Royal rituals and cultural change

Arjun Appadurai

Departments of Anthropology and South Asian Regional Studies, University of Pennsylvania
Published online: 05 Jul 2010.

To cite this article: Arjun Appadurai (1981) Royal rituals and cultural change, Reviews in Anthropology, 8:2, 121-138

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00988157.1981.9977542
Royal Rituals and Cultural Change

Arjun Appadurai


In the past decade, the relationship between ritual, authority and premodern political arrangements has generated a rich body of interdisciplinary studies of South and Southeast Asia. H. L. Seneviratne's monograph, Rituals of the Kandyan State, is an important anthropological contribution in this context. Its intrinsic value is, therefore, considerably enhanced by its growing scholarly environment. The basic questions that underlie the dialogue between historians, anthropologists and textual scholars in these areas are the following: what constituted the authority of premodern kings? How did ritual performances establish or define this authority? What did these dramas of sovereignty achieve for the consolidation, maintenance and extension of royal domain?

Before going on to review some recent scholars' discussion of these questions, let me briefly describe Seneviratne's own study. H. L. Seneviratne is a native of Sri Lanka, who was trained there and in the United States, and he received his doctorate from the University of Rochester. He currently teaches anthropology at the University of Virginia. The principal aim of his study is to provide an interpretation of the relationship between the ritual process at the Palace of the Sacred Tooth Relic (Dalada Maligawa), in the Kandyan region of Ceylon, and the structure of kingship and society in the Kandyan period, approximately 1500-1800 A.D. The second aim of the study is to account for the viability of the core features of this ritual process in the radically changed economic and political environment of contemporary Sri Lanka. These ambitious concerns are dealt with in a
social-anthropological monograph which is characterized by brevity of exposition, clarity of organization, and a lucid and elegant style. In this sense, the book is a most valuable addition to the series, Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology, as also to our understanding of the culture and society of Ceylon.

Seneviratne’s Theory and Argument

Seneviratne’s theoretical stance is derived from a number of sources. From A. M. Hocart (1931; 1936; 1936a), he derives his general understanding of the link between kingship and caste in South Asia, in which the structure of specialization in local caste systems is homologous with (and logically derived from) the ritual division of labor in the royal court. From several distinguished predecessors in the anthropology of Sri Lanka, he draws his theory of the fundamental ambiguity about the “human” and “divine” natures of the Buddha in the Theravada tradition of Ceylon (Leach 1962; Obeyesekere 1963; Yalman 1964). More generally, it is to Leach that Seneviratne owes his view of ritual as “a language of argument, not a chorus of harmony” (Leach 1954). The argument of the study is explicitly concerned with Dumont’s contrast between the hierarchical world of caste and the egalitarian ideologies of modern South Asia (Dumont 1970). Last, and perhaps most significantly, Seneviratne places his specific ethnological arguments in a larger sociohistorical framework by reference to a series of ideas first formulated by Max Weber, the most important of which concern the modes of “legitimation” appropriate to premodern systems of authority (Weber 1946).

The book is divided into eight chapters, the first five of which analyse the social and political significance of the ritual at the Temple of the Tooth in the context of traditional Kandyan society. The last three chapters discuss the altered significance and structure of this ritual in modern Sri Lanka. The organization and sequence of chapters is logical and admirably suited to the author’s purposes. Chapter I, “Kandyan Society,” describes the social and political geography of the Kandyan kingdom and contextualizes its caste structure and religious ideology. Chapter II, “The Temple and Its Functionaries,” is a straightforward account of the social structure of the Temple and the division of labor within it, based principally on fieldwork conducted by the author in 1968-70. Chapters III and IV, “Rituals of Maintenance” and Victory and Prosperity,” constitute
APPADURAI / Royal Rituals and Cultural Change

The ethnographic core of the study and consist of a detailed description and interpretation of ritual praxis at the Temple. Chapter V, “Ritual and Society,” places specific aspects of the organization and ritual of the Temple against the backdrop of a drastically changed sociopolitical environment. Chapter VII, “The Perahāra and Modern Society,” focuses sharply on the ways in which a crucial annual ceremony reflects the stresses to which traditional ritual is subject in an altered political economy. The final chapter, “The Directions of Change,” draws together the threads of the argument and succinctly states the predicament of this ritual process today.

Let me now summarize the main argument of the book. According to Seneviratne, traditional Kandyan society, of the period from 1500 to 1800, was a centralized monarchy, the social basis of which was the rigid division of society into castes, on the Hindu model. In this system, the king represented the symbolic apex of both society and polity. Sinhalese Buddhism in this period was characterized by a cultic dualism, whereby the Buddha was worshipped at shrines called vihara and the subordinate gods at shrines called devāla. At the Temple of the Tooth, however, the Buddha was worshipped as a god, and the king was expected to be the custodian of the Dalada, the Sacred Tooth, Relic of the Buddha, which became a central symbol of sovereignty. But the upper stratum of the Buddhist monkhood monopolized the ‘priestly’ functions at the Temple, and thus the ritual process involved the cooperation of kings and monks, the twin apices of Kandyan society. The social organization of ritual at the Temple involved an elaborate hierarchy of roles, allotted to ‘secular’ as well as ‘religious’ specialists, and was oriented to ‘official’ worship, instituted by and for the king, conducted by officials and functionaries compensated by royal grants, and supported by a rural hinterland, which was tenurially bound to the Temple. In addition, there was another category of worship, the individual worship by pious laymen which Seneviratne deals with only incidentally. ‘Official’ worship, which is Seneviratne’s main concern, was conceived as ‘work’ (vada) or ‘duty to the king’ (rajkāriya). The actual structure and details of this ritual were basically a Sinhala Buddhist variant on Hindu patterns for the worship of enshrined divinities. The two major events of the ritual calendar were the ‘New Rice Festival,’ held in the lunar month of December-January, and the central festival of the entire year, the royal ritual, the Asala Perahāra, held in July-August. This latter ‘pageant’ which was, and is, of enormous scale, grandeur and complexity, was the symbolic charter of Kandyan
society. From the point of view of traditional Sinhalese Buddhist theory, the king’s role in ensuring the ritual maintenance of the Sacred Tooth Relic was a critical component of his own legitimacy, his cosmic dominion, and the fertility and prosperity of his realm. Seneviratne agrees that the ritual served as a “re-affirmation and re-legitimation of royal power” (pp. 111-112), but he also holds that it was a ‘depiction’ of the society’s hierarchical system, a ‘representation’ of the society’s hierarchical system, a ‘representation’ of the caste system which was the basic organizing principle of Kandyan society, a ‘validation’ of this social structure. It also served, according to Seneviratne, to bind distant provincial chiefs to the central authority of the Kandyan monarch.

In the period since 1815, when the British annexed the Kandyan kingdom, the social environment of the Temple changed drastically. Changes in the land tenure system, the replacement of the monarchy by a constitutional and parliamentary system, new sources of mobility in education, conversion to Christianity, and commerce, new ideologies of ‘equality’ and ‘egalitarianism,’ new enfranchisements for tenants and low castes, all have drastically affected the meaning, function and viability of the great rituals of the Temple of the Tooth. In this context, the Āsala Perahāra in particular has become an arena for symbolic and political debate. The new currents of egalitarianism in modern Sri Lanka make the Āsala Perahāra’s role as a ‘mirror’ of hierarchy, politically ambiguous. Besides, changes in the laws governing land tenure with their orientation toward the emancipation of rural tenants threaten the resource-base of the Temple and weaken its hold on its traditional agricultural servants. Nevertheless, bureaucrats and politicians in contemporary Sri Lanka find the Perahāra a potential political symbol. They are, therefore, struggling to find acceptable meanings, motives and means for supporting a ritual which, though of potential symbolic aid to their interests, also represents a hierarchical world view which is repugnant to them.

The above summary does not do full justice to what is a dense and rich analysis, full of important insights into a variety of issues. Suffice it to say that the argument, as I have represented it, is, to my mind, powerful and skillfully presented. I turn now to some difficulties with the analysis. In the critical discussion that follows, I shall occasionally make reference to studies that have appeared while the book under review was in press, or since its publication (Fox 1977; Richards 1978; Smith 1978; Smith 1978a). I do so not in a spirit of pedantry but in order to extend and further contextualize Seneviratne’s own argument.
Even within the confines of Ceylon, the relationship between Buddhism and kingship has been the subject of an immensely sophisticated and dense body of recent scholarship, which has been brought together in two important collections (Smith 1972; Smith 1978). This body of scholarship is flanked by equally important recent studies of the subject in the Indian subcontinent (Smith 1978a; Richards 1978; Fox 1977) and in Southeast Asia (Bechert 1966-1973; Tambiah 1970, 1976). *Rituals of the Kandyan State* is an important contribution to this nexus of scholarly studies concerned with the ritual construction of authority in South and Southeast Asia.

Few would quarrel with the broad thrust of Seneviratne's analysis of ritual at the Temple of the Tooth. He certainly does not depart from the general view of his colleagues working on Ceylon that the rituals of the Temple were, indeed, critical to the maintenance of Kandyan royal authority. He is appropriately sensitive to the basic ambiguities in the Sinhalese conception of the Buddha, which have been remarked by others (e.g., Gombrich 1971). But, on closer scrutiny, some features of his analysis may be open to question.

Although Seneviratne makes a compelling case that the rituals at the Temple of the Tooth were straightforward cultural devices through which kings “reaffirmed and re legitimized” their authority, the case may not be quite so simple. In regard to classical India, Heesterman has recently argued persuasively that the authority of the Hindu king was a fundamental conundrum for Hindu theoreticians, and that the king-Brahmin relationship, whereby royal power and Brahmin sacerdotal authority were irredeemably divorced, was at best a working solution to this irreducible dilemma (Heesterman 1978). It has also been suggested that in medieval South India (and Kandyan society appears to be culturally no less complex), there were at least three distinct idioms and traditions within which royal legitimacy was perceived (Stein 1978). There is every reason to believe that the relationship of the King and the Sangha of Buddhist monks in the history of Ceylon is at least an equally ambiguous dilemma. (Smith 1978b). While it is beyond the scope of this essay to investigate the conundrum in detail, it does suggest that the formula of 'legitimizing' royalty by association with sacred symbols is not a straightforward matter in South Asia, especially since the king is, in some regards, a 'divine' being in his own right. The point of royal rituals, then, is that they represent an extremely dense cultural code for the exchange of power between various kinds of authoritative 'persons' —kings, monks, priests, deities—which is not traceable to a straightforward Weberian model of legitimation (Weber 1946).
In a recent essay, an anthropologically-oriented historian of South Asia has attempted to resolve another basic tension in the analysis of pre-modern Hindu kingship. This is the apparent contradiction between the view of the Hindu king as transcendent, as principally a ceremonialist, who exercises only ritual sovereignty in a decentralized or segmentary state; and the view of the king as immanent, as an exercisor of political sovereignty in a centralized state or in an absolute monarchy (Inden 1978). Inden suggests that this tension and contradiction in scholarly models of traditional Hindu kingship (which seems relevant to Ceylon as well) can be resolved by a careful examination of the cycle of royal rituals, taken as total system, with daily, annual and dynastic periodicities. The basis for this suggestion, briefly, is that these cycles of royal ritual, both in theory and in performance, involve a systematic oscillation between these opposed poles, and therefore represent a cultural and political synthesis between them. Whether or not this suggestion can resolve all the problems it seeks to address, it does suggest that Seneviratne's own analysis might have profited from a consideration of the total cycle of royal rituals in the Kandyan kingdom, in addition to the obviously pivotal performance at the Temple of the Tooth.

This leads to the issue of the relationship of the rituals in the Kandyan capital city to the Kandyan polity as a whole. In the early pages of his first chapter, Seneviratne outlines the structure of the Kandyan kingdom as if it were a well-organized, centralized monarchy. There are good comparative historical reasons for doubting this view, and for suspecting that the Kandyan kingdom was a type of 'segmentary' state, as Burton Stein has forcibly argued for premodern South India (Stein 1975, 1977), or a dynamic 'galactic' polity, as Tambiah has suggested for premodern Thailand (Tambiah 1976). Both Stein and Tambiah, looking at ritual sovereignty in premodern agrarian contexts, argue for a dynamic and intrinsically flexible set of relationships between locality and center, province and state. Indeed, beneath the veneer of centralized administration, as Seneviratne himself notes (pp. 7, 114), the Kandyan state was probably a fluid and unstable dominion of the center over potential and actual 'rebels' at the periphery. In such a context, Seneviratne could have looked more closely at the historical structure of the Kandyan polity, and in particular at the link of the royal ritual of Perahāra to political stability. On this critical matter, he says:

It was possible for the disāva [Provincial Ruler] of a far-away province to assert his power and establish himself independent from Kandy. But one fact acted as a deterrent. In the Perahāra, the king had an excellent means
of compelling the chiefs of the provinces to come to the capital once a year. Tradition compelled them to come to the Perahāra which was primarily understood as a festival in honor of the Dalada. Fear of mystical repercussions prevented the disava from making such a drastic violation of faith as refusing to attend the greatest festival in honor of . . . such a mystically powerful object. The imperative created by this to go annually to Kandy, thereby to the presence of the king in his own fortress, prevented the disava from 'rebelling' and breaking away from the authority of Kandy. (p. 114)

Surely an analyst as sensitive as Seneviratne is to the complex political functions of shared cultural meanings, should not have to rely on such concepts as the compulsion of 'tradition' or the fear of mystical repercussions, to account for the behavior of these provincial chiefs.

The answer to this central question, namely, why did potentially autonomous chiefs indeed subordinate themselves to a central monarchical ritual, probably cannot be given without an account of the structure and vicissitudes of the monkhood in the Kandyan period. Unfortunately, this is probably the single major gap in Senaviratne's analysis, for he largely excludes the Sangha from his model of continuity and change. Recent work on Buddhism in Early Modern Ceylon (Malalgoda 1976) suggests that the Kandyan period was characterized by an important Buddhist revival, and that the involvement of the Temple of the Tooth in the longstanding Āsala Perahāra was probably a royal innovation of the later Kandyan period (Malagoda 1976:64). Since the Sangha was clearly involved in these changes, it seems highly likely that the role of the Perahāra in binding center to locality in the Kandyan period had something to do with the newly resurgent monastic networks and activities of the time. The rule of the Buddhist monkhood in Ceylonese politics is clearly an old, enduring and fundamental feature of the society, and, as such, the reader of Seneviratne's study can legitimately wonder about its relatively minor status in the analysis (Smith 1978b).

These difficulties with Seneviratne's argument concerning the Perahāra as a dramatic microcosm of the Kandyan polity, are matched by cognate problems with his argument about the pageant as a ritual representation and validation of the 'existing social order.' There is no doubt that the Perahāra, in Seneviratne's marvellous depiction, does display the incorporation of society by state. But there are several reasons to suspect that the Perahāra was more than a dramatic "status exhibition." Given the author's own observation, in another part of the study, that conflict and tension (albeit over matters of specific sumptuary privilege and not over matters of principle) did occur in traditional Kandy; given also the fact that Ceylon's
simplified caste hierarchy (minus a Brahmin caste) placed a special onus on the king to regulate sumptuary matters (Hocart 1950; Pieris 1956); and given the extremely high specificity of ritual roles in the Temple (see Figure 7 on p. 113) in comparison to the broad slots of the social hierarchy—these are three strong reasons to suspect that royal ritual at the Temple of the Tooth was not merely reflective of the social order, but was actually constitutive or creative in regard to it. This view is also suggested by recent work on the role of honors in South Indian temples, and the role of South Indian kings in this respect (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1976; Breckenridge 1977). Such a perspective would have added to the dynamism of the careful analysis that Seneviratne has already made.

There is then the matter of the grammar of the ritual itself. In general, Seneviratne provides the reader with a marvelous description, usefully interspersed with annotations and interpretations, of value to specialists and non-specialists alike. However, certain points could usefully have been elaborated. The central ritual object in this study is, of course, a relic, the Sacred Tooth of the Buddha. The notion of dhatu (relic) in general, and the metonymous symbol of the Buddha's Tooth, in particular, could have been pursued further, especially since these matters are already surrounded by lively debate in the field (Gombrich 1971: 103-108; Obeyesekere 1966; Yalman 1967). This debate concerns the exact doctrinal meaning of relics in Sinhalese Buddhism and the extension of this meaning to popular religion in Ceylon. The issue of relics raises the problem concerning the identity and ontological status of the Buddha—was the Buddha a man or god? Is he dead or still alive? If he is not a god, should he be worshipped? An exploration of the symbolism and the conceptualization would have strengthened Seneviratne's account of the Sacred Tooth, the core feature of the ritual. Seneviratne also makes a strong case to the effect that ritual at the Temple of the Tooth represents a high 'Hinduized' variant of Sinhalese Buddhist patterns of worship. However, in regard to the treatment of relics of the Buddha as representing a 'live' or a 'dead' person, a monk or a king, a super-man or a super-monk, it is clear that the contemporary ideology of Sinhalese Buddhists is probably over-determined in terms of prior models, and that it probably represents a complex mixture of Hindu models and ancient Sinhala patterns, (Gombrich 1971: 103-121). Specifically, then, one wonders whether Seneviratne's analysis of the redistribution of food offerings in daily and periodic worship at the Temple, as a compromise between the Buddhist lay horror of consuming or
appropriating sanghika (monastic) possessions (and food offered to the Buddha is apparently classed with such possessions) and the pressure of the Hindu paradigm of congregational food-sharing after worship, is adequate (p. 70). Such a compromise, which allows the ‘officials,’ though not the congregation, to partake of the sacralized left-overs, also appears to contradict Senaviratne’s acute analysis of the nānumura ceremony.

In this important ceremony, a bronze mirror is held before the sacred casket which contains the Tooth, and it is the reflection of the casket which is washed in a rite of purification. This nānumura ceremony takes place every Wednesday at the Temple. Seneviratne analyses this striking rite as a device for ‘getting close to the sacred in a situation whose inherent and necessary demands are exactly the opposite’ (p. 98). Richard Gombrich, on quite other grounds, rejects this line of interpretation, arguing that the operative concern here is not to avoid direct contact with the person of the Buddha, but more likely to avoid the excessively powerful ‘gaze’ of the Buddha (Gombrich 1971: 134-140). Whatever be the value of this alternative explanation it does appear, prima facie, that there is an apparent contradiction between the ritual avoidance of direct contact with the relic in the nānumura ceremony and the (from the Buddhist point of view) heterodox intimacy between the Buddha and his worshippers which we see in the ritual redistribution of food. It is not clear from Seneviratne’s description whether the monks at the Temple are among the co-sharers in the divine left-overs. In any event, this aspect of the study can most usefully be juxtaposed with a series of recent studies of divine food in North India, South India and Ceylon (Yalman 1969; Khare 1976; Ferro-Luzzi 1978). These studies suggest that the categories of the sacred cuisine and the etiquette of the divine meal contain important clues to the indigenous classification of deities and the indigenous understanding of how best to transact with them. Seneviratne’s evidence is an interesting addition to such data.

Methodological Issues

I turn now to the central methodological issue raised by Seneviratne’s study, before returning to substantive matters. Perhaps as important the ethnological aspects of this study is its bold use of the ‘ethnographic present’ to explicitly analyze an important period of Sri Lanka’s past. Before I state my reservations about the author’s ethnohistorical
strategy, I should make it clear that his is a remarkably elegant and lucid solution to the linked problems for anthropology, of 'text' and 'context,' ethnographic present and historical past, structure and process. Put simply, this study is an important, though not flawless, exercise in what might be called ethnographic reconstruction. Given the paucity of contemporary descriptions of state ritual in the Kandyan period (Robert Knox's description published in 1681, appears to be the only strictly contemporary one that Seneviratne uses), the author deftly fills this gap with his ethnographic account of the ritual process at the Temple of the Tooth in the late 1960s. His defense of this procedure which will doubtless alarm some historians and text-oriented scholars of medieval Ceylon, is contained in the brief but dense Preface to the book. His arguments are twofold. In the first instance, he argues that there is good documentary and historical reason to suppose that the core rituals of the Temple today are identical to those of the Kandyan period, and that, in any case, religious beliefs and practices, 'in their fundamentals' are not quick to change. In addition, from a conceptual point of view, he argues that the information received from informants today inevitably refers to 'rules,' which invariably have a timeless element, an element that is the common ground between past and present. These rules constitute what the author, following Radcliffe-Brown, calls "the form of social life." The compact argument could be persuasive in principle, especially to some anthropological readers, but it runs into severe difficulties in practice. As the author is obviously aware, it does not necessarily resolve the myriad particular problems of inferring 'meaning' as opposed to 'behavior' in the past; of interpreting the lacunae in texts; of using texts from the past to clarify behavioral or ideological contradictions in the present. In Tambiah's recent, and magisterial, studies of Theravada Buddhism in Thailand, we have an example of a social anthropologist with whose general strategy Seneviratne shares much, but Tambiah conducted a much more elaborate set of textual-historical investigations to clarify his anthropological claims than does Seneviratne (Tambiah 1970; 1976). In any event, Seneviratne does not avail himself of: first, a certain number of indigenous texts central to his subject (especially important is the Cūḷavamsa; the absence of any reference to the twelfth century chronicle, the Dāṭhavamsa is puzzling); second a set of colonial sources which do much to strengthen his analysis; and third, a first-rate body of secondary works on religion, politics and history in Ceylon, although the absence of any reference to the important recent mono-
graphs of Gombrich and Malagoda is striking (Gombrich 1971; Malagoda 1976) \(^1\) Nevertheless, it is clear that Seneviratne is well acquainted with the continuing work of such of his colleagues as Obeyesekere, which represents a fine example of historically sensitive anthropological analysis of Sinhalese Buddhism (Obeyesekere 1963, 1966). The latter article by Obeyesekere is mentioned in the text but is absent from the bibliography.

Seneviratne’s overall argument, from a methodological point of view, rests on three interrelated types of evidence: first, an ethnographer’s view of the present meaning, function and context of the rituals of the Temple, and in this, he is on very strong ground; second, recorded information, concerning ritual, land and politics from the colonial period; and third, the reconstruction, using a variety of contemporary and early colonial sources, of the Temple in the Kandyan period, which I discuss next.

Both in regard to the central pageant, the Perahara, as well as in regard to the Kandyan period in general, the author relies largely on sources which, in his own words, “perhaps present a picture more accurate for about the year 1800” (p. 174). He goes on to state, however, that it is “assumed here that in fundamentals, the picture is true of the broader period.” This is a large assumption and the author has fleshed it out in two essays published elsewhere of which he has not, however, cited in the present bibliography (Seneviratne 1977, 1978). Nevertheless, no systematic case is made for this assumption. This is not an unimportant matter since it was during the Kandyan period that the social order of contemporary Ceylon (linking caste, Sangha, temples, land and government) was formed. This suggests that a synchronic model of the Kandyan period has some risks. Specifically, recent scholarship suggests that in regard to Buddhism, caste, and polity, the Kandyan period was characterized by important and fundamental changes (Malalgoda 1976: passim).

While the major chronicles of Buddhist Ceylon (of which the Cūlavamsa is a particularly important source for this book) are clearly important normative documents, their status as records for any given period must be skeptically assessed (Smith 1972a: 31-33). It would, of course, be quite reasonable for Seneviratne to hold the view that this dichotomy between prescription and description is irrelevant to these indigenous sources, which are, rather, condensed statements of Sinhala Buddhist cultural categories. But this is an argument that must be made, not implied or assumed; and, in any case, it would not solve Seneviratne’s basic problem of historical reconstruction.
Last, from the point of view of method, the reader cannot fully evaluate, within Seneviratne's terms of reconstruction a series of specific propositions which implicitly compare the Kandyan period with the present. He suggests that the Perahāra today has become an arena of intense competition between members of the Kandyan aristocracy, in contrast to Kandyan times “when there was little room for mobility and the relative statuses of the families were tacitly accepted ... (and) ... there was no disagreement as to who could aspire to which office” (p. 137). Yet, at another point, he does imply that conflict and tension did characterize the ritual in Kandyan times, although the conflict then was over concrete privileges and not over basic principles, and involved such questions as “what ceremonial respect is due to which radala chief” (p. 160). These two views are at least possibly in contradiction, and to clarify their implications would have required a more dynamic social history of Kandyan society than the synchronic model Seneviratne's model constrains him to use.

This problem comes to a head in the author's discussion of what he supposes to be the conscious manipulation of the ‘ideal model' of the Perahāra by its most important contemporary lay officials, in order to “focus more attention on themselves rather than the sacred objects which ideally should receive the greatest honor...” (p. 138). This approach to change in the function of the ritual (with its explicit debts to Leach) is suggestive, but it obscures the issue of whether, and in what sense, such manipulation is a new feature of the ritual. This important section of the book rests on an argument about the 'ideal' form of the Perahāra as opposed to its contemporary, manipulated version (p. 138). But what is the source of this 'ideal' model? Kandyan texts, contemporary informants or a combination of both constructed by the analyst? The answer is not entirely clear to this reader, and would have been clarified by a more explicit methodological argument about the distinctions between past and present, than Seneviratne provides.

The Problem of Change

These methodological issues lead back to a substantive aspect of the study, the problem of change. In some ways, the treatment of change in the last three chapters of the book is its most interesting and innovative aspect. Especially given the author's reliance on first-
hand ethnographic observation, it is an exceptionally able account of extremely complex political, legal and cultural developments as they bear on the changing function and structure of the great rituals at Kandy. It contains an impressive general argument (a refinement of Dumont’s argument in *Homo Hierarchicus*) concerning the juxtaposition of hierarchical and egalitarian norms in a modernizing nation. It also cogently documents the implications of important shifts in the agrarian resource-base of religious institutions in colonial Ceylon and independent Sri Lanka. Last, it contains a host of rich insights into the specific ways in which ritual modes are reinterpreted in changed social and political circumstances. My two reservations about this aspect of the study are less criticisms of the argument, and more in the nature of regrets about understressed and underinvestigated aspects of the process that, otherwise, Seneviratne so persuasively interprets.

First, it is regrettable that Seneviratne did not make a more systematic investigation of records from 1815 onwards, such as revenue reports, court records of litigation and possible documents in the possession of the Temple authorities and the monasteries most involved with the Temple. Such an ethnohistorical analysis using the colonial records pertaining to the Temple (to the extent feasible) would have immeasurably strengthened the author’s argument about change. Several recent analyses of religious institutions in South India during the colonial period suggest that such efforts are potentially rewarding (Appadurai 1981; Breckenridge 1976; Presler 1978). These studies all deal with the problem of reconstruction by making detailed diachronic analyses of colonial records, and thus do not have to face the difficulty of an unmediated gap between precolonial structures and current ethnography. Specifically, they are able to document the processes by which both meaning and functions change, rather than simply deducing them.

My second caveat concerning Seneviratne’s treatment of change concerns the Sangha, especially the monks of the Asgiriya and Malvatta monasteries who traditionally monopolize the critical offices at the Temple of the Tooth. The role of the Buddhist monkhood in the politics or ritual at the Temple, as I have already suggested, is the most elusive aspect of Seneviratne’s treatment of traditional Kandy. This is even more apparent in his analysis of change. Of all the modern interest groups involved in the Temple, Seneviratne’s analysis of the role of the monkhood is least detailed, and his suggestion that “the enhanced ceremonial prestige of the monkhood in modern
Ceylon is a source of new vitality to the Temple ritual" (p. 123) seems to be a considerable understatement. The role of the Sangha in modern politics in Sri Lanka, the internal conflicts within the monastic lines, and the conflicts within the monasteries associated with the Temple (noted by Seneviratne), all suggest that the current 'revitalization' of the rituals at Kandy has far more to do with the larger context of the role of the Sangha in modern Sri Lanka, than this study leads the reader to believe (Malalgoda 1976; Smith 1972; Obeyesekere 1972; Bechert 1978; Kemper 1978). This is not, of course, to argue that the factors and forces on which Seneviratne does lay emphasis are insignificant, but only to suggest that the role of the Sangha has largely been ignored.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me return to some of the more general issues that make Rituals of the Kandyan State an important study. In the first place, it is an important addition to anthropological and historical studies in Sri Lanka, a field which is characterized by a high density of previous studies of an exceptionally high standard. Secondly, it is the first book-length study which could serve as a bridge between the growing scholarly interest in matters of ritual and polity in Hindu South Asia and Buddhist Southeast Asia since it deals simultaneously with South Asian models of society and worship and a Theravada Buddhist framework which Ceylon shares with parts of Southeast Asia. Third, it should certainly lay to rest the charge that "British" social anthropology is incapable of dealing with historical issues. Last, but not least, it is a first-rate ethnography. It should be of interest to a wide range of anthropologists as well as to any scholar interested in Ceylon or in Theravada Buddhism. The criticisms made in the course of this review, thus, are offered in the spirit of the on-going dialogue which Rituals of the Kandyan State will have done much to enliven.

Note

1. For a sense of the richness of these secondary sources, see the bibliographical essay by Frank Reynolds (1972). Limitations of space have also prevented me from discussing various South Asian contributions to the subject of ritual and authority. Particularly relevant here are the work of George Spencer on medieval South India (Spencer 1978), the ongoing work of B. S. Cohn on British imperial ritual in colonial India, of N. Dirks (1977) and P. Price on Kingship in South India, of J. Waghorne on images of sovereignty in South India. There is also a large body of work on conceptions of authority in Islam (Richards 1978a; Blake 1979) and royal cults in early modern Orissa (Kulke 1978). I have also benefited much from conversation over the years on 'imperium' in India with R. E. Frykenberg.

References

Appadurai, A.


Appadurai, A. and C. A. Breckenridge


Becchert, H.


Blake, S. P.


Breckenridge, C. A.


1977 From Protector to Litigant: Changing Relations between the Raja of Ramnad and Hindu Temples, 1907-1920. Indian Economic and Social History Review.

Dirks, Nicholas

1977 Political Authority and Structural Change in Early South Indian History. Indian Economic and Social History Review 13 (2): 125-58.

Dumont, Louis


Ferro-Luzzi, G. Eichinger.

Fox, Richard G., ed.

Gombrich, Richard F.

Heesterman, J. C.

Hocart, A. M.
1936a The Basis of Caste. Acta Orientalia, Leyden, XIV.

Inden, Ronald

Kemper, Steven E. G.

Khare, R. S.

Kulke, H.

Leach, E. R.

Malalgoda, Kitsiri

Obeyesekere, Gananath

Pieris, Ralph.

Presler, Franklin A.

Reynolds, Frank

Richards, J. F.
1978 Kingship and Authority in South Asia. Madison: University of Wisconsin South Asian Studies Series No. 3.

Seneviratne, H. L.
1977 The Alien King: Nayakkars on the Throne of Kandy. The Ceylon Journal of Historical and Social Studies, New Series VI (1)

Smith, Bardwell L.

Smith, Bardwell L., ed.

Spencer, G.
Stein, Burton

Tambiah, S. J.

Weber, Max

Yalman, N.