ColomboArts
Biannual Refereed Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities
Volume II | Issue 4 2018

Religious Colombo: The Secret City Hiding in Plain Sight

Catherine M. West
Deakin University, Australia
cmwest@deakin.edu.au

Recommended Citation
West, C.M. (2018) Religious Colombo: The Secret City Hiding in Plain Sight. *ColomboArts Biannual Refereed Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities, II (4)*
Available at: https://colomboarts.cmb.ac.lk/?p=416

Religious Colombo: The Secret City Hiding in Plain Sight

West, C.M.
Deakin University
cmwest@deakin.edu.au

Abstract

When we read and hear about Colombo, Sri Lanka, we don't often read and hear about religion experience. However, when we step outside on to the streets of Colombo religious experience is obvious and ubiquitous. This project reviews the scholarly and anecdotal record and compares it to the social and spatial life of the contemporary inner-city. As well as temples, churches and mosques, the spatiality of religion extends to the street, markets and homes of the city: religious experience is more than worship and sanctioned ritual. It is felt through all the senses in Colombo. For example, the cool shade of a bo tree allowed to grow through the hot pavement; the colours and styles of dress; the aromas and flavours of the richly syncretic cuisine; small acts of kindness; and the sounds of observance: voices and instruments connecting the humans, their material realm and the cosmological world. When religious experience and innovation determine the spatial and the social to such a high degree, why is it that history does not acknowledge their presence? This blindness to 'urban religion' is evident in the literature on Colombo, but also in urban studies more generally. Situational analysis of the social formation, the urban environment and religious experience represents a way to move past axiomatic views of religion, cities and their relationship. This study also reflects on how a more anthropological understanding of the capital, Colombo, might offer alternative perspectives of the nation and its complex social identity in the post-conflict era.

Keywords: Colombo, religion, social, spatial, urban

Introduction

There is a paradox contained within the title of this paper: religious Colombo. To many people, cities and religion are not a natural, common-sense pairing. But why is this the case? This study reveals a curious disparity between the experiential 'lived reality' of Colombo and the way in which it is discursively produced. The most obvious disjuncture relates to religious experience. In the former context religion is inescapable, in the latter it is barely appreciable. Walk down a Colombo street and you will see, hear and smell the outward signs of religiosity: temples, incense, bells, statuary, offerings, food and clothing. The rhythm of the city is unevenly but predictably driven by religious festivals such as monthly Poya days, astrological observances, and the commemoration of the births, feats and deaths of various saints, prophets and deities. As a common-place of day-to-day Colombo life, religion is a promising entry point for understanding and analysing the city. Yet, the way in which Colombo is discussed (verbally and textually) would suggest that religion is of peripheral concern: it is minimized or elided altogether, in favour of economy and politics. The metropolis is a spiritual void. There are historical epistemological underpinnings for this bias, as well as some that are more specific to Colombo and Sri Lanka.

This paper is part of a larger project which considers the relationship between religion, the social formation, and the urban environment in Colombo, Sri Lanka. In Colombo, innovation is evident in the practice of four world religions: Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. If meaningful social change is incubated at the level of ritual then people, places, performances and relationships that involve ritual, such as those associated with religious experience, are a rich site for revealing covert social structures and processes. Kapferer (2013) sees ritual as indicative of 'complex dynamics of reality construction and creation': not simply social enactments of the transcendent or material world, but agential spaces of existential knowledge and change. Following this logic, I link the situational analysis of ritual to observations of the spatial and social practices of religion. This combination of the extraordinary with the ordinary, sometimes unconscious, adherence to religious ideas and practices is what I mean by the term 'religious experience'; contra to the narrower psychological definition associated with William James's (1902) analysis of mystical religious experience. My emphasis is on the anthropology of religious practice and includes aspects of organisational religion: 'an approach that is sensitive to the

phenomenological unity of being and acting in the world in its complex ways' (Schielke & Debevec, 2012, p. 8). In a proudly religious society such as Sri Lanka, religious experience is an overt agent in the human condition. This study looks to the contemporary urban world, paying close attention to the ways in which the city changes religion and religion changes the city.

What is the lived reality of Colombo?

The large physical presence of a city makes it a challenging object of ethnographic study. To overcome this problem of scale, this project focusses on Narahenpita/ Thimbirigasyaya, an inner-city area seven kilometres from the city centre. Field work was conducted over a twelve-month period in 2016 and 2017, primarily in a three square-kilometre site, which forms the geographical basis for an extended case study. The research design aims to encompass as much of the contemporary social and spatial reality of the field site as possible. I participated in minor and major rituals of personal, national and cosmological significance. Living at the centre of the field site meant that even the most ordinary events, such as shopping at the local market or walking my daughter to school, formed part of my observations. As one of my research assistants exclaimed: 'she even wants to know the names of the dogs!'. With the help of four multi-lingual research assistants I did indeed learn the names of many dogs. More importantly, I met Sri Lankans of diverse backgrounds and recorded their life experiences via surveys, formal and informal interviews. This methodology placed me squarely inside what De Certeau (1984) calls the 'performance of daily life': interacting with the people, and the built and natural environments of Colombo. I supplemented this sensory and familial world with maps, aerial surveys, news and social media. I also collected data (primary and secondary) on a range of governmental, religious and private institutions. Before the 1970s, the field site was a sparsely-populated swampy section of the city fringe. In less than fifty years it has become a fast-paced commercial and residential zone, its proximity to the city driving up demand for property and services. The intertwined threads of society, space, and religion that nurture city-wide change and growth are condensed in the recent history of this geographically limited area. My initial review of scholarly literature indicated a puzzling lack of attention to religion in Colombo and 'urban religion' in general. I wondered if religious experience was less evident or important in the contemporary urban world than in other settings, so I looked to the field site to see how urban religion operates in practice. The site soon revealed some interesting possibilities.

Sometimes the city conceals its religious spaces. After months of hearing rumours about the existence of a Hindu *kovil* (temple) in a street where there appeared to be none, my Tamil-speaking research assistant found a small shrine to Naga Amman, an incarnation of the mother goddess, behind a dark red curtain at the end of a walkway on the third floor of an apartment block. The custodians live in the adjacent apartment. They recounted how they receive instructions from Amman through dreams and feelings; and how their Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and Muslim neighbours have been cured, achieved good exam results or been relieved of bad spirits after paying homage at this shrine. For all its aesthetic ordinariness, the history and function of the *kovil* is deeply mystical and social. If it is hierarchically inferior to other *kovils* it has a none-the-less integral role in the relationship between the residents, deities and their cosmological systems. Its location, invisible from the street, was no deterrent to its success or reputed power. In the field site there are two other small public *kovils* (although these are visible to passers-by) and one official *kovil* (that is, it is registered with the Department of Hindu Affairs). The fact that a place or practice can remain anonymous among the dense population and buildings of the city is particularly urban, yet urban religion is not necessarily typified by this feature.

The scale and footprint of religious institutions can vary enormously. I collected data on four Pentecostal-charismatic Christian organisations in the field site. The largest is a church building that fits 5000 people, hosts lectures from international speakers and offers vocational training courses. It also has a book shop, offices and meeting rooms for staff and volunteers. Starting as a prayer circle, this group held services in progressively larger venues in the inner city (a home, a horse stables, a nightclub, an old embassy building) before they purchased newly released canal-side land from the government in 1991 on which they built their current headquarters. According to the Assembly of God website, the church had a membership of ten thousand when its senior minister passed away in November 2018 (De Silva, 2018). The second group holds their services in the Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall. For a recent ministry-related five-day course, this organisation hired an exclusive venue in a Cinnamon Gardens restaurant and entertainment strip, usually frequented by wealthy foreigners and the local elite. With no permanent church building, they rely on a sophisticated social media presence to unify their congregation. In contrast, the two other Pentecostal 'house churches' in the area are spatially and socially bound to the adjacent community. I attended services at these

churches, where a room in or next to the residence of the devotees or minister is set aside for religious ceremony. Both had less than fifty attendees and were found through word-of-mouth and by tracing the narrow laneways of the *wattes* (densely populated low-income areas). There may be more of these house-churches in the field site, but without speaking to the right people they remain invisible. As well as these Pentecostal-charismatic churches, the field site also has an Anglican cathedral and a Catholic church. The variance in size and nature of these churches suggests that the city affords a range of localities for religious practice, even within a single religious tradition. In this case they range from the spectacular, through to the virtual and the domestic.

The other major religions also offer a range of places and ways in which to experience their practice. As the religion of the majority, Buddhism is conspicuous in Colombo. The blue, yellow, red, white and orange stripes of the Buddhist flag punctuate the visual landscape. There are twenty formal Buddhist venues in the field site, ranging from sprawling temple complexes with national profiles and international funding, to modest structures that are maintained solely by devotees. There are countless locations that are not temples but are none-the-less Buddhist. There are shrines at intersections and at the entrance of large buildings, where visitors make a brief observance with flowers, prayers or incense arranged on an altar at the Buddha's feet. There are house and shop shrines, where the Buddha may be joined by a favourite deity, such as Ganesha; bo trees with coins wrapped in white cloth tied to their branches; meditation centres; Ayurvedic health clinics (run by the Maha Bodhi Society, for example); political sites such as the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress; shops that sell Buddhist books, images and paraphernalia; memorials to Buddhist leaders and the increasingly ubiquitous statues of the Buddha. This variety in the spatial expression of a religious tradition strikes me as being a particularly urban phenomenon, as the sheer volume of devotees and resources is necessarily greater in the city. It also suggests that urban religion is not diminished due to a lack of availability or visibility of religious sites. My second hypothesis was that religious experience is less revered in the city, yet my field data showed that urban religion is practiced in earnest.

My method for developing contacts and insights within the Muslim community illustrates how religion is respected and taken seriously in the city. After initial difficulty in finding interlocutors, the mother of one my daughter's school friends invited me to attend a weekly

women's Islamic study group held at an air-conditioned 100-seat lecture theatre. I interviewed participants, many of whom suggested other sites and people of interest in the area. I was invited to monthly volunteering sessions, where we packed essential items (rice, salt, flour etc.) for a foodbank program. I interviewed the board members, staff and residents of an orphanage and hostel; and the *moulavis* and devotees from three mosques within the field site. As this network snowballed, I met researchers and teachers from three Islamic educational institutions, attended a 'visit my mosque' program at the Masjid al Akbar in Slave Island and interviewed the *moulavi* and manager at another famous Colombo mosque. This broad range of people shared stories of their personal and family histories as well as their views on marriage, schools, money, world affairs, the city, politics, pilgrimage, mysticism, ritual, food, gender, the *hijab* and more. Just as I found in the other religious traditions, there was a significant degree of dedication to the educational, spiritual and moral practices associated with their religion, across the social spectrum: people take religion seriously in the city.

It is important to note that this does not suggest homogeneity. Not every individual, family or street is equally zealous or committed. Colombo residents tend to dress, eat, meet and act in ways that speak of their religious heritage, although these markers are not necessarily distinct from habits and tendencies related to ethnicity, language or regional cultural practices. This complexity of identity is analogous to the character of Sri Lankan food. Although it is generally like South Indian cuisine, there are specific variations that relate to religious observance, socio-economic status, family tradition, regional differences and so on. For example, *paripu* (a dahl made of orange lentils) is prepared by virtually all Sri Lankan households but can have different accompaniments (roti, rice, meat or vegetable curries, sambals, salads), texture (dry or soupy), degrees of spiciness, garnish (fried onions, fresh/roasted chilies, curry leaves) and ingredients (a little or a lot of coconut milk; with or without garlic, mustard seeds, cinnamon etc.). *Paripu* is quintessentially Sri Lankan yet a standard recipe is elusive. Particularly in Colombo, the multi-religious, multi-ethnic, multi-language community similarly denies standardisation. However, religion observance stands out as a common theme. In over sixty formal interviews, I met only one atheist. In many hundreds of informal interviews, I met one three-wheeler driver who didn't have a religious practice and instead claimed a particularly austere form of communism as his personal lodestone. They both passionately denied the existence of god, illustrating the gravity of

religion in their lives, not its absence. The lived reality of Colombo is one where religious experience is highly diverse, taken seriously, visible, available and folded in to the fabric of everyday life. So where does the image of Colombo as un-religious come from?

What is discursive Colombo?

Colombo has received surprisingly little academic analysis in the English language. This absence becomes more pronounced when seeking works that also address religion. There are few English language monographs about Colombo, with the following exceptions: Brohier's (1984) colonial history, Muller's (1995) historical 'novel', and Wijesuriya's *Colombo: a critical introspection* which depicts the city as the 'locus of the fault line between tradition and modernity' in Sri Lanka (2012, p. 8). Dharmasena's two volumes (1980, 1998) on the port of Colombo provide a detailed, but topic-specific history. There are works where Colombo is a significant player, such as Perera's (1999) inter-disciplinary discussion of society and space. There are chapters (Roberts, Raheem, & Colin-Thomé, 1989; Thiranagama, 2011) and journal articles (Perera, 2002; Sivasundaram, 2017 to name a few) which piece together a mosaic of Colombo. As useful as these contributions are, holistic analysis of the city is lacking. There is a developed anthropological literature on the rise of the Sinhala Buddhist elite which intersects strongly with Colombo's history (Jayawardena, 2000; Peebles, 1991; Roberts, 1982, for example). However, there is no anthropological treatise that takes Colombo as its main subject.

I found little that acknowledges the primacy of religion in shaping the history and future of the city. Journal articles by Bastin (2016), McKinley (2016) and Obeyesekere (1970) are exceptions to the tendency to divide 'Colombo' and 'religion': they consider religious experience in its specifically urban spatial and social forms. Gombrich and Obeyesekere's *Buddhism transformed* (1988) and Abeysekara's *Colors of the robe* (2002) both discuss, in part, Buddhist practice in Colombo. However, these texts focus on how urban modernity shapes Buddhism, and less on how religion shapes Colombo. Wijesuriya (2012) paints religion and irrationality as the twin demons of Sri Lanka's woes, with Colombo as the modern city that should know better. Publications by the Colombo Municipal Council tend to provide a light, touristy perspective of religion in Colombo, with colourful photos or descriptions of harmonious religious diversity (Corea, 1988; Hulugalle, 1965). Colombo often appears as the setting in English-language fiction, but it is rarely depicted as a religious

space. For Muller, Colombo is 'a club sandwich of filth and luxury': an essentially immoral place where religious practice is hypocrisy (1995, p. 452). In a quick sample of other fiction, Colombo is a utilitarian site of the economy (Selvadurai, 1998, pp. 11,12), quasi-Western (De Kretser, 2003), nostalgic (Ondaatje, 1984), socially competitive (Ferrey, 2009, 2012), political (Ratnayake, 2013; Sivanandan, 1997) and a place where the class, ethnic and religious differences within Sinhala nationalism collide (Gooneratne, 2009). In a similar vein to the non-fiction bias, the Colombo of fiction is rarely determined by religious experience.

This tendency not to acknowledge Colombo as religious extends to other printed materials, conversations and everyday perceptions of the relative importance of religion in the country versus the city. For example, the most current Survey Department map of my field site showed about 50% of the religious institutions. The list of religious sites held at the Thimbirigasyaya Divisional Secretariat was only marginally more accurate. This indicates the rapidity of spatial change and the limitations of government resources, but also cultural priorities. During the period of constitutional crisis in October/ November 2018, politicians seeking validation of their decisions, or confirmation of their legally shaky roles, made rushed pilgrimages to Kandy. They sought blessings from the *sangha* (Buddhist clergy) at the Dalada Maligawa: a more authoritative act than Colombo's parliamentary sanction. During the most widely celebrated national holiday (Sinhala and Tamil New Year) Colombo is deserted. Multi-lane roads that usually host a semi-permanent traffic jam transform in to the grounds for semi-permanent street-cricket matches. The rituals of annual renewal are associated with the village, rather than the city (although, on the contrary, perhaps these urban cricket matches may be on their way to joining the canon of ritual). In conversation with Colombo residents, Colombo is depicted as morally bankrupt: people have no scruples; they don't pray; they don't care for one another; the city is just for making money. Yet in the same conversation you will soon know their religious heritage, practices and moral outlook: *they* are religious, but the rest of Colombo isn't. In brief, Colombo and religion are both broadly under-represented, hence a lacuna in the Anglophone understanding of 'religious Colombo'. When we read and hear about Colombo, we don't often read and hear about religious experience. However, when we walk outside it slaps us in the face.

What is a city?

This myopic view of urban religion is not restricted to Sri Lanka but is related, in part, to the systems of knowledge that have developed alongside the 'urban' as a subject of study. As many cities (Colombo, for example) grew in stature following 16th century European maritime exploration, there is a tendency to depict them in print within the terms and interests of the Enlightenment and its antecedents. In the 20th century this largely secular analysis became the axiomatic lens through which the city (and many other objects) came to be viewed, including a de-emphasis of religion and the transcendent, with a concurrent privileging of positivism and political economy. Urban social theory was heavily influenced by Marxist sociological models. For example, the ecological perspective of the Chicago School (for example Park, Burgess, & Janowitz, 2012 (1925)); Lefebvre's (1991 (1974)) 'right to the city'; the city's role in globalization and new forms of capitalism (Harvey, 2001, 2013; Sassen, 2008); and Castells' (2000) consideration of contemporary socio-economic networks and flows and their potential disruptions. Cities in general, and perhaps Colombo in particular, are characterised by the kinds of concerns that came along with the European colonial project: extraction of resources, utilization of land, control of the population, and a Christian ethos which was progressively submerged within secularism. As post-colonial scholarship shows, the departure of the colonisers does not represent a straight-forward excision of their ideological legacy.

There are differences between academic disciplines in the way that they approach urban religion. Within the discipline of anthropology, where one might expect to find more concerted attention paid to religious experience, the urban (Low, 1996) and the religious (Boddy & Lambek, 2014) are often studied independently, rather than as paired phenomena, and rarely in the contemporary setting. The 'secular urban' stereotype perseveres when the available evidence seems to support its falsity or at least suggest a fruitful area of further research (Hansen, 2014; Narayanan, 2016). Kong (2001, 2010) has called for her discipline, human geography, to recognize the salience of religion and consider it an essential part of research in to how humans inhabit space. In the 21st century scholars have paid greater attention to cities outside of Europe and the United States (Mayaram, 2009; Ong, 2011; Simone, 2010). Analysing the Global South within its own terms follows the trajectory that political scientist Jayadeva Uyangoda (2018) describes as the paradigmatic movement from post-colonial to decolonial and Southern Theory. This has the potential to problematize the

overreach of the West and, I suggest, the secular. Yet, bottom-up perspectives from the Global South have not, so far, generated any significant challenges to the way cities and religion are documented and deconstructed in the social sciences: the corpus of material on Colombo is still dominated by political economy. The anthropological perspective seeks to see the whole human and from this I extrapolate that it also seeks to see the whole city. In this sense, it is salient to bring religion in to the way that we think, write and talk about the city. In this brief survey of how the concept of the city has been studied over time, we can see that the urban is often separated from religion in scholarly writing, which relates to the broader attitudes and representations from outside of academia.

The paradox of urban religion in the field site

There are ramifications to the lack of recognition of Colombo as a place where religious experience happens. With this incongruity between lived and discursive realities, opportunities are missed, blind-spots remain, perspectives are skewed, and the story of the city and the nation is partially told. Rodman (1992) exhorts researchers to attend to the 'multivocality' and the 'multilocality' of urban society; to make links between diverse people and places apparent, reiterating Lefebvre's central argument that space is social. That is, the social relations around ethnicity, gender, caste and class have material effects. The field data collected in Colombo suggests that this theory makes no sense without the recognition of religion as an important element of social diversity and connection. The small street where I lived in Narahenpita was mainly occupied by long-established multi-story houses with enclosed gardens and garages. Immediately across Thimbirigasyaya Rd, there is a one-lane alley, often lined with three-wheelers, that has densely packed, less permanently-built houses. As I came to know the area, it became clear that many of the drivers, maids and cooks who worked in the first street, lived in the second: social and economic factors were expressed in the spatial arrangement. A nearby Catholic church attracted parishioners from both streets and scheduled their activities around the three 'language communities': English, Sinhala and Tamil. The church fathers were intent on integrating the groups to mitigate differences of socio-economic status, and the annual feast day procession was a good example of how this was achieved. Yet a class divide persisted. An elderly parishioner, Evelyn, disparaged the haughty behaviour and attitudes of the English-speaking elites by calling them 'the high and mighties'. Despite these tensions, there were positive aspects to the spatial proximity of the church groups.

The health professionals, largely from the English-speaking cohort, provided free clinics for the poor (mainly from the Sinhala and Tamil-speaking groups) at least twice a year, attracting up to one thousand visitors in a day. The patients were offered diabetes tests, psychological assessments, heart checks, skin examinations and gynaecological consultations; they took home medications, equipment and advice. More than three hundred patients visited the eye clinic on the day that I observed. Although I saw similar programs advertised by NGOs and government health promotions, I felt that many of the issues that the patients presented with on that day may well have remained unresolved without the church's 'health camp'. This service filled a gap that exists between free (but time-consuming and fragmentary) government health care and the considerably more expensive private health sector. The three language groups live and worship in close proximity, but a significant socio-economic distance sometimes hardens language and other cultural differences. Offering their medical expertise to the less 'high and mighty' sectors of the church community was charitable, but also reiterated social boundaries and positioned the English-speaking group as morally superior as they walked in Jesus-the-saviour's footsteps by healing the downtrodden. In theory, the health camp brought the congregation together, but it also made differences, in class for example, more visible. This vignette alerts us to the salience of religious practice in the social formation at the community level.

The paradox of urban religion in Colombo: past, present and future

A religious history is evident in Colombo's current-day society and space. Kelaniya, now part of greater Colombo, features as one of the places visited by Gautama Buddha. Similarly, Sri Pada (another site visited by the Buddha) was used as a landmark by early ocean navigators to locate the West coast of Sri Lanka, with Colombo being the most convenient anchorage for those wishing to access the sacred mountain. The Mahavamsa records these visits and locations, suggesting that Colombo was at least functionally significant when the Buddha was alive, around 500 BCE. As a popular, canonical living document of the Sinhala Buddhist polity, the Mahavamsa, regardless of its historical accuracy, conditions the spatial history of the city. Stone inscriptions, maps and traveller's journals note Colombo as a settlement frequented by traders from India, China, Africa and the Middle East. Some of the earliest stone inscriptions are written in Tamil, which is the language of Sri Lanka's Hindus. This could indicate little about the relations between India and Sri Lanka, as Tamil was the lingua franca of trade, as well as the language of South India. However, combined with archaeological evidence, Indian historical sources and the

proximity of the land masses, it is safe to assume a long history of Hinduism in Sri Lanka, and in Colombo as a trading port. With the advent of Islam in the 7th century and increasing Indian Ocean trade, descriptions of Colombo as a trading settlement with a large Muslim presence, begin to emerge in the 10th century. Mosques were one of the features noted by the Portuguese when they landed there at the beginning of the 16th century. The development of the city up to this time was inextricably linked to Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam.

From 1505 through to independence from the British in 1948, the influence of Christianity became increasingly central to Colombo. This occurred through the proselytising of missionaries; policies of the colonial governments (such as the Dutch and Portuguese insistence that all employees convert to Catholicism and the Dutch Reformed Church, respectively); and through subtler social mores that were adopted by the local population. As the capital of Portuguese, Dutch and British Ceylon, Colombo was transformed through its contact with Europe. By the time Ceylon reclaimed its independence, the foundations of capitalism and democracy (and their concomitants) were firmly established. By 1956 the growing Sinhala Buddhist nationalist movement used its majoritarian power to overtake the Christian faction of parliamentary politics, which had been influential under the British (Obeyesekere, 1970). The independent nation of Ceylon initially maintained its capital in Colombo. However, following changes to the name (Sri Lanka) and constitution of the nation, the political capital moved to Sri Jayawardenepura in 1982. Although still in the Colombo area, the relocation of the parliament had strong symbolic import (Perera, 1999). Rather than the seat of government remaining in a colonial building surrounded by the multi-religious, multi-ethnic history of the Colombo port, this new space was a locally-designed 'vernacular-style' building on the site of the Sinhala Buddhist Kotte kingdom, the last polity to rule the island before the arrival of European colonialism and Christianity.

The spatial nature of Colombo was highly determined by the national government's religious imperatives after independence in 1948. Nearly fifty years ago, Obeyesekere observed that the cityscape was being transformed and that for all intents and purposes Buddhism had become the 'state religion' (1970, p. 44). He describes the novelty of large Buddha statues, images of the Sinhala lion, publicly displayed Buddhist aphorisms and flags appearing to territorialise the city. The political shift toward Sinhala Buddhist nationalism

has been represented in the urban landscape through modest and grand gestures. The Jathika Pola in Narahenpita is an example of Buddhicisation at work on a local level. The market was established on this site in 1978 on undeveloped government land: its name suggesting that it is intended for the people and nation. Four Buddhist temples, a meditation centre and an Ayurvedic clinic were granted land surrounding the *pola* in the following decade, creating a new enclave of Buddhist activity. On a grander scale, Perera (2005, pp. 247, 248) argues that in relocating the capital to Kotte, and proposing to re-house the Dalada Maligawa there, President J.R. Jayewardene's appeal to the ancient lineage of Buddhism in Sri Lanka was demonstrating insecurity in his authority. Considering Obeyesekere's observations, and urban developments such as the *pola*, I suggest that the process of Buddhicising urban space was escalating in the 1970s. As such, Jayewardene was utilizing a popular trope, as much as displaying a sense of precarity. Bastin (2016, p. 109) notes that the state's saturation of urban space with Buddhism has sometimes included deliberate inclusion of non-Buddhist practices, but only on its own terms. For example, the government's post-war promotion of the annual Hindu Vel festival. The Vel parade, which traverses the coast from the Pettah to Bambalapitiya, now includes Kandyan dancers, and halts to greet the President and his wife at their official residence *en route*. Buddhism was thoroughly entrenched in the political, social and physical urban landscape in the decades following independence.

Buddhicisation in the post war era has continued apace. One of the Buddhist temples near the *pola*, mentioned above, produces fibre glass images of the Buddha and architectural forms (*dagäbas*, archways, statues of deities) on a commercial basis. Expertly designed by the chief monk (who has formal training in art and design) and manufactured by a small on-site factory, the products are created cheaply enough to be accessible to all, yet of a high enough quality to attract national and international customers. Some of the smaller items are sold in a shop in the *pola*. This literal proliferation of the Buddha image and the close connection between the temple and the concerns of a commercial fibre-glass business are a continuation of practices of Buddhism that Obeyesekere saw, in 1970, as very new, urban and aligned with the political shift toward Sinhala Buddhist dominance. In 2011, two years after the cessation of civil conflict, he writes that Buddha images have continued to accumulate in Colombo, and with that, they have become more closely associated with the worldly realm (more *laukika* than *lokattara*) (2011).

Denying the religious nature of Colombo entails a reduced capacity to gain a balanced perspective of the past, assess the present and consider the future. My field work in 2016 and 2017 concurs with Obeyesekere's claim that the Buddha image is ubiquitous in Colombo. Buddhicisation also takes the form of replacing poor, largely non-Buddhist residential areas with commercial or government edifices (Amarasuriya & Spencer, 2015); by repainting colonial buildings in a bright '*dagäba*-white', as one of my peers termed the Urban Development Authority's renovation colour of choice; and the decoration of public space with images of lions and the Buddhist flag. It is also apparent in changes to the public relationship between Buddhism and politics, such as the use of temple grounds for political meetings (for example Abhayaramaya Viharaya on Thimbirigasyaya Mw) and the strict apportioning of religious representation at ceremonial events, where one Christian priest, one Brahmin priest and one Muslim representative are joined by many more Buddhist monks, expressing a numerical correlation with the population of the nation (70.2% Buddhist, 12.6% Hindu, 9.7% Muslim and 7.4% Christian at the last census). The mysterious shrouding of religious Colombo has meant that these changes to public space and behaviour have occurred with little analysis or critique.

Conclusion

By examining a theoretical contradiction, urban religion, and suggesting ways in which it plays out in the material world of Colombo I have sought to draw attention to a lacuna in the anthropological study of Sri Lanka and perhaps in the social sciences more broadly. When a phenomenon such as urban religion is under-represented or actively omitted from scholarship, the difference between discursive Colombo and its lived reality is the result. These fissures and conundrums are a rich field in which to mine for new perspectives on familiar problems; to review axiomatic histories and to think about the future. Colombo is ideologically, socially, and spatially constituted in religious experience. By taking religious Colombo as its subject, this research reorients the imagination of urban scholarship. It also invites further discussion regarding the transmission, syncretisation and revitalisation of religion in urban spaces. Colombo is a primate city: more central and significant to the life of the nation than any other city. It is at the crux of Sri Lanka's contact with the outside world and the place where the movement of people, ideas and capital coalesce. Further study of urban religion in Colombo may provide fresh opportunities for the analysis of the complex social identity of the nation, which were central to the civil war and still burn bright

in the post-conflict environment. Political economy is a useful empirical basis for understanding the urban, but it illuminates a part, not the whole. Including the conditions of religious experience, its social and spatial expression, leads toward a more comprehensive anthropological vision of the present and future city.

References

Abeysekara, A. (2002). *Colors of the robe: religion, identity, and difference*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.

Amarasuriya, H., & Spencer, J. (2015). 'With that, discipline will also come to them': the politics of the urban poor in postwar Colombo. *Current Anthropology, 56* (S11), S66-S75. doi: 10.1086/681926

Bastin, R. (2016). Recognizing the spatial and territorial nature of religious communities in Colombo, Sri Lanka. In Y. Narayanan (Ed.), *Religion and urbanism: reconceptualising sustainable cities for South Asia* (pp. 97-114). London: Routledge.

Boddy, J. P., & Lambek, M. (2014). *A companion to the anthropology of religion*. Hoboken, NJ John Wiley and Sons.

Brohier, R. L. (1984). *Changing face of Colombo 1505-1972: covering the Portuguese, Dutch and British periods* (1 ed.). Colombo: Lakehouse.

Castells, M. (2000). *The information age: economy, society and culture* (2 ed.). Oxford: Blackwell.

Corea, I. (1988). *Glimpses of Colombo*. Colombo, Sri Lanka: Colombo Municipal Council.

De Certeau, M. (1984). *The practice of everyday life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

De Silva, S. (2018). Rev. Dr. Colton Samuel Wickramaratne (1931-2018). Assemblies of God Sri Lanka. Retrieved 23 November 2018, from https://agceylon.wordpress.com/history/rev-dr-colton-samuel-wickramaratne-1931-2018/

De Kretser, M. (2003). *The Hamilton case*. Sydney: Random House Australia.

Dharmasena, K. (1980). *The port of Colombo: 1860-1939* (Vol. I). Colombo: Ministry of Higher Education (Sri Lanka).

Dharmasena, K. (1998). *The port of Colombo: 1940-1995* (Vol. II). Tokyo: Japan Overseas Ports Cooperation Association (JOPCA).

Ferrey, A. (2009). *Colpetty people*. Haryana: Penguin Random House India.

Ferrey, A. (2012). *Serendipity*. Noida: Random House India.

Gombrich, R., & Obeyesekere, G. (1988). *Buddhism transformed: religious change in Sri Lanka*. Dehli: Motilal Banarsidass.

Gooneratne, Y. (2009). *The sweet and simple kind*. London: Little, Brown.

Hansen, T. B. (2014). Religion. In D. M. Nonini (Ed.), *A companion to urban anthropology* (pp. 364-380). Chichester, West Sussex ; Malden, MA Wiley-Blackwell, .

Harvey, D. (2001). *Spaces of capital: towards a critical geography*. New York: Routledge.

Harvey, D. (2013). *Rebel cities: from the right to the city to the urban revolution*. London: Verso.

Hulugalle, H. A. J. (1965). *Centenary volume of the Colombo Municipal Council: 1865-1965*. Colombo: Colombo Municipal Council.

James, W. (1902) 1985. *Varieties of religious experience: a study in human nature*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Jayawardena, K. (2000). *Nobodies to somebodies: the rise of the colonial bourgeoisie in Sri Lanka*. New Dehli: Leftword.

Kapferer, B. (2013). Ritual practice and anthropological theory. *Religion and Society: Advances in Research, 4*, 27.

Kong, L. (2001). Mapping 'new' geographies of religion: politics and poetics in modernity. *Progress in Human Geography, 25*(2), 211-233.

Kong, L. (2010). Global shifts, theoretical shifts: Changing geographies of religion. *Progress in Human Geography, 34*(6), 755-776. doi: 10.1177/0309132510362602

Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Low, S. M. (1996). The anthropology of cities: imagining and theorizing the city. *Annual Review of Anthropology, 25*(1), 383-409. doi: 10.1146/annurev.anthro.25.1.383

Mayaram, S. (2009). *The other global city*. New York: Routledge.

McKinley, A. (2016). The sacred second: religious moments in a Colombo marketplace. *Culture and Religion, 17*(2), 21.

Muller, C. (1995). *Colombo: a novel*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.

Narayanan, Y. (2016). Religion, urbanism and sustainable cities in South Asia. In Y. Narayanan (Ed.), *Religion and urbanism* (pp. 1-23). Abingdon: Routledge.

Obeyesekere, G. (1970). Religious symbolism and political change in Ceylon. *Modern Ceylon Studies, 1*(1), 43-63.

Obeyesekere, G. (2011). Foreword. In S. Thiranagama (Ed.), *In my mother's house: civil war in Sri Lanka* (pp. xi-xvi). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Ondaatje, M. (1984). *Running in the family*. London: Picador.

Ong, A. (2011). Introduction. In A. Roy & A. Ong (Eds.), *Worlding cities: Asian experiments and the art of being global* (pp. 1-26). Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.

Park, R. E., Burgess, E. W., & Janowitz, M. (2012). *The City*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Peebles, P. (1991). *Social change in nineteenth century Ceylon*. New Dehli: Navrang.

Perera, N. (1999). *Decolonizing Ceylon: colonialism, nationalism, and the politics of space in Sri Lanka*. New Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press.

Perera, N. (2002). Indigenising the colonial city: late 19th-century Colombo and its landscape. *Urban Studies, 39*(9), 18. doi: 10.1080/00420980220151736

Perera, N. (2005). Making of a national capital: conflicts, contradictions and contestations in Sri Jayawardhanapura. In M. E. Geisler (Ed.), *National symbols, fractured identities* (pp. 241-272). Lebanon, NH: Middlebury College Press.

Ratnayake, M. D. (2013). *There is something I have to tell you*. Boralesgamuwa, Sri Lanka: Prajaya Studio.

Roberts, M. (1982). *Caste conflict and elite formation: the rise of the Karava elite in Sri Lanka, 1500-1931* (Vol. 24). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Roberts, M., Raheem, I., & Colin-Thomé, P. (1989). *People inbetween.* Ratmalana: Sarvodaya Book Publishing Services.

Rodman, M. C. (1992). Empowering place: multilocality and multivocality. *American Anthropologist, 94*(3), 640-656.

Sassen, S. (2008). The Global City. In D. Nugent & J. Vincent (Eds.), *A companion to the anthropology of politics* (pp. 168-178): Oxford: Wiley.

Schielke, S., & Debevec, L. (2012). *Ordinary lives and grand schemes : an anthropology of everyday religion*. Berghahn Books: New York.

Selvadurai, S. (1998). *Cinnamon Gardens*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.

Simone, A. M. (2010). *City life from Jakarta to Dakar.* New York: Routledge.

Sivanandan, A. (1997). *When memory dies*. London: Arcadia Books.

Sivasundaram, S. (2017). Towards a critical history of connection: the port of Colombo, the geographical "Circuit," and the visual politics of new imperialism, ca. 1880–1914. *Comparative Studies in Society and History, 59*(2), 346-384.

Thiranagama, S. (2011). *In my mother's house: civil war in Sri Lanka*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Uyangoda, J. (2018). Decolonial thinking, Southern theory, and the search for alternative epistemologies in the social sciences. *ColomboArts Biannual Refereed Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities, II*(3), 1-18.

Wijesuriya, W. (2012). *Colombo: A critical introspection*. Wimarshana Wijesuriya.