

A M E R I C A N U N I V E R S I T Y S T U D I E S

The Puberty Ritual in Sri Lanka

A Comparative Exploration of Perceptions and
Attitudes between Buddhists and Christians

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1 Introduction

Many traditional rituals are practiced among the Sinhalese people of Sri Lanka. When people come into the Christian faith, a crucial issue becomes what they have to do with those traditional rituals. This study explores in particular the puberty ritual among the Sinhalese people, with a question as to how Christians need to respond to the ritual. I undertake this study in an attempt to promote the Christian faith both biblically faithful and culturally relevant among the Sinhalese people. This chapter presents the overall framework of this study.

Research Background

I did mission work in Sri Lanka from 1995 until 1999. During that time, I regularly visited and met with the Sinhalese people at their homes to share the gospel. As I became closer to the people, they would often ask me about my religion. I prayed for the sick at their requests. I also encountered their cultural and religious practices, such as weddings, funerals, and the worship of gods. I, an outsider, noticed social get-togethers as well as life concerns expressed around those rituals.

While I had constant contact with the Sinhalese people, I became aware of my Korean cultural roots. I observed their family relationships and intimate social relationships. This led me to recognize and to cherish the close relationships that I had with my family in Korea. I was never aware of this concern before I went to Sri Lanka. In this regard, the Sinhalese people had me realize and value my cultural roots and identity. As I became more familiar with them, I felt that we were similar in many cultural aspects.

My experiences among the Sinhalese people caused me to reflect upon the traditional ritual for venerating ancestors that my parents and their offspring including myself performed regularly in years past. When I became a Christian, I stopped attending this ritual, despite my father's unpleasantness about it. He was, however, religiously tolerant. When he later became a Christian, he decided to have a Christian memorial service instead of the traditional ritual. I was happy about his decision. However, as we did a Christian service at home, I realized that something was missing from it, in comparison to the traditional ritual. In the past, my father was a leading performer and director of our traditional ritual. My brothers and I would just

follow his symbolic actions during the ritual, in which there were few words.

In contrast, our new Christian memorial service was full of verbal expressions. My father was not used to singing Christian hymns and saying words from Scripture. Further, he was personally a man of a few words. I, the youngest of his offspring, was asked to lead the service and share a message from the Bible, since I was a Seminary student at that time. I felt very sorry that my father had lost his respected role and position as the head of the family in the Christian service. This impression of mine was revived when I encountered the Sinhalese people's social relationships and rituals. I thought to myself that though these rituals were non-Christian, they might entail important life meaning to the Sinhalese people, similar to my past notion of the traditional Korean ancestral veneration, when my family shifted from traditional beliefs and practices to Christian ones. As a consequence, my hope is that the Sinhalese people should not lose precious cultural values when they come into the Christian faith, as long as those values do not contradict biblical teachings.

In the mean time, I came to be interested in the puberty ritual among the Sinhalese people. One day, I went to visit one of my students from English class. She was about thirteen years old, and her family was Sinhalese Buddhist. I was not allowed to see her, even though she was home at the time I arrived. They explained that the girl had to observe a puberty ritual whereby she was prohibited from seeing any man for seven days. They asked me to come to her celebration after the seven days were over. On that occasion, I realized the importance of the puberty ritual for Sinhalese Buddhists. On a religious level, the practice of the puberty ritual among the Sinhalese people is little related to their official religion of Buddhism, but much to their folk religious beliefs in the supernatural. The participation of the large number of people in the ritual indicates its social significance for Sinhalese Buddhists.

The Christian church has practices for births, marriages and funerals; yet, a puberty ritual does not have a concrete place in the Sinhalese church. The church does not appear to be sure about how to deal with that ritual. Some Sinhalese churches forbid the puberty ritual. Some churches have a brief sermon, prayer, and then a feast. Other churches allow believers to perform the traditional puberty ritual, and then come to pray for the girl after the ritual is over.

A renowned evangelical Christian leader in Sri Lanka addresses the missiological study of the rites of passage in Sri Lanka as crucial, because the Sinhalese people are very attached to them. He notes that the church needs to discern which parts of the ritual are acceptable and which are not.¹ This process is concerned with helping believers affirm their own cultural identity and heritage while staying faithful to the Lord (Hiebert 1994: 90).

Christian missions during the colonial period downplayed the Sinhalese religion and culture (Malalgoda 1976: 31). They generally imposed their home cultures upon Sinhalese Christians. As a result, Christianity was often regarded as a force that deconstructed the cultural root and identity of the Sinhalese. According to today's missiological view, contextualization was generally ignored during that time. This study assumes that sharing the Christian faith does not mean separating people from their culture, but rather responding to their culture in the light of the Bible. The Sinhalese church needs a culturally relevant presence, which involves living both as a Sinhalese and as a Christian, in faithfulness to the Lord. I hope that this study will help the Christian faith to be expressed and practiced in a way that connects to and impacts the cultural grounds of the Sinhalese people.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to offer insights that will help the Sinhalese Christians of Sri Lanka respond to the puberty ritual appropriately in light of the Christian faith. In addition, I wish Sinhalese Christians to utilize the implications of this study in dealing with many other traditional cultural practices.

Goals

This study seeks to achieve the following goals:

1. To identify the nature and outcome of religious-cultural contacts between Christian missions and the Sinhalese people during European colonial periods.
2. To compare and contrast the attitudes of Sinhalese Buddhists and Sinhalese Christians toward the puberty ritual.
3. To identify the implications of the stories of selected biblical characters during their adolescent transitions for the Christian understanding of the practice of the puberty ritual among the Sinhalese people.
4. To present a missiological approach that helps Sinhalese Christians properly respond to the puberty ritual.

Significance

I address the significance of this study in four areas. First, I expect this study to stir empirical missiological research in the Sinhalese context. A considerable amount of research on the Sinhalese culture has been undertaken in the past. However, studies from non-Christian perspectives scarcely touch upon Christian cultural issues in Sri Lanka, even though they have produced valuable data on the Sinhalese Buddhist culture. On the other

hand, studies from Christian perspectives tend to be conceptual, with less empirical data. In this study, I seek to draw missiological implications through a focused, empirical study on the perceptions of Sinhalese Buddhists and Sinhalese Christians toward the puberty ritual. Stirrat points out that no significant research work has yet been done on cultural issues in Protestant Evangelical groups in Sri Lanka (1992: 165). I hope this study will be a valuable contribution for the Protestant sphere.

Second, this study inquires into different issues and questions from what precedent research achieved. In this study, I focus on the perceptions and attitudes of the Sinhalese people toward the puberty ritual, while precedent research described the ritual and its meanings. Herein, I delve more into the Sinhalese rationale, stance and experience regarding the ritual. Furthermore, I compare Sinhalese Buddhists and Sinhalese Christians in their attitudes toward the ritual. This comparison employs the quantitative method which did not seem to be used in preceding research. Consequently, this study has significance in the character of its questions, employment of the quantitative method, and a comparative inquiry of Buddhists and Christians among the Sinhalese.

Though I esteem an ethnographic or qualitative method, my ill health hindered me from taking such an approach which usually requires a researcher to have a long span of time in the field. In my limited condition, I attempted to ask focused open-ended questions as part of the survey research to both Sinhalese Buddhists and Sinhalese Christians. As a result, I was able to obtain meaningful qualitative data. My viewpoint on qualitative versus quantitative approach is that they are complementary, while the nature and intent of a study would determine the approach to be taken. This issue will be further discussed in Chapter 3.

Third, this study should stimulate a missional action.² The inquiry into the Sinhalese puberty ritual will suggest the methodological ideas and practical implications that enable the church to deal with cultural issues and thereby to cultivate relevant Christian cultures. Finally, this study will broaden and deepen my own understanding of Buddhist contexts, and equip me to serve better as a researcher and practitioner of missions for these contexts.

Central Research Issue

The central research issue to be addressed in this study is an examination of the perceptions and attitudes of Sinhalese Buddhists and Sinhalese Christians regarding the puberty ritual in Sri Lanka, thereby identifying a relevant Christian response to the ritual.

Research Questions

This study explores the major research questions in relation to the central issue as follows:

1. How did the Christian faith and the Sinhalese culture relate to each other during past colonial periods?
2. How do Sinhalese Buddhists and Sinhalese Christians respectively view the puberty ritual?
3. What do the motifs underlying the adolescent times of selected biblical characters imply in regard to the Sinhalese puberty ritual?
4. What are the missiological insights that can help Sinhalese Christians to appropriately respond to the puberty ritual today?

Delimitations

Christian respondents to my survey include people who attend Assemblies of God, Calvary Churches, and other independent churches I assume to be evangelical.³ They are much newer churches than other historical denominations. Thus, the results of this survey do not represent the established historical denominational churches of Sri Lanka. However, the implication of the survey may be useful to them, as well.

This study does not aim to present a complete product for the Christian practice of puberty⁴ among the Sinhalese people. Rather, it presents missiological insights, approaches, and suggestions that would help Sinhalese Christians to develop their own practices in their own contexts. This is because local churches are the very agents of living out the Christian faith in their cultural soils under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Limitations

A major limitation of this study is that I am an outsider to Sinhalese culture and society. My interpretation of the data, as well as of the overall Sinhalese culture may be imperfect, since I might have blind spots as an outsider. However, I think my past four years experience in missions among the Sinhalese people helped me, to some extent, appreciate the viewpoints of insiders. I have also tried to minimize my personal bias by checking my understanding of the literature and data with informants and translators.

Another limitation of this study is in regard to sampling methods. I employed the informal quota sampling method in this research, since I thought random sampling would be difficult to secure survey questionnaire returns. For this quota sampling, I attempted to distribute questionnaires to Sinhalese respondents, divided evenly for religion (Buddhism/Christianity), place of residence (rural/urban), and gender. My intention was achieved for