	240.—	
Stationery, postage, etc.	100.—	
	<hr/>	
TOTAL EXPENDITURE		16,885.—
BALANCE	Rs.	5,593.—

Source: Unpublished records in the Public Trustee's Office, Colombo, for 1962-1963.

Kandyan feudal system.¹⁵ Their operation in Ceylon national politics is "traditional": through personal relations, kinship and marriage within the modern framework of political parties and parliamentary democracy. The kinship network of Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, Prime Minister of Ceylon 1960-64, might serve as an example. She is a born Ratwatte, a prestigious Radala family, and owns large estates herself. Her father who had the title of *dissāva* (Kandyan Provincial Governor), and one of her brothers served as chief of the richest Buddhist temple, the Daḷadā Māligāva in Kandy, another brother is the Public Trustee, whose function is, among other things, the supervision of temples and their properties, still another brother held a seat in the fourth and fifth parliaments. She is related to the Governor General of Ceylon, to the Mahānāyaka Thero of Malwatta Vihara, the largest monastery in Ceylon, and to most of the other important Kandyan Radala families.

Generally the "monastic landlords" of Central Ceylon have tended to remain in the background and abstain from attendance at political mass meetings. The Mahānā-

¹⁵ The Kandyan feudal system before 1815 is analyzed in Ralph Pieris, *Sinhalese Social Organization*, (Colombo: University of Ceylon Press, 1956). The administration of a Buddhist temple (vihara and devale) is described in Hans-Dieter Evers, "Buddha and the Seven Gods: The Dual Organization of a Temple in Central Ceylon," *Journal of Asian Studies*, Volume XXVII, No. 3 (1968), 541-50 and in A. M. Hocart, *The Temple of the Tooth in Kandy*, (London: Lusac, 1931).

yaka Theros of Malwatta and Asgiriya have often voiced their disapproval of the activities of "political monks," operating primarily in the low country.¹⁶ Their political activities have tended to follow traditional practices: private meetings with those in power, exploitation of kinship connections or rivalries, personal favors and subsidies.

The values and ideologies underlying monastic landlordism can best be seen in the operation of the service tenure system (*rājakāriya*) of Buddhist monasteries and temples in Central Ceylon.

A monastic estate (*vihāragama*) consists of several shares (*panguva*), the estates of the larger temples can have more than a hundred. The *paraveni pangus* are plots of land of varying size and at the same time units of service. They are owned by peasants who can mortgage, inherit or sell the land. Whoever owns a *paraveni panguva* is, however, liable to perform temple services (*rājakāriya*) under the direction of the chief monk. The services and their money values are laid down in the service tenure register of 1872, which is the basis of the present system. Chief monks can sue temple tenants for non-performance of services on the basis of this register but this is hardly ever done today and many services are no longer performed. Often the chief monks have, however, established a very effective system of control by renting *bandāra* lands to holders of *paraveni pangus*. Non-performance of services can then be sanctioned by eviction from *bandāra* lands.

Some *pangus*, often five, make up the *gamvasama* or land of temple officials. The tenants of these lands have to act as messengers, overseers over the cultivation of temple fields (*mutteṭṭuva*), measures of rice and supervisors of the monastic granary, etc. All of them are members of the goyigama caste, frequently of families of the former Kandyan petty bureaucracy.

The other *pangus* belong to the *nilavāsama* or servants' land. The temple servants (*nilakāriya*) are drawn from all the major Sinhalese castes. Their services, performed during the four annual festivals and during the daily rituals, reflect their caste status. The ritual in the temples of the large landowning monasteries and in the temple of the Tooth in Kandy is very elaborate, requires the daily attendance of many temple servants, and differs considerably from the often described and admired simplicity of Buddhist ritual in smaller temples. These rituals cannot be described here, but we might mention that they are in their basic structure identical with the ritual in the temples of the gods (*dēvālaya*) and with the former royal ritual in the Kandyan palace.¹⁷ This means that up to 1815 monastic estates, temple estates and royal estates supported identical rituals of purification and annointment performed daily before the Buddha, the Gods, and the King. The palace ceremonial has ceased, but the ritual in the viharas and devales is still going on without cessation stressing the unity of Buddha, Gods, and Government.

¹⁶ The Council of the Malwatta Monastery in Kandy officially condemned political activities of monks in 1946. See Heinz Bechert, *op. cit.*, p. 313. The present Mahānāyaka of Malwatta also declared that monks should abstain from politics (*World Buddhism*, Volume XII, No. 10 [1964], 23-24). This does not mean that he himself did not try to influence the government. His "political style" is indicated by his demand to have an official residence in Colombo, the capital.

¹⁷ A full account will be found in a forthcoming book on the social organization of Buddhist temples. For some preliminary results see Hans-Dieter Evers, "Buddha and the Seven Gods: The Dual Organization of a Temple in Central Ceylon," *loc. cit.* See also Gananath Obeyesekere, "The Buddhist Pantheon in Ceylon and its Extensions," in Manning Nash, *et al.*, *Anthropological Studies in Theravada Buddhism*, (New Haven: Yale University, Southeast Asia Studies, 1966), Cultural Report Series No. 13, p. 10.

"Monastic landlordism" and its ritual complex had thus behind the drawn curtains of its temples perpetuated for more than a century an ideology which was to find violent expression in modern Ceylon politics.

"Monastic landlordism" is certainly a mixed blessing for Ceylon. In its service tenure system caste distinctions are emphasized and perpetuated and members of the "bhikkhu Sangha," the "fraternity of beggars," are among the richest landlords of Central Ceylon, closely tied in with Kandyan aristocratic families. Reforms of the Buddhist Sangha and land reforms—both urgently needed—are effectively stalled.

The "monastic landlords" of Central Ceylon have successfully protested against the implementation of the recommendations of the Buddhist Committee of Inquiry of 1953 which had mildly criticized the role of pupillary succession and the transmission of monastic property to blood relatives.¹⁸ They opposed the Buddha Sāsana Commission of 1957 which recommended that *vihāragam* should be centrally administered by an appointed official, and they threatened in 1963 through the Diyavaḍana Nilamē, the head of the Temple of the Tooth, to close the temple and stop the ritual if land reform was to be extended to monastic and temple lands as well.¹⁹ Monastic landlords have thus operated successfully in Ceylon's parliamentary democracy, as a traditional system in a modern setting.

¹⁸ Buddhist Commission of Inquiry, *The Betrayal of Buddhism*, (Balangoda 1956), Wriggins, *op. cit.*, p. 195, Bechert, *op. cit.*, p. 269.

¹⁹ "Buddha sāsana komiṣan vārtāva," *Sessional Paper XVIII*, 1959, and Bechert, *op. cit.*, pp. 280, 350.