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Heritagisation of Religious Festivals and (Re) invention of Buddhist Heritage in Modern Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Heritagization is the important process of creating, inventing or reinventing of heritage that is intertwined with internal and external socio-cultural, economic and political factors of the relevant community. This concept has been under explored as a process in heritage literature of Sri Lanka and beyond, in the South Asian context.The aim of this research is to understand ideological setting caused to the heritagization of newly emerged set of Buddhist festivals in 21st centuryCE of Sri Lanka with special reference to the*KañcukaPūjā*festival. In depth interviews, field observations and netnography were applied as methods for the data collection of the study. The researcher used content analysis within a qualitative approach in order to conduct the data analysis. The Buddhist festivalizationprocess is associated with re-interpretation, invention and reinvention of heritage which is geared by the intention of glorifying heritage within the contested ground of ethno-religious identities.

Key words: Heritage studies, Buddhist festivals, Heritagization, Festivalization, Event studies

Introduction

Scope of the study

This study explores heritagisation of recently emerged Buddhist festivals with special emphasis on Ka*ñcukaPūjā*or *KaprukPūjā*festivaland attempts to map the ideological setting for this phenomenon within the socio-cultural-political sphere of 21st centuryCE, Sri Lanka. Relevant period marks intensification of festivalization in Buddhist shrines with introduction of new set of Buddhist festivals which haven't direct continuation from the past.

Festivalization has been simply defined by Sala and others as rapid expansion of the festival concept (Sala, Waalwijk, Lillesoe, Sterneck, Maidman,&Rosen 2016: 3), that can be clearly observed in Buddhist religious context of modern Sri Lanka in combination with the Sinhalese nationality. However, this facet is not confined to the above domain with occurrence of it in

personal, social and other event domains as well. According to Getz and Page (Getz & Page 2016: 36), festivalization is becoming festivals as anaccepted part of social fabric with increasingly normalized occurrences. In 21st century CE, both, newly emerged Buddhist festivals and the festivals with historical roots started to occur more frequently at various Buddhist shrines around the island. Ka*ñcukaPūjā*can be identified as the most popular newly emerged Buddhist festival with increasingly normalized occurrences. In other parts of the world, festivalization is associated with 'alternative' festivals beyond materialistic which were termed as spiritual or magic festivals focusing concern on authenticity (Sala et. al. 2016: 5). These festivals are complex cultural products. It is possible to observe the above characteristics in the recently emerged Buddhist festivals as well. In this context, it is important to make an inquiry on ideological setting for this festivalizationprocess within the context of heritagization.

Heritage and heritagisation

Heritage is a more complex concept than is it described in common heritage discourse in Sri Lanka, except in few academic circles. Generally, history, historical and archeological monuments, 'traditional' aspects of the society are considered as heritage in the first context. Heritage is a `value-loaded concept', meaning that in whatever form itappears, its very nature relates entirely to present circumstances (Hardy 1988, quoted inHarvey 2001: 324).It can be regarded as a process whereby objects, events, sites, performances and personalities, derived from the past, are transformed into experiences in and for the present, but also for the future (Milošević 2017: 4). Catrina and Isnartview cultural heritage asa complex notion that has evolved over the time facilitating ideological construction of 'collective memory' with intention of fostering common understanding of the past and social cohesion inside a society (Catrina &Isnart 2014: 7-8).

According to Smith, the idea of heritage not so much as a 'thing', but it is a cultural and social process, thatinvolves with acts of memorizing that work to create ways to understand and engage with the present. Because of it, heritage is ultimately a cultural practice, involved in the construction and regulation of a range of values and understandings (Smith 2006: 11). Further, she recognizes heritage as an essentially intangible, vital and alive element that is done at places, making these places to places of heritage, both, because ofthe events of meaning making and

remembering that occur at them (Smith 2006: 56,83).This statement clearly points out the importance of events in heritage making.

Heritagisation can be simply defined as the process of heritage making, invention and reinvention of heritage thatis complex phenomenon influenced by different internal and external factors of the relevant society. It can be used to initiate a process for repossessing the past in a way that supports the legacy of a present political system by recycling old ideas and making them relevant again (Nilsson 2018: 37). Heritagization is a process from a function of a place, developed by ethnic, religious or social circumstances, towards a situation characterized by more or less obsolete traditions, in order to promote certain, oftennationalistic, ideas. One of the intentions of this process is establishing solidarity among members of a social group(Nilsson 2018: 37).

Nature of the heritagization process has been discussed byAshley & Terry. According to them, the process influenced and distinguished by number of factors such as who undertakes the valuation, for what reasons, and who is viewing or consuming (Ashley & Terry 2018: 1). On the other hand, it is a performative act that can be considered as an active, affective and/or artistic expression of individual and community senses of self. It has been recognized as a process of cultural production by which people make sense of their world and their place within it, as well as strategically assert their voices in the public sphere(Ashley & Terry 2018: 2).

Sjöholm interprets heritagization as transformation of objects, places and practices into cultural heritage as values are attached to them (Sjöholm 2016: 26). Dramatic increase in heritage was occurred during the last decades throughout the world. More importantly, four ways that heritagization may be operated were suggested bySjöholm including reaffirmation of already designated heritage, re-interpretation of alreadydesignated heritage, designation of new objects as heritage, or dismissal of previouslydesignated heritage(Sjöholm 2016: 78).This categorization of the heritagization process was developed in the context of state authority. Therefore, those can be adopted as reaffirmation of already perceived heritage, reinvention of new heritage value/s for already perceived heritage, invention of new heritage and dismissal of previously perceived heritage in the case of heritagization process of the wider society since, heritage is an element based on collective perception of a social group.

Heritagisation can be identified as the process of granting value to particular resources through both scientific and social criteria that reveal the making of heritage(Catrina &Isnart 2014: 8). However, the selection process can differ from one state to another, from one sub group to another, from one legal framework to another, from one socio-religious context to another. Further, the selection process of heritage resources is directed by social, cultural and economic constraints, sometimes, leading to different views on value criteria. Things or practicesfrom the past are marked as important by heritagisation and it is related to nostalgia.

Ashley has explained the importance of this process in creation of community or group identify with expected outputs as a community and individual members of a group (Ashley2014:39). It contains negotiation and sharingidentity with others in valued aspects of the past based on personal or local or national ideas that canunite into group expressions. The heritagization process transfers an emotionalresonance on underlying values that sustains social order, collective relationships and senseof belonging. Individual members of a group obtain a sense of wellbeing, happiness and develop self and mutual confidence as a result of contributing to cohesiveness with others of a group. This solidarityfacilitates the smooth operation of the social groupwhile developing community pride. The stabilizing and fixing of ideas of common heritage is an indicator ofthe workings of power within a society (Graham,Ashworth, &Tunbridge2000, 1). Thus, while there is a rewarding internalsense of belonging about heritage, there is an external constraint or compulsion to adhereto the group (Ashley 2014: 39).

Materials and methods

Materials for this study were obtained from in depth interviews, field observationsand netnography as methods of data collection. SeveralBuddhist pilgrimsKa*ñcukaPūjā*who have participated and organized at prominent Buddhist shrines were interviewed in order to understand their motivations, behaviors and ideologies. This is an ethnographical method widely used in this type of research projects that was combined with field observations at *Ruvanveliseya stupa* in Anuradhpuaraand *Kelaniya stupa* inColombosuburbs.

Netnography can be recognized as a research approach that was firstly, suggested by Robert Kozinets for consumer research and the term refers to the textual output of internet related field work (Kozinets 1997: 473). It is a process of searching and analyzing relevant data to address

recognized research questions of a study (Mkono 2012: 553). The most important benefit of netnogrphy in the context of this study is the possibility reach more reliable data that cannot be accessed by other methods specially, in the context of unavailability of the local direct literary sources in this research area. Facebook posts, photographs and comments published by the Buddhist festival tourists on Facebook pages of the major Buddhist shrines including *Ruwanweliseya*, *Kelaniya* temple, *Mahiyangana* temple and *Kiri Vehera* temple about their experiences and views on recently emerged Buddhist festivals with special emphasis on Ka*ñcukaPūjā*were analyzed in netnographical approach of the present study. In addition to that, number of videos of the events and related photographs were subjected to the analysis as well.

This study applies qualitative research approach with content analysis as the main method of data analysis. Content analysis can be considered as a study of documents and text of various formats, images, audio or video in order to examine pattern of communication (Bryman 2011: p20). It was used for this study considering its key advantage of effective application for analyzing of social phenomena.

Results and discussion

This section of the research paper is dedicated to the analysis of 21stcenturyCE Buddhist festivalizationandKa*ñcukaPūjā*festival separately, in the context of heritagisation with emphasis on underlying socio-political factors.

Buddhist festivalizationand (re) invention of heritage

Although, the Buddhist festivalization of the modern times has shown an intensification in 21st centuryCE, specially, after end of the long lasting war in 2009 CE, it may have been started in the early 1990s with *picca malPūjā*(Jasmine flower) festival at *Ruvanveliseya* and *Sri Maha Bodhi* premises in Anuradhapura. The event may mark the first appearance in the trend of emerging new set of Buddhist festivals without historical roots. Itbecame a very popular annual Buddhist event with participation of large number of domestic Buddhist festival tourists and the wider recognition led to stage duplicated regional versions of the event at other Buddhist shrines such as *Kelanivihara*.

Later, number of new Buddhist festivals started to appear within a relatively short period of time including Ka*ñcukaPūjā*,*Kiripindu puja, MahaArahanthaVandanava,*

AnubuduMihinduMahimiArahantaVandanava, *AngulimalaMahaArahantaVandanava*. These religious events can be identified as one stream of the Buddhist festivalization. The other trend is organizing more Buddhist festivals with historical roots such as Buddhist processions indicating increasingly normalized occurrences. Some monasteries started to conduct number of processions within a year with considerable investment of resources for all events in contrast, to the previously,held one and only annual*Katina* procession (Buddhist religious procession after the rainy season). Both of those phenomenon are compatible with two meanings of festivalization; over supply of events and becoming of festivals as increasingly normalized occurrences pointed out by Getz and Page (Getz and Page 2016:27).

It is possible to observe that the festivals were standardized with specific protocols with more or less complex rituals. Some of those festivals are large events with complex rituals staged with large number of participants at Buddhist shrines with influence of heritage politics as well. *MahaArahantaVandanava*may set an example for this that was conducted at the premises of *RankotVehera* at Polonnnaruwa in 2018 CE. This Buddhist archaeological site is never considered as a major pilgrim center or very important sacred site by the Buddhists. Polonnaruwa was native area of the contemporary president of the country that may have influenced for the selection of the site through heritage politics. However, some of the newly emerged events such as *Kiri pindu puja* takes the form of small personal events with participation of family members and/or close relatives at various Buddhist shrines throughout the island.

This festivalization of Buddhist events can be considered as a process of heritage making when those are analyzed in light of the modern theories of heritage and heritagization. Events are intangible in nature and heritage is intangible as wellin accordance with the views of scholars such as Laurajane smith (Smith 2006: 56). She further states that heritage is a live element that is conducted at places, making these places to places of heritage both, because of the events of meaning making.It is clear that events can be used to make the event venues to places of heritage. *RankotVehera*is perceived as a site with historical and archaeological heritage value but not as a valuable Buddhist heritage site. The large complex event of *MahaArahantaVandanava* festival held at the site in 2018 CE, can be argued as an attempt to designate strong Buddhist heritage value to the site. One way, that heritagization occurs is re-interpretation of already,

designated heritage(Sjöholm 2016: 78). This re-interpretation of heritage of *Rankotvihara* is a process of adding new religious heritage value to the already, established historical and archaeological heritage values. The shrine was a livingBuddhist site during 11th and 12th century CE, since, that this can be considered as a reinvention of the heritage value that was dismissed hundreds of years ago.

The above discussed Buddhist festivalizsation of modern Sri Lanka may have been fueled as a strategic move of the Sinhala Buddhist society,in order to establish glorious living Buddhist heritage in contested ground of ethnio-religious identities. Wickremasinghe's views on modern heritage discourse of the island is important in this context. She explains hegemonic heritage discourse of the Sinhala-Buddhist society that aims to consolidate the notion of glorious national heritage through various performances (Wickremasinghe 2013: 91, 97). Majority of the interviewees had pride on Buddhist heritage and idea of hegemonic heritage discourse was prevailed, in addition to other secular and non-secular objectives of participation and organizing the events. Memory demands display, an articulation in objects or depiction to give it meaning.Festivals and events are highly qualified performances for display of collective memory of a social group.

Ka*ñcukaPūjā*and heritagisation

Ka*ñcukaPūjā*can be observed as the most popular Buddhist festival among the recently emerged new set of Buddhist festivals. The event is organized and sponsored by families, groups of relatives, groups of friends, members of Buddhist societies, government institutions, private institutions or even student groups of universities showing the wider popularity of the event throughout the Sinhala Buddhist society. Main activity of the event is wrapping a long robe or long Buddhist flag around a *stupa* at the bottom level of *Garbha* while standing on the highest *Pesawa* by white clothed males in collaboration with and guidance of Buddhist monks. Although, *stupa* is the most popular venue, the activity can be done around an enclosure wall of a *Bodhi* tree. Most popular site for the event is *Ruvanveliseyastupa*due to its high recognition as the most sacred *stupa* in the island. *Somawathiyastupa*, *Mahiyanganastupa*, *Kelaniyastupa*, *Kiri veherastupa* can be found as some of the more popular sites for the event. However, there are numerous instances that the activity is performed around small stupas at various unpopular Buddhist shrines by members of the relevant village community.

Firstly, special long robe or long Buddhist flag is arranged or bought with consideration of standard sizes for different sites. It is 300m for *Ruvanveliseya stupa*, 90m for *Mahiyanganaya stupa*, 75m for *Somawathiya* stupa etc. At the start of the event, the long sacred cloth is carried to the *stupa* premises in a procession that requires large number of people to hold it over their head or shoulders. The procession is headed by traditional drummers. After it reached the *stupa*, it makes three rounds around the stupa in order to pay the respect. Then,the sacred cloth is wrapped around the *stupa* followed by chanting of event related verses by a Buddhist monk. Other offerings are made to the *stupa* as well.

It can be assumed that the popularity of the event is geared by promotion of community cohesiveness, collective relationships and sense of belongingness and ability to have more close interaction with two of the sacred Buddhist symbols: the robe or Buddhist flag and the *stupa*. Everyone can touch and hold the robe or Buddhist flagduring the procession irrespective of gender. Patrons are advised by the Buddhist monks to assume that they are wrapping the robe to living Buddha since, stupa symbolizes the lord. These factors make the festival highly suitable to create collective memory in the Sinhala Buddhist society. The heritagization process causes to the sustenance of collective relationships and sense of belonging while facilitating individual members of a group to develop self and mutual confidence as a result of contributing to cohesiveness with others of a group(Ashley 2014: 39). This situation can be identified at Ka*ñcukaPūjā*since, large number of community members are invited by the organizers to attend the procession and all are responsible to hold the sacred cloth properly, that provide same level of immersed experience to all the participants. The sacred cloth play the role of a thread that facilities community relationships and unity.

Although, an event with these characteristics was not mentioned in historical sources in accordance with the research literature on history of events in Sri Lanka (Godakumbura 1970; Pieris 1956), new discourse has been developed to trace it with completely different restoration or renovation activity carried out by ancient kings for the protection of *stupa* from natural elements that is termed asKa*ñcukaPūjā*in historical sources. This restoration activity is not an event and it involved laying a new brick layer and mortar to the stupa. However, according to the common discourseof the contemporary Buddhist society,it was able to establish the notion that modern Ka*ñcukaPūjā*is an ancient event that was reinvented after dismissal of it thousands of

years ago. This can be identified as one way of creating heritage that is described as designation of new element as a heritage(Sjöholm 2016: 78). However, it was performed based on nostalgia to convince it as a reinvention of heritage in order to assign it a historic heritage value.

Conclusion

21st century CE marks intensified festivalization of Buddhist events in Sri Lanka with over supply of events and highly normalized occurrences of those. Some festivals may have been used to add a new heritage value to the religious sites where the events were staged. Attempts are made to create historic value to the newly introduced events based on nostalgia of the dominant heritage discourse of the island. Ka*ñcukaPūjā*has become the most popular recently introduced Buddhist event due to its unique power to develop community cohesiveness and highly immersed event experience having close contact with sacred Buddhist symbols.The Buddhist festivals are used by stakeholders involved in the events and wider Buddhist community to reinvent and invent Buddhist heritage in order toglorify heritage in a highly contested circumstance of ethno-religious identity.

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