

The Harmonious Buddhist Society in Ancient Sri Lanka as Depicted on Kandyan Buddhist Paintings

Dr. Leena Seneheweera
Department of Fine Arts, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka

Introduction

My main purpose in this paper is to discuss the harmonious society that existed between Buddhist and Western artistic cultures under the British colonization as depicted on Kandyan paintings in the 18th and 19th centuries in Sri Lanka.

Normally, the paintings as visual art are a prominent media that communicate or represent any culture and society of humans¹. It reveals the activities of harmonious society at the time. In accordance with these facts I have selected the Kandyan Buddhist paintings which I believe are the best visual example to prove the validity of acceptable social and cultural values between the Buddhist and Western harmonious society as well as cross cultural Buddhist society in ancient Sri Lanka in the 18th and 19th centuries. Particularly, the Kandyan paintings manifest Jataka stories (Past life of the Buddha), Buddha's enlightenment, *Suvisi-vivarana*, *Mara Parajaya* etc. as expression of religious sentiment of the devotees. They always contribute a constructive effect for our minds and relationship with society and cultural affairs.

There is some documented evidence written by foreign and local scholars about the Sri Lankan society in the two decades mentioned before. However, Buddhists living in villages were unable to refer these documents and they could understand the difference between the Western and indigenous society only through the visual media, and, in particular, the temple paintings of the Kandyan school.

There are two schools of Kandyan paintings, the Kandyan School and the Southern School respectively². Kandyan paintings can be found in the Kandy area in the Central Province, and some are found also in the Western Province of the island while those of the Southern school are seen in the Southern Province. The paintings of the Kandyan School manifest in the Central and North-central plains, the paintings of Southern school in the temples of the South –Western coastal area and few temples in the Western Province. However, the earliest Kandyan paintings are depicted at Medawala Vihara and the paintings of Degaldoruwa Gadaladeniya Dambulla depicts the style of Kandyan School and they do not show evidence of Buddhist and Western harmonious society in Sri Lanka.

The paintings of Southern temples belonging to the Southern School appear in some temples which I have selected at the temple of Kataluwa Purwarama Vihara and Telwatta Vihara in Gall district and the temple of Samudragiri Vihara in Matara district. These selected temple paintings represent the Buddhist society and Western mixed culture of Sri Lanka in

¹ A visual object or experience consciously created through an expression of skill or imagination. The various visual arts exist within a continuum that ranges from purely aesthetic purposes at one end to purely utilitarian purposes at the other. This should not by means be taken as a rigid scheme, however particularly, in cultures in which everyday objects are painstakingly constructed and imbued with meaning. (Britanika, Vol.1.139.p).

² Senaka Bandaranayake, *The Rock and Wall Paintings of Sri Lanka 1996*, 17.p.

18th and 19th centuries. Although the paintings of Kandyan School depict the Buddhist perspective, paintings of the selected temples in Southern area represent the Western cultural aspect/ concept in a harmonious existence between Sri Lankan Buddhist society and culture of the Western society and culture at the time. This can be seen through Western human figures, architectural designs, natural environment, household goods and Western musical and dancing environment in the paintings. This paper studies what kind of Buddhist social values are represented on these paintings as well as the influence of social factors to the Sri Lankan Buddhist society particularly the Buddhist concept of different nations and the culture at the time.

According to Sri Lankan history, the 18th and 19th centuries were ruled by the British colonizers. Before them, the Portuguese and Dutch invaded Sri Lanka in 1505 A.D. and 1796A.D. respectively, and they established the Catholic and Christian religions among of Sinhala Buddhist people and other minorities such as Tamil and Burger etc. communities. However, the 19th century saw considerable changes in the economy and society in Sri Lanka. The British colonized the Kandyan area as well as the Southern part of the country and they followed a similar pattern from colony to colony. As a result of changes in the economy and society, remarkable Buddhist temples were constructed, particularly in Southern area. According to my knowledge, the paintings in these temples represent mutual interaction between British and Sri Lankan Buddhist society at the time. Buddhist people had to experience a culture that was a mix of both European and Sri Lankan. This was the result of the desire of the British government to create non-traditional identities and Western social values in Sri Lankan society. In this article, I consider the features of Buddhist harmonious society under the British period through the paintings in the following manner.

Discussion

The services of the Kandyan Kingdom were regulated by the monarchy through the *radala* (manorial lords)³ and they monopolized the religious and secular administration. This fact reveals the objectives of British ruler and the Buddhist religious hegemony of Sri Lankan society. The objective of British rulers was to create their culture in Sri Lanka through depictions in Buddhist temples and establish European and Buddhist cultural society through local the Elite. Under this circumstance, the Buddhist temples were built under the supervision of the Sri Lankan Elite stressing both the European and indigenous culture.

Therefore, European architectural features, human figures, household things etc appear in these paintings. Sri Lankan Buddhists at the time do not appear to have opposed it. It can be assumed that they realized the equality of human society in the universe and unequal access is not a disturbance for religious sentiment. When devotees examine the temple paintings with equanimity, they wouldn't mind that a certain figure is Western or it is not our culture so on. The devotee respects the Buddha's teaching of equality of human society. These paintings prove the social equality of Sri Lankan and European mixed culture and society. It develops social consciousness and a positive view of peaceful and harmonious society. Furthermore, it reveals how the Buddhist people understood and worked with the government of colonizers. Under normal circumstances, sentiments of inequality would be aroused and there would be conflict among one society over another society. But the above

³ Patric Peebles, *Social Change in Nineteenth Century Ceylon*, 1995, 10p.

mentioned temples' Buddhist paintings prove the constructivism of one society over another.

According to the Buddhism, equality is very important to develop each society and it is one of the features of harmonious society. If the devotee observes the paintings of European figures with traditional clothes and local people and their traditional dress, it would represent for them the equality of two societies at the time.

The painting depicts *Mahasutasoma Jataka* at Kataluwa Purwarama in Gall district. We can see two ladies in the palace at King Brahmadata's court. The features of the ladies are European and they are dressed in traditional garments. In addition, the palace is decorated in European style. According to Buddha's teaching, we should live together with any community which then becomes a harmonious society. In the harmonious society caste, gender, color etc cannot exist. The Buddha didn't consider caste or color as a prerequisite for entering the Order. Scavengers, courtesans etc. were admitted to the Order together with the Brahmins and were given similar ranks. This is the best example to depict harmonious society in Buddhism.

The below painting also represents the features of Buddhist harmonious society in the 19th century in Sri Lanka. This painting shows two cultures within the same frame (composition) in the Buddhist temple without color bar between European and local community.



*Figure 01- Ladies in palace,
Temple of Kataluwa*

When a devotee observes this composition, unanimously he decides all human beings are the same and we are living at the same society in the world. According to the above picture, the ladies are living in a European environment. It shows European style of decorations in the background. It clearly informs that Sri Lankans lived with the influences of the European cultural background at the time without aggressiveness but living with loving-kindness (*metta*). In my perspective, these painting compositions represent cultural, artistic and aesthetic values of two cultures and it also shows that Buddhism is universal and not confined to any particular nation or country. Each local and foreign people can realize the egalitarian and social democracy through the paintings. It is a significant pathway to develop harmonious society and it is the intellectual discourse of the harmonious society. Otherwise, conflict can emerge between societies. In the 18th and 19th centuries, Kandyan paintings teach equality of human society. Furthermore, this kind of paintings represent the equality and ethnicity as well.

One of my points is that equal social status and respect of inter religious communications are the most effective phenomena in the harmonious society. On the other

hand, they deeply followed their own religion and listened to the Buddhist community simultaneously. The British administrators strove to express this dialogue through the paintings. It can be seen in the following illustration.



Figure 02 – Queen Victoria, Temple of Kataluwa

The best example of the above symbol of the temple at *Kataluwa* in Gall district of Southern province. The paintings of this temple belong to the 19th century. The above emblem is depicted in the Central space above the doorway and shows the British empire containing a supposed portrait of queen Victoria. According to the history of Sri Lanka in 1890, Buddhists and Roman Catholics among them proclaimed their religiosity with equal Victorian Zeal⁴. When we observe this Zeal, we can see that it expresses the contribution of the British people to promote and settle peaceful and harmonious relations between European and local community. The center of the painting depicts Queen Victoria and it is formed by traditional decorations and a makara-torana. It indicates that the British always respected Buddhism and they admired the traditional function as well as supply the religious needs. Then it helps to induce compassion and generosity in society and supports to construct social harmony. I think this illustration gives more details than written documents about the harmonious society with respect for ethics and morality.

Furthermore, some of the Kandyan paintings represent the harmonious society with prosperity and peacefulness. The people of a peaceful society communicate their mutual dependence, human welfare, moral and spiritual development etc. This is clearly seen in another illustration from the temple of Kataluwa.



figure 03 – Royal procession, Temple of Kataluwa

⁴ Patrick Peebles, *Social Change in Nineteenth Century Ceylon*, 1995, 20p.

This Painting composition represents a royal procession of *Katthahari Jataka*. The king is going to the countryside to riding out on his white elephant and is accompanied by servants. King and servants are dressed in European and conventional garments. The style of the King's crown and green shoes are European. Normally the person who comes from the Western royal family is riding a horse but the king in this picture is riding a richly garbed white elephant. In addition, the procession is elaborated by an elephant from the ancient Sri Lankan Buddhist society. It can be seen in the significant *Dalada procession*. At the time the *Dalada* procession was held by British ruler. They usually respect and follow the Sri Lankan Buddhist customs. It is not only depicted on paintings but it also appears in social and religious customs. This kind of function reveals social interaction between the Sri Lankan, the ruled, and the British ruler. Furthermore, this painting depicts the traditional objects such as fans and flywhisks as well, and the musician plays traditional drums and there are acrobats on false legs in the background. Although the king wears European dress, this composition reminds to the devotee of the traditional procession. The Sri Lankan Buddhist people are able to realize the nature of Buddhist procession or royal procession through this illustration. The theme and artistic value of the painting, it is does not disturb the religious sentiment⁵. Therefore, it could be argued that this illustration shows the significant features of harmonious society. It protects the freedom of religion thoughts and worship of Buddhist people. On the other hand, according to the Buddhism, it is concerned more with the intellect than with the emotions. And these paintings can not be observed with emotion it should be argue with intellectual function.

Another fact is happiness of the society. Happiness is also significant teacher of the Buddhist harmonious society. It always draws out the close mutual relationship between inner personal happiness and outer social happiness. It can be found some example on paintings. It depicts that people with peaceful minds will interact happily with others. Some illustrations prove it.

There is a picture at the temple of Kataluwa Music and Merry- Making from the story of Mahadana Sitano. This picture depicts Mahadana Sitano and his wife enjoying with music and singing. The illustration represents western musical activities and musician dressed in European garments. The background of the illustration shows European style such as buildings etc. It depicts European life –style because Europeans are enjoying there life with music more than Asians. Although the illustration depict Mhadana Sitano's life but it is represented by western style. As well as here the main roles are Mahadana Sitano and his wife. According to my opinion, the illustration represents the relationship between husband and wife. They are living in a happy environment therefore they bring up children with good behavior. And together they deal with there children's issues. This is the foundation of Buddhist harmonious society and as a mother, the women in the painting holds an honorable place in Buddhism.

⁵ Buddhists do not worship an image expecting worldly or spiritual favors, but pay their reverence to what it represents (Britannica, Vol.2,23p),.

It depicts another picture in this series of Mahadana Sitano as follows.



Figure 04 – Dancer and drummer, Temple of Kataluwa

There is female musician who is beating time on a hand drum and another female dancer is dancing. And there are people watching them. This painting reveals the entertainment of aesthetic activities. Psychologically it is very important to develop aesthetic values of humans. If we can improve our aesthetic sensitivity, it contributes to develop our morality then we can apply these positive elements to create happy and harmonious society. The illustration shows important fact such as women also have equal statues in this society. Furthermore, it reminds us that the Buddha did not humiliate women. There is another example from the temple of Samudragiri in early 19th in Mathara District.



Figure 05 – celestial Musicians, Temple of Samudragiri

It depicts happy celestial world as the social value. Lovely Ladies are playing on musical instruments and it represents the beauty and pleasure. If the women live in the society with representing pleasure, the whole society can integrate happy and peaceful. The

lovely ladies play string instruments and drums under the ornate arch of European style.



Figure 06 – celestial Musicians, Temple of Samudragiri

The above illustration represent the female musician plays a flat drum in same heaven. In my point of view, the above few illustrations represent the happiness life. As Buddha says higher happiness can be achieved by overcoming all forms of desires, but if we follow the middle path (*Madhyama Prathipada*) during our life, it construct our inner peace and outer social harmony.

Another social value of Buddhist harmonious society represented through this paintings such as the attractive environment of humans. Some illustrations are decorated with flowers. The flower is the symbol of purification. Buddhist people offer flower to Buddha with religious sentiments. If we can live in this kind of environment we could repay the prosperity, happiness, contentment etc. to the society; because they are living on human necessity of freedom. Following illustration is the best example.



Figure 07 – A vessel form, Temple of Telwatta

The picture of the Panchanughaha Jataka from the temple of Telwatta depicts pediment above Southern doorway. It reveals a vessel formed a find lady. As well as it represent the prosperity of society. This is the social value of the Buddhist harmonies society.

Conclusion

Then Kandyan Buddhist paintings of southern province in Sri Lanka depict the features of harmonious Buddhist Society between Western and Sri Lankan cultures. I have discussed a positive relationship between western and Buddhist society through selected illustrations in 18th and 19th centuries. To prove my arguments I have observed some social value of harmony society such as equality, ethnicity, happiness, prosperity. I hope proven if society emerged these esthetics it can build a harmonious society. The paintings prove that British rules respect the Buddhists' religious needs for stability, security, justice of the Buddhist society at the time.

References

Bodh, Bhikku and wanamoli, Bhikku (tr.) (1995), *The middle Length Discourse of the Buddha; A new translation of the Majgima Nikaya*. Wisdom Publications; in Association with

the Barre centre for Buddhist Studies.

Candy, D. (2008) *Peace; in the Buddhist Discourses*, creative printers and Designers, Kandy.

Harvey, p.(2000) *Introduction to Buddhist ethics Foundations, Values and Issues*, Cambridge University Press.

Peebles, P. (1995), *Social change in Nineteen Century Ceylon*, Lake House Book shop; Colombo.

Seneheweera, L. (2009), *Buddhist Approach to the Environment Crisis From Kandy Paintings of Sri Lanka*, Buddhist Approach to the Environment Crisis UNDV conference Volume, Thailand.

Ven. Narada, G.P. – Malalasekara, Ven.K.Wimalajothi (2008), *Buddhism Culture and Sri Lanka Pilgrim's Guide*. Buddhist Cultural Center; Dehiwala

Britanica: Ready reference Encyclopedia (1995), vol.1,2,9 Encyclopedia Britanica (India) pvt .Ltd; New Delhi.