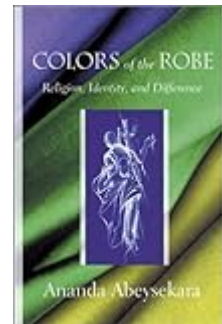


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Ananda Abeysekara. *Colors of the Robe: Religion, Identity, and Difference.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002. x + 271 pp. \$44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57003-467-1.



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Ananda Abeysekara offers a valuable and insightful exploration of the ways in which “native” discourses about Buddhism, politics, and violence shape ideas about “identity” and “difference.” In order to accomplish his aims, the author first lays out the theoretical framework that will serve as the interpretive lens for the remainder of the book. As pointed out in the first chapter, this framework builds on David Scott’s recent work *Formations of Ritual: Colonial and Anthropological Discourses on the Sinhala Yaktovil* (1994) in Sri Lanka, particularly his concern for locating genealogies about what constitutes authentic Buddhism. Taking Scott’s work as a template, the remainder of the book examines “the formations and deformations of contingent relations between ‘religious’ identity and difference” (p. 4) by turning to several native debates that challenged and shaped ideas about what can and cannot count as Buddhism.

Chapters 2 through 7 of *Colors of the Robe* take up this issue of identity and difference by exploring a number of discussions in which, and through which, ideas regarding who is an ideal monk and what constitutes acceptable monastic roles became shaped. In the second chapter Abeysekara contests previous dichotomies drawn between tradition and modernity (or big tradition and little tradition) by focusing his attention on the processes by which “authoritative understanding about Buddhism

and monastic identity” is produced (p. 56). Drawing the reader’s attention to several native debates pertaining to “what kinds of ‘Buddhist’ practice should be performed by whom” (p. 41) as well as to “what persons and practices constitute Buddhism and monkhood” (p. 43), the author steers clear of the need to present an essentialized conception of Buddhism, a conception, he argues, that is often based on and derived from asocial and ahistorical sources.

In the third chapter the author examines the interaction between Buddhism and politics. Investigating how the relationship between Buddhism and politics became re-shaped from the 1940s (with D. S. Senanayake) to the 1990s (with R. Premadasa), Abeysekara challenges some of the previous discussions regarding the “decay” of Buddhism by arguing that they are often based on a Western (colonial) story of secularism and progress. In studying several of the debates which “enable different persons and practices to come” into view and through which “the boundaries between religion and politics” become shaped, the author is not so much keen to assert claims about the relationship between Buddhism and politics as he is interested in illustrating how the very categories of “politics” and “reform” come to be historically constructed and defined in Sri Lanka.

In chapter 4 Abeysekara examines the life and ca-

reer of two popular monks—Pelpola Vipassi and Kananke Dhammadinna—in order to look at how conceptions of monastic roles and service become reconstituted as well as how new ways of being a Buddhist emerge. Paying particular attention to the open-market policies that emerged with the Jayawardene government and the role that they played in redefining monastic vocations, this chapter reveals how the concept of social service became transformed from a religious ideal (providing religious service) to a practical one (economic development). Looking closely at the debates and crises that emerged around these two monks (for example, Vipassi’s conversion to Mahayana Buddhism and Dhammadinna’s tendency to break, openly, the *Vinaya* prescriptions), Abeysekera illustrates some of the ways in which “‘new’ forms of being a Buddhist monk” became constituted and transmitted as well as, in a more general sense, how religious identity and difference become authorized throughout history.

In the fifth chapter, Abeysekera analyzes how the presidency of Ranasinghe Premadasa led to differing configurations regarding the relationship between Buddhism and the nation. Investigating some of Premadasa’s “religious” accomplishments as well as his alliances with certain well-known monks, the author provides evidence for how competing narratives authorize and threaten the relationship between Buddhism and the nation. As well as being relevant to Sri Lanka, the main focus of the chapter extends to other conversations about religion and nationalism in South Asia and beyond as it looks at how religion or religious movements in general play “an instrumental part in the processes of establishing and defining the identity of the ‘nation’” (p. 170).

Chapter 6 turns away from the political arena. In this chapter Abeysekera considers more closely how authoritative claims about Buddhism and difference are made, debated, and defended by turning to some of the recent debates that surrounded several competing monks, monasteries, the state, and the laity. Focusing specifically on the events pertaining to the recent establishment of the Dambulla temple ordination lineage as well as the building of a hotel in the culturally and environmentally sensitive town of Kandalama, this chapter demonstrates how shifting notions of identity, practices, and rules actually reshape the ways in which ideas about Buddhism, the true Buddhist monk, and tradition are formed. Through a skillful weaving of stories about recent events and, more importantly, key figures in the debate, the author reveals

how moral representations of identity and difference occur through particular conjunctures or “sites of possibility.”

The final chapter challenges previous studies of Buddhism and violence, particularly those that presuppose that authentic Buddhism is apolitical and that the categories of religion and violence are diametrically opposed. Rather than taking notions such as “violence” and “Buddhism” to be self-evident, this book treats these concepts as discursive categories and examines a variety of discourses that have authorized the image of a fearless monk ready to die while defending the religion. More specifically, Abeysekera explores how ideas such as violence and Buddhism are constantly being redefined through authoritative debates between different political parties, monastic figures, national events, and cultural crises by drawing on a wide variety of newspaper sources, narratives, books, and events.

A major strength of this work is the way in which the author weaves together textual, ethnographic, and historical materials to support his theory that “what can and cannot count as Buddhism, culture, and difference alter within specific native debates” (p. 3). At the same time as being culturally and chronologically specific, Abeysekera’s focus on “the ways in which diverse persons, practices, discourses, and institutions conjoin to foreground competing definitions” (p. 3) makes the implications of his argument pertinent beyond modern-day Sri Lanka. While the theoretical implications that underlie *Colors of the Robe* are a major strength of the book, they are also, at times, its weakness. Indeed, the theoretical arguments are repeated frequently and, at times, appear to overshadow the material presented in the chapters. It may well be, however, that the author’s very emphasis on theory is what makes the book appealing to a wider audience and, no doubt, his cautionary statement that all categories and concepts should not be taken as essential and reified is worth repeating.

Colors of the Robe is a meticulously researched work that draws on a wide range of theoretical, anthropological, and historical sources. The author’s ability to illustrate how the material contained in the chapters speaks to larger theoretical issues and concerns makes this book a rich addition to our current understanding of Buddhism in Sri Lanka as well as to historians, ethnographers, and readers interested in exploring, in a more general manner, the ways in which authoritative traditions become created, challenged, and established.

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