

Guardians of the Law

*Sinhala Language and Buddhist Reformation
in Postwar Sri Lanka*

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7.1 INTRODUCTION

Discussions of Buddhism and constitutional law frequently focus on one direction of influence: the influence of Buddhist principles on the guiding law of the state. But what about the other direction? In what ways do notions of constitutional law find their way into Buddhist institutions? Are there notions within Buddhist communities, both traditional and emergent, that seem similar to the notion of constitutional law?

This chapter builds on previous work that examines Buddhism and constitutional law in Sri Lanka and other Theravāda contexts.¹ While it considers the broader dynamics of politics, nationalism, and Buddhist groups that helped shape Sri Lanka's 1972 and 1978 Constitutions – which officially give to Buddhism “the foremost place” and oblige the state to “protect and foster” it – this chapter directs its major questions about Buddhism and constitutional law elsewhere. It investigates a Buddhist group that claims to commit itself to nonviolence and scriptural Buddhist reform, and it examines the ways in which this group blends religious practice with linguistic and nationalist ideologies drawn from secular constitutionalism.

More specifically, this chapter looks closely at a new transnational movement of televangelist Buddhist monks, who form part of the “Mahamevnāva Monastery” in Sri Lanka. These monks publicly proclaim their support for a state of Gautama Buddha (*gautama buddha rājya*) that is governed by the authentic doctrine (*saebae dahama*). They also encourage their followers to liberate themselves from all suffering (*siyalu dukin*) by attaining nirvana in this life. This Mahamevnāva group believes that most everyday Buddhists fail to live up to the Buddha's teaching and the Noble Eightfold Path to nirvana because they do not fully understand the language in which the teaching has been preserved.

¹ See among others: de Silva-Wijeyeratne 2014; Schonthal 2016; Frydenlund 2017; Harris 2018; Kyaw 2019; , Tonsakulrungruang 2020.

Mahamevnāva believes, not unlike constitutional draftspersons, that the correct language – in the form of accurate vernacular translations of the Buddha’s teaching – might solve the problem. Although the monks of this group claim to maintain a separation of religion and political life and actively cultivate an air of other-worldliness, they actually use the status and prestige that Sinhala acquires through the Constitution to argue for its use in sacred contexts. In their case, Mahamevnāva insists that a reform of Buddhism ought to involve a reform of the language used in rituals and textual practices. More specifically, they believe that Buddhist practices ought to shift from Pāli, the Buddhist canonical and ritual language to Sinhala (Harvey 2012), the majority language of the Sinhalese Buddhists which is one of the two official languages in the country (Dharmadasa 2000).

As a linguistic anthropologist, I draw upon tools of linguistic analysis and ethnography to offer a unique viewpoint on the interrelations of Buddhism and constitutional law. More specifically, I use the concept of linguistic ideologies, by which I mean “the ideas with which participants and observers frame their understanding of linguistic varieties and map those understandings onto people, events, and activities that are significant to them,” (Irvine and Gal 2000) in order to explain the influence of constitutional law on Buddhist practices. This chapter shows how Mahamevnāva has taken the linguistic ideology of Sinhala nationalism, the ideology which was absolutely central to constitutional practice in Sri Lanka and made it a central tenet of Buddhist practice. The group has also taken a core idea of Sri Lankan constitutionalism – that the law of the land should be accessible to and representative of the “nation,” and turned it into a soteriological principle of direct access to nirvana. By making these points, I suggest that both the Constitution and Mahamevnāva’s Buddhist reforms embody similar forms of linguistic ideology in which the ideal state – for example either the Republic of Sri Lanka or the ideal Buddhist state – can be realized by creating “public” texts for the uplift of the “nation.”

In what follows, I will first sketch the histories of constitutional debates on the Sinhala language in colonial and postcolonial Sri Lanka and their nationalist underpinnings. I will then consider the emergence of the Mahamevnāva monastic group and their interpretation of Buddhism, language, and state. In contrast to the popular idea that Buddhism influences public law in many South and Southeast Asian societies, I demonstrate that constitutional design and interpretation have also come to influence Buddhism.

7.2 LANGUAGE POLICY AND MONASTIC POLITICS IN POST-INDEPENDENCE SRI LANKA

In postcolonial constitutional debates in Sri Lanka, the issue of the “national language” became one of the major themes of both religious and political spheres.²

² Regarding the need to establish a national language, D. B. Jayatilaka, an active member of the Buddhist revival, stated: “It is impossible for a people to grow to their full manhood, to their

A number of lay and monastic groups have been concerned with protecting the linguistic preeminence of the ethnic majority Sinhalese while at the same time ensuring the safeguarding of Buddhism, the main religion of the ethnic Sinhalese.³ Buddhist monks allied with politicians and political parties which promised to secure the authority of the Sinhala language and Buddhism. According to some scholars, the development of this relationship between politically engaged monks and Sinhalese nationalist politicians was an opposition to the secular, Western-style government that was implemented during colonialism and continued to be used in the newly sovereign nation (Kapferer 1998).

Religio-linguistic politics based on ethnic outbidding gained pace, especially in the early 1950s in post-independence Sri Lanka, with the formation of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) under the leadership of S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike.⁴ During the general election in 1956, Bandaranaike promised to safeguard the interests of the Sinhalese Buddhists by offering populist social reforms such as the introduction of the Sinhala-only official language policy. His attempts to reform the status of official language/s echoed the dominant “one nation–one language” ideology which grew during the colonial period as a reaction against the dominance of English. Sinhala-only politics came to be seen as a tool of decolonization. This fed a growing culture of linguistic nationalism which was, as K. M. De Silva points out, a form of “populist nationalism, in contrast to the elitist constitutionalism of the early years after independence” (De Silva 1986, 164).

In the decade following independence in 1948, Buddhist pressure groups – mainly monastic organizations – campaigned for the adoption of a Sinhala-only policy, and for the restoration of the “rightful status” of Buddhism (Phadnis 1976, 65). The newly

fullest stature, unless the individuals that compose that people have a language of their own, in which they give expression to their highest and best thoughts” (*Debates, LC* 1928: 367). Jayatilaka emphasizes the necessity of replacing English with a language that appropriately reflects an authentic Sri Lankan identity. He also supports the cause for making Sinhala the national language and recognizes the Sinhalese people as the founders of the island, and the perceived need for them to reclaim authority over their country.

³ The Sinhalese people who are predominantly Buddhist are the major ethnic group in Sri Lanka. They constitute, according to government statistics from 2012, 74.9 percent of the population. The Sinhala–Buddhist identity in Sri Lanka derives from two factors: (1) the Sinhala language and (2) the Buddhist religion. These factors have been enthusiastically promoted in the development of a Sinhalese Buddhist ethno-religious nationalism in post-colonial politics as part of the larger discourse on nation building. They have also been at the core of the discourse on constitutional reform and legislature.

⁴ Bandaranaike relied upon socially and politically influential groups, albeit non-elite, popularly known as *panchamaha balavegaya* (five great forces), which included the Buddhist clergy, indigenous physicians, teachers, farmers, and workers to carry his political message to his major vote base in Sinhalese villages. To win the general elections of 1956, Bandaranaike also formed an electoral alliance with the pro-Sinhala nationalist parties. The election coalition manifesto declared “Sinhala only within 24 hours” with “reasonable use of Tamil.” The ‘Sinhala-only’ movement had developed and, under the influence of the monks, had become linked to the issue of state support for Buddhism (Tambiah 1992: 42–44).

formed Eksath Bhikku Peramuna (EBP) or the United Monks Front, for example, played a critical role in the 1956 general election as a major political pressure group. They presented a ten-point agenda (the Dasa Panatha) to Bandaranaike which included making Sinhala the only official language and giving Buddhism its “rightful” place (Tambiah 1992, 42–44).

Shortly after Bandaranaike was elected as the prime minister in 1956, the parliament passed the Sinhala Only Act,⁵ which made the majority language the sole official language of the country. Government institutions such as the Department of Official Language Affairs and the Department of Swabhasha were brought under the purview of the Prime Minister from October 1, 1956. A separate Ministry of Cultural Affairs, which was largely mandated with preserving Sinhalese culture and Buddhism, was also established in that year. In accordance with the Sinhala Only Act, a number of activities were carried out by the Official Languages Department. This included publishing the Government Gazette in Sinhala, franking official letters in Sinhala, issuing important government circulars in Sinhala, printing official publications in Sinhala, compiling glossaries of technical terms, and implementing language training classes for government servants. In addition, two major *pirivenas*, or “oriental study centers,” the Vidyalandara and Vidyodaya, were transformed into universities, further encouraging the study of Sinhala and Buddhism with the benefit of added government funding. These attempts led to a cultural revolution in the following years, popularly known as “the Revolution of 1956” (*panas haye peraliya*).

Predictably, the Sinhala-only language policy marginalized non-Sinhala speaking minorities in the multilingual country. It not only promoted religio-ethno-linguistic nationalism on both sides of the ethnic divide, but became a key source of frustration and anger among Tamil nationalist groups, including a variety of militant movements (most notably the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) that gained influence beginning in the 1980s (Wilson 1975). Ethnic riots against Tamils erupted in July 1983 in the Sinhala-dominant south, and the subsequent civil war conditions further complicated the problems related to linguistic rights of the minority Tamils.⁶

During this time, the notion of Tamil as a minority language had been used as a justification for separatist aspirations among Tamils. Even the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord signed by Sri Lankan President J. R. Jayewardene and Indian Prime

⁵ The Sinhala Only bill was introduced by Bandaranaike in the House of Representatives, supported by the main opposition UNP voting with the government and was opposed by the Tamil parties (Federal Party and All Ceylon Tamil Congress) and leftist parties (Lanka Sama Samaja Party and Communist Party). Because Tamil was not given the same official language status as Sinhala, minority Tamils actively tendered their support to the Federal Party’s nonviolence campaigns.

⁶ Discussing this period of ‘linguistic nationalism of civil war,’ DeVotta (2004) says: “while economic rivalry and ethnic jealousies partly lay behind the 1983 riots, the major reasons were the Sinhala-only policy and the culture of ethnic outbidding and institutional decay that the language issue initiated, enculturated, and legitimated” (157).

Minister Rajiv Gandhi in July 1987, which declared that Sri Lanka is “a multi-ethnic and multilingual plural society,” could not ameliorate the situation. The country was unsettled by mass protests organized by monks, political parties, and lay Buddhist associations under the powerful umbrella organization *Mavbima Sirakeeme Wiyaparaya*, or “The movement for safeguarding the motherland” (Amunugama 1991). Tamil and English were, in the end, proclaimed to be official languages, along with Sinhala in 1988, as a part of the 13th amendment to the Constitution. Tamil was raised to the status of an official language, while English was assigned the position of a “link language.”⁷ Nevertheless, linguistic nationalism and Sinhala-only attitudes still endure among many parts of the population.

7.3 RESURGENCE OF SINHALA-BUDDHIST NATIONALISM IN POSTWAR SRI LANKA

Sri Lanka saw a resurgence of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism after the end of its three-decade-long civil war in 2009, with the emergence of numerous extremist groups of Buddhist monks.⁸ Yet, the driving ideological force that fueled postwar ethnonationalism has shifted from Sinhalese ethno-linguistic nationalism to the global rhetoric of war on terror. For instance, in 2012, an extreme Sinhalese Buddhist organization called the Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Power Force or BBS) was created under the leadership of Ven. Galagodaththe Gnānasara and Ven. Kirama Wimalajothi.⁹ One of the key objectives of this organization was to draw attention to the threats of minority ethnic and religious groups, especially extremist Islamic groups, faced by the Sinhalese Buddhists (Zuhair 2016, 20). The BBS claimed that their major goal was to protect the rights of Sinhalese Buddhists who have no international links, in the face of both internal and external threats. Along with other less prominent organizations such as Sinhala Ravaya, Sinha-le and Mahasohon Balakaya, the BBS launched a virulent anti-Muslim campaign and finally led violent actions against the Muslims in various parts of the island. These movements draw upon this post-independence history of Sinhala-only politics, blending it further with Buddhist nationalism.

⁷ This part of the 13th amendment to the constitution stated, “Tamil shall also be an official language.” However, the legality of the word “also” was not explained in the relevant constitutional provision. As K. M. De Silva (1993) observed, “[a]lthough there is some ambiguity about the position of English, its legal position appears to be almost equal to Sinhalese and Tamil in many areas” (299). The provisions of the 13th amendment were clarified and indeed consolidated by the 16th amendment. The benefits of the 13th amendment to the Constitution have not, in fact, percolated down to the Tamil-speaking population in the country due to the lack of policy implementation. The Tamil language was afforded parity status only after Tamil youths mobilized militarily, seeking a separate state, Eelam.

⁸ For a comparative discussion on the rise of Buddhist Power Force (BBS) and militant Buddhist groups in Myanmar see Schonthal and Walton (2016).

⁹ Ven. Kirama Wimalajothi subsequently disavowed the group.

7.4 EMERGENCE OF THE MAHAMEVNĀVA MONASTERY

During this time, a nonviolent movement of televangelist Buddhist monks, collectively part of the Mahamevnāva Monastery (Pāli: Mahāmeghavana), named after the legendary monastery founded by Mahinda when Buddhism was introduced into the island in the third century BCE, has emerged under the guidance of Ven. Kiribathgoda Gnānānanda.¹⁰ Gnānānanda's movement has challenged mainstream Buddhist nationalistic politics by criticizing common linguistic and ritual practices with the aim of rediscovering *saebae dahama*, or the authentic teaching of the Buddha. Defining its religious mission and the Mahamevnāva's objectives, the website states: "Mahamevnāva Buddhist Monastery was established to benefit the spiritual development of human beings through the teachings of Buddha. Founded in 1999 in Sri Lanka by Ven. Kiribathgoda Gnānānanda Thero, its sole purpose is to spread the original teachings of the Buddha. The monastery is a warm and welcoming place for everyone to investigate true happiness through Dhamma and meditation."¹¹ Several key messages are embedded in this seemingly banal welcome. First, Mahamevnāva identifies with the *original* teachings of the Buddha, which they believe are found in the sutras of the Pali canon. Mahamevnāva's stress on the sutras is part of a more general textual orientation for the community, which claims to base its practices not simply on the authority of the Pali texts themselves, but on a particular, authorized Sinhala translation of those texts that the group has produced. Using these texts, they consider the doctrine (dharma) and the monastic code (*vinaya*) as the twin pillars of *Buddha Nītiya* (the law of the Buddha), which functions as their religious constitution. According to Ven. Gnānānanda, Mahamevnāva's mission consists of three major aims, namely, helping the *buddha sāsana* (teaching of the Buddha)¹² to endure, ending the suffering of *samsāra* in this life, and preserving the teaching of the Buddha for future generations. He is critical of the current state of Buddhist practice: "What we are doing now is just visiting monks at the temple and talking nonsense with them till evening. We do not discuss anything related to the teaching of the Buddha. Even monks show no enthusiasm to teach anything. We should change this" (Gnānānanda 2010, 36).

¹⁰ Ven. Gnānānanda was originally born into a Catholic family, but he claims that his birth inspired his parents to become Buddhist and to raise him as a Buddhist. After becoming a monk in his teens, he entered the traditional monastic educational system, but soon left the university in search of a more direct path to realizing the True Dhamma in the exact way that the Buddha had taught it. After spending time as an ascetic in the Himalayas – in imitation of the Buddha – Gnānānanda returned to Sri Lanka and began studying the sutras of the Buddha directly. Having gained a realization of the Dharma, he founded the Mahamevnāva monastery as a forest hermitage in Polgahawela (Berkwitz 2016, 112).

¹¹ Mahamevnāva, "Starting of the monastery," <https://mahamevnawa.lk/en/about-us/> (Accessed May 2, 2021).

¹² Generally, the term *sāsana* designates everything that is related to the Buddha's teaching: Buddhist doctrine, its propagation, study, and putting into practice.

Gnānānanda's reformist stance seeks to replace common forms of Buddhism, which he claims have been politicized and influenced by non-Buddhist practices. In its place, he advocates for a fully 'spiritual' form of the tradition, which might end the suffering of all. The implication here is that there are other types of so-called Buddhist practices that revolve around false views, not taught by the Buddha. Mahamevnāva ridicules monastic political activism and popular rituals, such as tying banners around Bodhi trees (which are thought to dispel the negative fruits of karma) or reciting protective verses in Pāli by rote memory. These, Mahamevnāva's monks claim, are ineffective for true spiritual development, and secondary to the practice of the path to liberation that the Buddha has outlined. They lament that the traditional Buddhists (*sāmpradaika buddhayo*) who do not follow the noble path to nirvana are Buddhists only by name (*namata buddhayo*) and are misled by the opportunist monks and politicians who emphasize this-worldly benefits and material wealth. According to Mahamevnāva, the correct path that should be followed by "True Buddhists" (*saebae buddhayo*) includes developing an understanding and practicing of the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and the system of Dependent Co-origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*).

Ven. Gnānānanda has argued that mere knowledge of the religious ideals that were revealed by the Buddha is not enough to be a True Buddhist. Rather, those ideals must be enacted to become free from suffering in this world. He claims that the doctrine of dependent origination, *paṭicca-samuppāda*, is the real dharma, and should be investigated by people to develop their insight and to become virtuous persons (*satpuruṣa*): "The Buddha's teaching is for the wise person. This wise person can belong to any caste, clan, race, or ethnic group. The Buddha's teaching is not limited to a single nation, it is for the wise man. If there is no wise man in one clan, no one is able to reach out the teaching" (Gnānānanda 2016, 95–96). Ven. Gnānānanda often states that the major threat to Buddhism is the majority Buddhists themselves, who do not follow the teaching of the Buddha; therefore, they are responsible for the declining of the Buddha's dispensation, the *buddha sāšana*, in contemporary society. Even though politicized Buddhist monks and their followers fought for the political status of the Sinhala language and Buddhist religion, Mahamevnāva posits that they have neither taught their followers to pursue the correct path of the doctrine, nor hastened the ideal "kingdom/state of the Buddha" (*gautama buddha rājya*).

7.5 ME GAUTAMA BUDDHA RĀJYAYAY: "THIS IS THE STATE OF GAUTAMA BUDDHA"

The desired *gautama buddha rājya* is not a specific polity defined by a set of secular laws, geographical boundaries, or specific political authority, but a more general climate in which the Buddhist doctrine reigns supreme. Consider, for example, the following statement in their official print magazine, *Mahamēgha*:

If there is an undefeatable supreme state in the entire human history, that is the State of Gautama Buddha (*gautama buddha rājya*) and neither humans nor super-human forces can overthrow the powerful rule of the supreme lord Buddha. In this supreme state of Gautama Buddha there are no territorial boundaries, ethnic disparities, or any other divisions such as clergy-laity, gender. Hence the unity of this state cannot be broken. Anyone who believes in the supreme power of the Buddha and accepts him as the only king and his doctrine as the supreme rule, establishes strong connections with the other noble citizens. They are protected by the unity of the state. True guardians of the state of Gautama Buddha are the ones who follow the Buddha and his doctrine (“Gautama Buddha Rājyaye Maha Rajun Sarana Yamu” 2015).

What is notable here is that Mahamevnāva’s definition of the Buddhist state appears to draw inspiration from Sri Lanka’s secular Constitution. Similar to protecting Buddhism’s “foremost place” in the Sri Lankan Constitution, which also protects the rights and freedoms of all citizens, the *buddha rājya* of Mahamevnāva’s celebrates the “true Buddhist” which anyone can be.

A secular-legal mentality also appears to apply to the Mahamevnāva’s criticisms of the activities of politically active Buddhist monks who, in their estimation, attempted to rule the country rather than practice the doctrine or guide their lay followers on the path of nirvana. For Mahamevnāva, the disappearance of true dharma is caused mostly by the decline of the *vinaya* (monastic discipline) with the emergence of such politicized Buddhist monks. Ven. Gnānānanda posits:

We should clearly understand the [real] followers of [the Buddha]. We follow the *maharath* (monks who attained nirvana), who followed the noble teaching of the Buddha to achieve different levels of spiritual liberation. Monks in the Buddha’s time dedicated themselves to cultivate *sīla* (virtuous conduct), *samādhi* (concentration) and *prajñā* (wisdom). We can also develop *śraddhā* (faith) when we think about these noble followers of the Buddha. Can you build *śraddhā* when you see a Buddhist monk making a political speech on a stage? Or by seeing a misbehaving monk in a protest? . . . We should have the ability to differentiate the followers of the Buddha from the others. Who is on the path of doctrine? Who is not? Then, you will realize who is truthful and who is not. (Gnānānanda 2010, 31–32)

Mahamevnāva laments that the decline of the “true teaching” in the island occurred from time to time due to both internal and external forces. For instance, Ven. Gnānānanda posits that the historical decline of Gautama Buddha’s *sāsana* happened in the late medieval period of Sri Lankan history, when “Mahāyāna influences” arrived from India and led people to aspire to become Buddhas and to see the future Buddha Maitreya (Gnānānanda 2004, 42). In contemporary society, such decline is caused by the ignorance of the lay people misguided by politicized and opportunist monks.

Also apparent among Mahamevnāva Buddhists is an attitude towards the Buddha’s teaching, or dharma, that treats it as a constitution for everyday life, a

set of rules applicable to everyone in the world. In their rendering, Buddhism is not merely a religion of blind followers, but contains the true principles of the world itself, the *loka dharmaya*. Due to influences of other religious rituals and misinterpretation of the dharma, the philosophical value of the dharma has been covered with false faith. During an interview I conducted with Ven. Bandarawela Saddhasheela, a young Mahamevnāva monk who was residing in Mahamevnāva Monastery in California, he said that the terms Buddhist or Buddhism themselves emerged very much later, when the idea of religion became prominent. For him, there was no religion called Buddhism during the Buddha's time and the followers did not identify themselves as Buddhists. What Siddhartha Gautama did, according to Ven. Saddhasheela, was to preach *loka darmaya*, and the people who had the wisdom and accumulated good karma could realize it through listening to him.¹³

Mahamevnāva's focus on the *gautama buddha rājya*, which is governed by these dharmic ideals, serves to orient the group's reformist project towards a transnational Buddhist citizenship. Explaining who is a "True Buddhist citizen" (*saebae bauddha puravaesiya*), Ven. Gnānānanda explains:

We all are blessed because we have the opportunity to listen to the teachings of the Buddha. There are no divisions based on ethnicity, caste, religion or clan in it . . . Nobody is superior because of the language he speaks. No matter whether he speaks English, Tamil, or Sinhala, it does not make anyone superior. Even the skin color does not make anyone superior . . . Anyone can be superior depending on the good or bad karma he commits. (Gnānānanda 2016, 119)

This broadly inclusive stance has assisted Mahamevnāva in expanding their movement across multiple continents and creating a single ethical community. Since the establishment of the first branch of the temple at Polgahawela, Sri Lanka, in August 1999, the organization has expanded to seventy branches in Sri Lanka and worldwide including the United States, Australia, India, Canada, Germany, England, and Dubai. This network is instrumental in establishing their imagined state of Gautama Buddha across geographical, ethnic, caste, and class boundaries.

Mahamevnāva has also adopted modern media and technology to disseminate their interpretation of Buddhism among the members of this transnational Buddhist state. It is the first organized Sri Lankan Buddhist group to adopt multimedia technologies – including TV, radio, print media, and internet – as part of their religious mission. They also use modern televisual technologies such as drones, camera-equipped helicopters, and other audio-visual techniques to create new ritual spectacles, meaningful for media modalities such as TV, radio, DVD, and the internet, and to make these rituals accessible to their wider transnational audience.

¹³ Bandarawela Saddhasheela, interview with the author, December 2012.

7.6 LINGUISTIC REFORMATION IN THE BUDDHIST STATE

While Mahamevnāva's reformation poses challenges to mainstream Buddhist monastic politics and rituals, it holds different ideologies about the religious language of their imagined Buddhist state. On the one hand, they stress that the authentic teachings of the Buddha can be found in the Pāli canon. On the other hand, they argue that the doctrine should be rendered in a simple, vernacular language so that Buddhists may understand it. In this way, Mahamevnāva downgrades the authoritative status of Pāli in traditional Buddhist practice, while also questioning the language's inherent sacredness and disavowing the idea that simply chanting Pāli verses produces supernatural powers.

This attitude towards Pāli is an innovation. Although monastic politics during the colonial and postcolonial period has been anchored in the status of Sinhala, Pāli central importance in Sri Lankan Buddhism was never in dispute. Pāli is an Indo-Aryan language, and its origins go back to the ancient Indian language called Māgadhi, spoken in the state of Magadha where the Buddha spent the greater part of his life. Theravāda Buddhists believe that the truest and most authentic versions of the earliest and most important scriptures, such as the "The Three Baskets," were preserved in Pāli.¹⁴ The *Dīpavaṃsa* and *Mahāvāṃsa*, the two major chronicles in Sri Lanka, relate the writing down of the scriptures in Pāli during the reign of the Sri Lankan King Vattagāmani Abhaya (89–77 BCE). In some cases, Pāli was even used as a medium of communication between kingdoms in the premodern Buddhist world (Blackburn 2010).

In fact, a second language ideology runs alongside the Sinhala-only attitude described above. This ideology, which is held among many Buddhists in Sri Lanka, maintains that Sinhala is a "low" and colloquialized language derived from the "high" language of Pāli, in which Buddhist texts and rituals are preserved (Ferguson 1959, Gair 1986, Paolillo 1997). Moreover, given that Pāli is imagined to be the language of the Buddha himself, its sound and appearance are thought to be inherently efficacious, capable of generating karmic merit and having a protective effect (Hackett 2011). Deegalle Mahinda documents a number of verbal rituals

¹⁴ In Theravāda Buddhism, Pali scripture is treated as the sacred medium, as it enshrines the word of the Buddha – particularly the dhamma and *vinaya*. It is generally known as the Pali canon, or Buddhist canon, because it contains the fundamental principles of Buddhism. The Pali term for the Pali canon is *Tiṭṭhaka*, from *ti* 'three' + *ṭṭhaka* 'text, scripture, or basket (where things are collected)', which literally designates its three major divisions of teachings: The *Vinaya Piṭaka* is the collection of monastic rules laid down by the Buddha for monks and nuns. The *Sutta Piṭaka* is the collection of discourses, or specific teachings that were adaptively expounded by the Buddha to suit the individual, place, and event or situation in question, together with supplemental material. The *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* is the collection of the teachings that are purely substantive or academic, without reference to any individuals or events, and without any supplemental material. The Pali canon is not a single-volume scripture, but an enormous set of scriptures containing as many as 84,000 textual units.

and preaching styles prevalent in traditional Sri Lankan Buddhism that exemplify the place of Pāli acoustics in those rituals (2006). Among these are the modern poetic genre of preaching called *kavi bana*, devotional hymns or *gāthā*, and protective verses (*paritta*), that form a central part of many Buddhist rituals. For devotees, the sacredness of these verbal rituals is derived from the acoustics of Pāli language and unique verbal styles.

For Mahamevnāva, Pāli is an unintelligible language for their followers, which makes them ignorant of true dhamma. Therefore, Mahamevnāva argue that colloquial Sinhala should be used for religious activities, as it is for other modern activities including public law. Highlighting the importance of comprehensible language in achieving their religious mission, the official website of Mahamevnāva states:

Here the Buddha's teachings are presented in modern language that is easy to understand. What makes Mahamevnāva unique is the effort to bring the Supreme Dhamma to listeners in its original form. Because of this, both young and old listen to the Dhamma and practice virtue, concentration, mindfulness and wisdom to realize the Four Noble Truths revealed by the Supreme Buddha. Presently there are more than 650 monks, more than 100 Anagarika nuns, and thousands of lay disciples practicing Dhamma at Mahamevnāva Monasteries around the world. (Mahamevnāva 2021)

The program of Mahamevnāva is in large part directed toward bringing Sinhalese Buddhists toward an authentic understanding and practice of the Buddha's dhamma through simplified language. Their emphasis on simple Sinhala in disseminating dhamma serves to orient their teachings to a transnational Buddhist audience affiliated to their branch temples around the world. Ven. Gnānānanda maintains that he was able to learn the true dhamma by studying the Pāli canon directly in Pāli, which required years of study. By translating these texts into vernacular, he hopes people will arrive at a similar knowledge of the truth discovered and taught by the Buddha.

Ven. Gnānānanda's linguistic ideology also aims to 'disenchant' Pāli by clearing from some of its magical associations. For example, he posits in one of his sermons that most Buddhist monks do not know the meaning of many of the protective verses they chant in Pāli. According to him, these monks utter aspirated sounds in these Pāli verses expecting those sounds to extinguish the non-human evil forces and that there is no logic behind this other than ignorance. These misbeliefs, he points out, are caused by ignorance of the true dhamma, one which has existed among Buddhists for centuries. In a statement that resembles the interpretive attitude of many public law jurists, Ven. Gnānānanda insists that protection from the spiritual law (the dhamma) can be expected only when one fully and accurately understands it.

The parallels between Sri Lankan constitutional law and 'true' Buddhist practice were even more pronounced in a discussion I conducted with a Mahamevnāva monk, who argued that:

even though the Constitution of Sri Lanka favors Sinhala and Buddhism as this is a Sinhala-Buddhist country, our monks have failed to disseminate the Buddha's word in intelligible language so that the entire Buddhist state is at risk. Real followers of the Buddha are not the Buddhists by birth who blindly follow the religious rituals or recite hymns and protective verses (*paritta*) in Pāli by heart, but the ones who understand the doctrine and practice meditation.¹⁵

In other words, in order to fully realize the guarantees of Sri Lanka's Constitution and to safeguard Buddhism, Buddhists had to fully understand the teachings of the Buddha. According to this monk and Mahamevnāva more generally, the proper enactment of Sri Lanka's constitutional language depended on the proper recognition of the Buddha's religious language.

7.7 POPULARIZING RELIGIOUS TEXTS AND RITUALS IN SINHALA

In order to make colloquial Sinhala the medium of the true doctrine, Mahamevnāva has translated the threefold Buddhist canon and protective verses from Pāli to simple Sinhala, and they are developing novel forms of chanting and devotional rituals. In the book series of Mahamevnāva Tipiṭaka translation entitled *Mahamevnāve Bodhi Gnāna Tripiṭaka Granta Mālā*, there is a Sinhala verse translated from Pāli highlighted in the title page. The verse explains that “the dhamma (doctrine) and *vinaya* (monastic code) are shining only when they are exposed, not when they are hidden” (Mahamevnāve Bodhigāna Tripiṭaka Granta Mālā 2004), indicating that the teachings of the Buddha should be in a comprehensible language in order for the followers to easily understand them.

In addition to translating the Tipiṭaka and protective verses from Pāli to Sinhala, Mahamevnāva has published more than 100 books in simple Sinhala, including books of Buddhist stories aimed at children. Their *Mahamēgha* monthly magazine attracts thousands of Sinhalese readers while the Shraddha television channel, Damviru radio channel, and YouTube video channel are popularizing among the Sinhalese around the world a vernacular version of Buddhism through innovative televised rituals.

These activities of vernacularization of religious texts can be understood in the larger discourse of religious language planning. As Sinnemäki and Saarikivi suggest, there are two competing processes at work in language planning in many religious communities: the preservation of doctrinal purity and the unity of the community, on the one hand, and the need to understand the sacred texts and doctrine, on the other (2019). They argue that translations that alter the understanding and expression of a religion may prove harmful for unity and continuity, because languages never have identical semantics and the metaphors typical of each language are

¹⁵ A Mahamevnāva monk in discussion with the author, January 2020.

culture-bound. The same conflict arose when the Mahamevnāva Tipiṭaka translations provoked a backlash from mainstream Buddhist monks. For instance, the late Ven. Bellanwila Wimalaratana, a well-known and outspoken Buddhist monk, at a public gathering in Colombo in 2013 criticized Mahamevnāva's use of "vulgar Sinhala" (*hadu Sinhala*) for the Tipiṭaka translations because, according to him, it challenges the purity of the dhamma in Pāli language and that of the Buddhist tradition. When I asked Ven. Saddhasheela of the Mahamevnāva to comment on these allegations during my encounters with him, he claimed that the purity or impurity of dhamma relies not upon the vehicle in which it is transported, but the accuracy of the content.

Most recently, Mahamevnāva translated the *Mahāvamsa* (Great Chronicle), the most celebrated literary work in Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism, into simple Sinhala from Pāli. Originally written during the sixth century CE in the Anuradhapura period and attributed to a Buddhist monk named Mahānāma, the *Mahāvamsa* consists of thirty-seven chapters describing the founding of the Sinhala kingdom by Vijaya, who migrated from India during the sixth century BCE, as well as the history of Buddhism up to king Mahāsena, who lived during the third century CE.¹⁶ More importantly, the chronicle legitimates the relationship between Sri Lanka and Buddhism by claiming that Buddha chose the island to preserve and promote his teachings. Sinhalese Buddhists thus ardently hold that Sri Lanka is *sinhaladīpa* (the island of the Sinhalese) and *dhammadīpa* (the island containing Buddha's teachings).

The *Mahāvamsa* was first translated into literary Sinhala between 1877 and 1883, during the British colonial period by Ven. Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala and Don Andris de Silva. Ven. Gnānānanda translated the chronicle again into colloquial Sinhala and the final volume of the series of the translation was launched in 2019 during a ceremony named *Mahāvanshabimāni* held in the Mahamevnāva temple in Kaduwela. The president of Sri Lanka (2019–2022), Gotabhaya Rajapakse, who was then a presidential candidate, attended the ceremony as the chief guest, and the first copy of the translation was handed over to him by Ven. Gnānānanda.

At the launch ceremony, Ven. Gnānānanda made a speech where he stated that all Sri Lankans, including Buddhist monks, are ignorant of history. Therefore, according to him, these Buddhist monks shamelessly propagate ideas against both Buddhism and the history of the Sinhalese people. The only way that the nation can be protected is by making the *Mahāvamsa* available for a broad readership. In

¹⁶ The *Mahāvamsa* played a decisive role in shaping the modern ideologies of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism, with its depiction of the Sinhalese king Dutugemunu (who reigned between 161 and 137 BCE) as the chronicle's supreme hero. According to the chronicle, King Dutugemunu vanquished the foreign non-Buddhist Tamil king Elara and unified the country as a centralised Sinhalese Buddhist kingdom, with the blessings and staunch support of the sangha, the Buddhist clergy. Thus, King Dutugemunu became the historical figure of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism and revival in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

addition, Gnānānanda said that he translated the chronicle into simple Sinhala in order to make it easier for the public to read and learn about the Sinhalese nation, *buddha sāsana*, and the role of the Buddhist clergy. Strongly apparent in this speech, then, was the linkage between linguistic purity and religio-national flourishing. As with the decades of legal discussions that had occurred over the twentieth century, prioritizing Sinhala was cast as the key to ensuring the future of Sri Lanka.

Yet, Mahamevnāva has gone further to link Sinhala language with Buddhism and the idea of a Buddhist state, using the appeal of popular culture. Consider, as one example, the creation of a mega-ritual called *arahantaka vandanāva*, or “the veneration of enlightened monks,” organized in 2017 in Polonnaruwa, which included music and songs. The ritual was a massive public celebration broadcast over all Mahamevnāva’s media outlets. The opening of the ritual was a recorded song in Sinhala performed by professional singers while the attendees were engaged in the act of *arahant* veneration. The lyrics of the song describe the Buddha’s path as the only way of liberation, and with the merits people gain from *arahant* veneration, they accumulate merit toward achieving nirvana in this life. The melody of the song makes it closer to secular songs rather than to the rhythm and style of stereotypical Mahamevnāva hymns.

The incorporation of these popular aesthetic forms in religious rituals set them apart from the dominant religious public, while it appeals to the interests of a wider audience. In an interview I conducted with a woman in her mid-twenties who attended the ritual with a group of friends, she revealed that these innovative aesthetic practices are important means to distract them from popular music, which attach them to this-worldly suffering. Further, she asserted that these recorded songs can be enjoyed over and over again whenever she wants to motivate herself to practice dhamma.

Scholars recognize that the consumption of popular culture in religious or political traditions creates new forms of publics across the world. For instance, Charles Hirschkind’s work analyzes the production of Islamic recorded sermons vis-à-vis a recalibration of politics in Islamic countries (Hirschkind 2006). Junxi Qian proposes that the public singing of nationalist songs can constitute an alternative community through the agentive reinterpretation of lyrics (Qian 2014). As Shoemaker (2017) posits, the recognized characteristic of these productions is that they offer a dialogical space that resists normative tropes and complicates the ways in which audience understands marginalized groups, religious or political positions, social issues, or social life differently from the way mainstream consumers do.

In Mahamevnāva’s case, Sinhalized styles in rituals and texts allow them to constitute new religious identities within the same religion and pose challenges to the linguistic ideologies of mainstream Buddhism, establishing alternative religio-linguistic nationalism. Through the use of constitutional language for religious rituals and religious texts, Mahamevnāva attempt to democratize Buddhist practice, allowing the public to access what they believe is “true” doctrine.

Similarly, Sinhalized ritual forms and texts created by Mahamevnāva constitute a language community which is part of their imagined *gautama buddha rājya*. These rituals function as boundary markers for their group, which, like a constitutional public, binds both monks and laypeople in a single imagined collective. These textual and ritual practices confirm Michael Warner's idea that publics rely on archived and indexed records of their texts and discourses to establish "style" that allow "participants in its discourse to understand themselves as directly and actively belonging to a social entity that exists historically in secular time and has consciousness of itself, though it has no existence apart from the activity of its own discursive circulation" (2002).

7.8 CONCLUSION

The relation between Buddhism and constitutional law is not just a one-way story of Buddhist influences on public law. It is also a story of how concepts and ideas that are prominent in constitutional design and interpretation come to influence Buddhism. Mahamevnāva is a perfect example of this for two reasons. First, they have taken the linguistic ideology of Sinhalese nationalism, which was central to constitutional practice in post-independence Sri Lanka and made it the language of Buddhism. Ven. Gnānānanda has reshaped the "official" language of public Buddhism in much the same way that constitutional experts have reshaped the official public language of Sri Lanka. In both cases, a Sinhalization program has taken place. Although these Sinhalization projects did not overlap in time, they can be seen as emerging from similar and connected historical trajectories, running from colonialism to anticolonial movements, to projects of populist nationalism. In its own programs of religious reform, the Mahamevnāva group has creatively borrowed the prestige of Sinhala language – acquired through the Constitution and nationalist politics – and deployed it in religious reforms to constitute an ideal religious state. In other words, debates over constitutional law have, today, found their way into debates over Buddhism.

Second, Mahamevnāva has in its own way taken up the very concept of constitutional law: it has transformed the constitutional principle that the law of the land should be accessible to and representative of the nation and turned it into a soteriological principle – that the Buddha's dharma should be available and interpretable to all. The constitution of a country is a set of rules regulating the powers of its government and the rights and duties of its citizens. A codified constitution is one in which key provisions are collected together in a single legal document; it should be accessible and representative of its citizens. Mahamevnāva monks have borrowed this principle to make Buddhist doctrine transparent and accessible to its followers. Vernacularizing religious and historical texts, rebuilding religious rituals, and circulating them among a transnational audience through modern media technologies are key strategies in a broader mission of democratizing Buddhist doctrine – and

with it, the pursuit of nirvana. Both of these interactions between the Constitution and the Mahamevnāva reforms embody similar forms of linguistic ideology in which the ideal state can be realized by creating “public” texts for the uplift of the “nation.”

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