

## **Universal Buddhist Pantheon in Post-War Sri Lanka**

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### **Abstract**

*Sri Lankan popular Sinhala Buddhist pantheon represents the long-term hybrid nature of Buddhism, ancient Sri Lankan feudal social structure, sacred geographical locations, and class and caste association. This article aims to present the transformation of the Sri Lankan popular Sinhala Buddhist pantheon to a universal Buddhist pantheon in post-war Sri Lanka. The Mahamevnawa monastic movement as a recent popular, innovative and radical Buddhist movement departs from the popular Sinhala Buddhist pantheon, and presents a universal Buddhist pantheon that is based on the Buddhist sacred text the Tripitakaya. Unlike the deities of the popular Sinhala Buddhist pantheon, the deities of the universal Buddhist pantheon are not restricted to any particular geographical or sacred location which presents a radical departure from Sri Lankan ancient feudal social structure to a more modern and larger upward social mobility-based Sinhala Buddhists social order. This paper argues that the universal Buddhist pantheon is a result of Buddhist purifying processes, nationalist orientation and the impact of the social composition of the Mahamevnawa monastic movement in post-war Sri Lanka.*

**Keywords:** *Popular Sinhala Buddhist pantheon, Social mobility, Tripitakaya, The Mahamevnawa monastic movement, Universal Buddhist pantheon*

### **Introduction**

Buddhism and the pantheon have a long historical and mythological connection in Sri Lanka. The Mahamevnawa Asapuwa (monastery)<sup>[1]</sup> which was formed by Rev. Kiribathgoda Gnanananda in 1999 has constructed a new Buddhist pantheon in post-war Sri Lanka. The Mahamevnawa cosmology is a radical and purifying cosmology in contemporary Sri Lanka since it attempts to purify the hybrid nature of Buddhist cosmology and present what this movement calls a 'pure Buddhist cosmology.' Further, it departs from the popular Sinhala Buddhist pantheon and constructs a universal Buddhist

pantheon based on the Buddhist sacred text the *Tripitakaya*. Sinhala Buddhism has historically been a humanist-deist religion, in the sense that the nature and behaviour of deities is super-human. That is, the deities (gods and goddesses) have special powers but are oriented toward the same goals as humans, and this is perfectly exemplified by the example of a human - Buddha. This situation creates a number of problems. One is that, according to Obeyesekere (1977), popular Sinhalese Buddhist deities go in and out of fashion according to how close or far away they are from human affairs. The second is that it is possible to imagine a world in which there are no deities at all. The Mahamevnawa monastic movement stands in the middle of these two positions since it imagines a world with deities but without non-Buddhist deities. Owing to the transformative potentialities that the Mahamevnawa represents as it steps away from the traditional humanist-deist paradigm to the universal Buddhist pantheon, I explore in this article the forces that have influenced this alternation in Sri Lankan Buddhist practice and closely engage with the arguments of Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988), Obeyesekere (1977, 1978, 1984) and Winslow (1984). The central argument of this paper is that the transformations to Sri Lankan Sinhala Buddhist pantheon that the Mahamevnawa represents are a response to Buddhist purifying processes, its nationalist orientation, and the impact of the social composition of this movement.

## Literature Review

### Popular Sinhala Buddhist Pantheon

The popular Sinhala Buddhist pantheon is limited to a particular geographical location, Sri Lankan territory, and it is justified in ancient chronicles like the *Mahavamsa*. Bond (1992: 32) argues that '[i]n both its theoretical and actual structures traditional Theravada was hierarchical<sup>[2]</sup>'. Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988: 19) state that the ancient chronicle, the *Mahavamsa*, has justified the clear structural hierarchy of the traditional Sinhala Buddhist pantheon. The Buddha handed over the protection of Buddhism in Sri Lanka to God Sakra. Then, the God Sakra entrusted the responsibility of protecting Buddhism to the God Vishnu (Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988: 19). The God Vishnu has shared this responsibility and the territory of Sri Lanka with three other deities. These three deities and God Vishnu are together labelled as *satara varam deviyō* (the four guardian deities). The four guardian deities are God Vishnu, and three of the five deities, named: Nātha, Saman, Kataragama (Skanda), Vibhīṣaṇa and Pattini (Obeyesekere 1972, 1977, 1978, 1984). The four guardian deities have given warrants to twelve deities, who are at the next level below in the hierarchy of the pantheon (Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988: 19-20). The power and morality of the twelve deities are hierarchically inferior to the four guardian deities. These twelve deities are called 'godling' (*dēvatā*) due to their moral ambivalence. Hence, they are placed under the deities and above demons (Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988: 20). Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988: 20) state that '[w]hile most of higher gods historically derive from India, the Twelve Gods are (whether in myth or fact is hard to determine) deified local lords (*baṇḍāra*). Human beings and these minor deities are morally similar to each other. These twelve deities have given warrants to demons and evil spirits (Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988: 20). Therefore, significant

aspects of the popular Sinhala Buddhist pantheon are, it is then justified in the *Mahavamsa*, there is a hierarchy among deities and other spirits in the pantheon, and those deities and spirits are located specifically in the Sri Lankan territory.

The popular Sinhala Buddhist cosmology involves a multitude of gods, goddesses, demons and ghosts as well as humans and the Buddha. It is a cosmology made up of different levels, at its apex is the Buddha. Obeyesekere (1984: 61) mentions that the Buddha is at the top of the pantheon, and all other deities and demons are subordinated, and their qualities and nature are defined in relation to the Buddha. Though the Buddha is considered to no longer be active in the world, or exercises any power, the Buddha's power and authority are still effective through deities to whom the Buddha has given warrants (*varan*) to protect Buddhist *sāsana* and the Buddhists of Sri Lanka (Obeyesekere 1963, 1977, 1984; Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988). Though doctrinal Buddhism devalues the worshipping of deities (Obeyesekere, 1977: 377), the worshipping of deities has become a major religious and ritualistic practice for all Sinhalese in Sri Lanka (Kapferer, 1983; Langer, 2007). Deities are considered to be good beings who follow the path of the Buddha and orient toward the ultimate goal of Buddhism (Obeyesekere, 1977; Kapferer 1983). They advance along this path by helping human beings and receiving merits (*pin*) from Sinhalese Buddhists through the latter's acts of Buddhist devotion (Kapferer 1983: 32). Merits of their previous lives have caused deities to reach their renowned status. Human beings need to be good Buddhists to gain the support of deities. Obeyesekere (1984: 50) notes that '[m]an's relation to the Gods is everywhere characterised by subordination and dependence. The Gods are powerful and superior beings who can do things for their dependent humans. Hence, worshipping deities, and believing in deities and other spirits have been a main aspect of popular Sinhala Buddhism.

Another significant aspect of the popular Sinhala Buddhist pantheon is the dynamic nature of the hierarchical positions of some deities. Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988: 30) state that the structure of the popular Sinhala Buddhist pantheon has not changed while the divine hierarchy has changed. Though there are four guardian deities, different deities have occupied this role. The reason, they suggest, derives from the Buddhist concept of merit, and with that the upward mobility of deities toward Buddha-hood within the pantheon, as a result of their good actions (see also Obeyesekere 1984). This upward mobility of deities has happened since ancient times. Though the four great regal deities Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Virūḍha, Virūpākṣa and Vaiśravaṇa were involved in human matters, their images are now used to decorate the front walls of Buddhist shrines (Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988: 31-32). Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) state that another four deities have taken their positions. While Vishnu has taken a permanent position among the guardian deities, three of the following five deities Natha, Pattini, Saman, Vibhishana, and Kataragama fill the other positions. These guardian deities are considered the protectors of the Buddha's Tooth Relic in Kandy, Buddhism and Buddhists in Sri Lanka. They are also considered to be bodhisattvas – future Buddhas who are at different levels of achieving that goal, and of these, Vishnu, Saman and Natha are more benevolent and

less punitive. God Vishnu is in charge of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, and God Saman is the overlord of the Samanala Peak where the Buddha's sacred footprint is located. God Natha is considered the next Buddha – Maitreya – and was also considered the protector of the Kandyan Kingdom (Obeyesekere, 1977; 1984). The Goddess Pattini is a famous deity in the Western, Southern, Sabaragamuwa and Eastern Provinces. Since Goddess Pattinī is female, she has to be reborn as a male to become a Buddha. Though God Kataragama is also a Bodhisattva, he has a long way to go to be a Buddha due to his lack of virtuous and compassionate qualities (Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988: 30-31). Gombrich and Obeyesekere state that:

Gods who at one time are low enough to take an interest in human affairs gradually move up into a kind of honorary retirement as “great Gods”; minor deities of rather mixed or neutral character move up to full God head; their place as “Godlings” (*dēvatā*) is taken by (ex-) demons. Canonizing Gods by calling them future Buddhas is an aspect of this process. (Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988: 31).

Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988: 32) note that the mobility of deities has been based on traditional Buddhist ideology. The logic of that ideology is if a deity grants more favours, he becomes more compassionate and powerful. Therefore, as a deity goes higher in scale, he loses direct contact with the human world and his punitive aspect. Hence, a more inferior spirit in the cosmic administration world then fills that deity's place. For instance, when God Vishnu was transferred from his Alutnuvara official residence to Kandy, Dadimunda, who is a local servant of God Vishnu took God Vishnu's Alutnuvara official residence and became Alutnuvara Deviyō (God of Alutnuvara) (Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988: 32). Obeyesekere has presented a few cultural principles that govern the changes of the pantheon. They are:

01. ...Wherever the Buddhist virtues of compassion (Maitriya) and benevolence (*karuṇā*) increase in the character of a God, there is a concomitant decrease in his punitiveness, however righteous it may be.
02. ....The more benevolent and compassionate the God, the more remote he becomes in relation to the worshiper.
03. ...The more favours the deity grants the worshipper the more he is viewed as benevolent and compassionate; the more benevolent he is, the less involved he becomes in the affairs of the world, which makes him progressively otiose.
04. ...When major Gods become further removed, others move up to take their places, the movement generally being from demonic to divine status.
05. ...When a particular demon ascends through the pantheon's hierarchy, his identity is often split into two, a divine one and a demonic one, the latter progressively decreasing in importance as the importance of the former increases.
06. ‘...If the deity ascending through the hierarchy is already composite of demon and God or *dēvatā*, then the divine aspect is enhanced as the demonic declines.’
07. ‘...A deity moving up through the supernatural hierarchy possesses at a certain stage an anomalous status composite of demon and God, which is often conceptualised as

dēvatā'. 08. '...When an inferior deity passes into divine status, he may retain some pejorative identity in his name, which is initially resolved by giving him an alias or a prefix that qualifies his former pejorative name; or he may be given a totally new name. (Obeyesekere, 1984: 64-70).

At the centre of Obeyesekere's analysis of the dynamics of the pantheon, is the role of human agency. Deities are elevated human beings unified by their mutual goal to be released from existence, which was exemplified by the wisdom of a human being – the Buddha – and, with that, a sense of the karmic consequence as a result of human actions in the world. Grounded in these actions, the pantheon changes in parallel with society and history. For example, changes in literacy, mass education, urbanisation and industrialization have intensified the 'belief and practices of the spirit cults' (Obeyesekere, 1977: 377). Another example is Goddess Pattini, who is worshipped in relation to children's diseases, smallpox, chicken pox, and at the time of drought and famine. Obeyesekere (1977) argues that though the Goddess Pattini was more popular in the traditional peasant society, the Pattini cult has been gradually declining due to the irrelevance of her involvement in her traditional roles because of free universal healthcare, hospitals, and vaccinations (Obeyesekere, 1977: 381). However, the worshipping Goddess Pattini has not totally disappeared. It has transformed from 'communal group rituals' to individual worship at Pattini shrines (Obeyesekere, 1977: 382). God Skanda (Kataragama) has been a very popular god since the fifteenth century due to South Indian immigrants, the patronage of some kings, and the war between local kingdoms and foreign invaders. Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) note that the growth of personal guardian deity (*iṣṭa dēvatā*) presents the collapse of the authoritarian structure of the traditional pantheon. Hence, morally ambivalent deities such as God Kataragama, Kālī and Hūniyam have been popular as personal guardian deities (Obeyesekere, 1987; Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988; Piker, 1993; Bastin, 2002). God Kataragama is more popular than other guardian deities because the God Kataragama is seen to be the most suitable deity for seeking support to manage the 'stresses of modern life' than other benevolent deities (Seneviratne & Wickramaratne, 1980; Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988). Lay people can approach God Kataragama for both moral and immoral purposes (black magic).

The popularity of the Indian Goddess Kālī has been rising, and she has been a major goddess in the Buddhist pantheon (Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988; Bastin, 2002). People seek support from Goddess Kālī for resolutions of personal conflicts, jobs, ensuring prosperity, revenge, marriage proposals, illnesses, sorcery and vengeance (Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988; Bastin, 2002). God Hūniyam has also been a popular deity. God Hūniyam is good at solving family conflicts, finding jobs and partners, curing illness, cursing enemies, redress in court cases or property thefts, and success in marriage proposals (Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988: 128). Gombrich & Obeyesekere (1988) mention that since the traditional village community was based on an agricultural peasant society, kingships and extended family ties, it was easy to solve social, economic, political and emotional conflicts, difficulties and issues faced by any member of the

family by means of family members, relatives and neighbours. This traditional village community had changed due to various social, economic, political, and educational changes, and due to demographic forces, such as population growth, migration, and urbanisation. Further, universal free education and health, poverty, unemployment, the emergence of middle and low class in urban areas, the failure of social institutions and the malfunction of state regulated institutions such as education, legal, political and economic caused to increase frustration among people. According to Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988: 100), ‘people quite correctly perceive that in modern Sri Lanka rational action to better oneself or one’s family is not always crowned with results, especially if one is not a member of the elite’. Hence, people in the low class especially, tended to seek alternative ways to meet their mundane necessities. Thus, the spirit religion supported them to meet this requirement. Therefore, low-class people seek the support of deities who are not only virtuous but also malevolent, with an aim to manage their lives due to frustration, loneliness and urban anomie that they face. Unlike the traditional spirit religion, where deities could achieve upward mobility through being virtuous and reduce their intervention in mundane matters, popular spirit religion has opened a space for deities to reach a higher status by intervening in human affairs. Therefore, the popularity of a deity depends on the deity’s ability to handle the invocations of people who seek the support of these deities in the spirit religion. For instance, worshipping God Huniyam has become popular among the lower class. Obeyesekere (1977) mentions that “[t]he rise and fall of deities are an inevitable process, sometimes slow, at other times rapid, but occurring at all periods in Sri Lanka’s history. External socio-economic conditions may bring about the rise of a God; his fall can be brought about by similar conditions” (1977: 394). The significant aspect of the popular Sinhala Buddhist pantheon is the dynamic position of the deities that connect with the larger social transformations. However, as I discuss later, the Buddhist pantheon of the Mahamevnawa monastic movement is a static pantheon since the position of deities does not change when the society goes through various social transformations.

With reference to the demons, Obeyesekere (1984) mentions that unlike gods, the demons are irrational beings. Therefore, they do harmful things without principle or cause, their wickedness disturbs the moral order, and causes suffering to human beings. Hence, though the gods have power, demons do harmful things due to their wickedness and evil nature. Obeyesekere (1984) states that ‘...king-Gods cannot stop demons from causing harm; they can admonish them, punish them if they do evil, and control them. But wickedness and evil cannot be stopped’ (1984: 62). Therefore, the demons must be controlled by the deities in order to prevent a disturbance of social order and people’s physical health (1984: 63). Obeyesekere (1984) states that demons can be converted into deities due to the fact that ‘the cultural ideology of Buddhism’, which allows for status changes (1984: 67). There are cases where demons were converted into good Buddhist laymen in both popular as well as doctrinal tradition of Buddhism. ‘In a culture that does not have an ideology of karma and rebirth, the apotheosis of the demon may be difficult to justify, but not in the Hindu Buddhist religious traditions’ (Obeyesekere, 1984: 67).



Therefore, it is possible that all spirits can change their hierarchical positions by following the Buddhist path.

Exorcism connects with spiritual religions. With regard to exorcisms, Kapferer (1983) presents a differentiation between the classes. According to Kapferer (1983), '[d]emon exorcisms are mainly a working-class and peasant practice, and are devalued by the middle class often because of their class associations and connotations' (1983: 18). Professional intermediaries play vital roles in the traditional spirit religion of Sinhala Buddhists. Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) note that there is a connection between the hierarchy of the spirits and the hierarchy of professional intermediaries' caste. The dominant caste priest called *kapurāḷa* works for godlings, while the low caste priest called *kaṭṭādirāḷa* works for the demons. Sometimes a higher caste person also may work as a priest for the demon according to personal preferences (1988: 21). Therefore, the caste connection with the professionals and different hierarchical positions of the pantheon.

The Mahamevnawa monastic movement stands out in the cosmology of the popular Sinhala Buddhism. As the Mahamevnawa monastic movement argues, the popular Buddhist pantheon related religious practices destroy the *nirvāṇaya* achieving path since the non-Buddhist deities have both benevolent and malevolent. When *Bumata* deities (deities who live close to the earth) help people, they are biased with personal attachments and purposes, since these deities do not have spiritually developed lives. Therefore, it causes long-term negative impacts on the spiritual journey of Buddhists. When the monks of the Mahamevnawa monastic movement preach, it is very common to hear the negative and long-term impact of seeking support from non-Buddhist deities, such as visiting shrines and making vows, on their spiritual journeys. Real Buddhists must not aim to seek the support of non-Buddhist gods. According to this movement, there are no real, spiritually advanced, and benevolent Buddhist deities at the shrines, since real Buddhist and virtuous deities live in the upper levels of heaven. Therefore, devils or beneath deities will intervene with people's problems when they visit shrines and make vows. Devils generally reside in most of the shrines and control them. Since they are beneath, spiritually less developed, and non-Buddhist deities and devils at the shrines, they expect people to come to their shrines regularly. They need to increase their number of followers to bring offerings and food for the deities, so that the devils and spirits may survive. Therefore, they will solve the lay followers' problems temporarily, and they again create problems in the lives of those people in order to bring them back to the shrines. In addition, this movement believes that when those lay people die, the devils will send their subordinate servant devils and spirits to their place of death. Those servant devils and spirits then appear as the family members of the dying person. After the person dies, those spirits will accompany that person's soul to the main devil of the shrines. According to Rev. Gnanananda, the monks, the sermons and the publications of the Mahamevnawa monastic movement, when the soul of a person is brought to the main leader devils, there is no escape for that soul for many hundreds and thousands of years. Since the dead person has sought the support of those spirits when he is alive, his soul has to acknowledge the support of devils by working as a servant for devils for many

hundreds and thousands of years. According to this movement, there is then no way of escaping from this bond and then it is really hard for those souls to achieve the ultimate goal of Buddhism. My point here is that the transformative nature of the Mahamevnawa practice then openly discourages popular Sinhala Buddhism's vows and demonological practices since it is an obstacle to the spiritual journey of Sinhala Buddhists in contemporary society.

## **Materials and Methods**

The Mahamevnawa monastic movement is very popular, innovative and radical in contemporary Sri Lanka. Rev. Gnanananda's aim is to find 'true Buddhism' since he believes that 'true Buddhism' is not practised in Sri Lanka (Mahamevnawa, 2023). According to the statistics of the official website of the Mahamevnawa monastery, there are more than 650 Buddhist monks, more than 100 Buddhist nuns, and hundreds of thousands of lay followers (Mahamevnawa, 2023). Furthermore, this movement has more than 70 branches throughout Sri Lanka and an international presence in the USA, England, Canada, Australia, Germany, France, Ireland, South Korea, Dubai and India. Therefore, the social composition of this movement consists of local followers from various classes, castes, ethnicities and localities, as well as diaspora communities and foreign nationals. This article is based on ethnographic research which was conducted mainly in Malabe, Polgahawela and Balangoda branch monasteries of the Mahamevnawa monastic movement while exploring other branches of the Mahamevnawa monastery as well from October 2017 to October 2018. The Malabe Mahamevnawa branch monastery is situated in Malabe city, an urban centre located around 20 km from the centre of the national capital, Colombo, in the heavily populated Western Province. The Polgahawela Mahamevnawa monastery is the main branch monastery of this movement. It is located in the Kurunegala District of North Western Province and around 82 km from Colombo city. The Balangoda Mahamevnawa branch monastery is a rural centre. It is located in the Rathnapura District of Sabaragamuwa Province and 156 km far from Colombo city. At the selected branches of the Mahamevnawa, I employed the informal interview method and participant observation method to collect data over 12 months. I employed participant observation to observe three broad areas: the daily activities, special days' activities and special organisational activities of this movement. The informal interviews were conducted with Buddhist monks, temple workers, lay followers of this religious movement, and villagers surrounding these three selected monasteries. This article then presents the cosmology of the Mahamevnawa monastic movement through an ethnographic study.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Feudal Administration System and the Popular Sinhala Buddhist Pantheon**

There are many different discourses about the hierarchy of the Sinhala Buddhist pantheon and its various manifestations. Obeyesekere (1984) argues that there is a similarity between the hierarchy of the feudal administrative system and the popular Sinhala



Buddhist pantheon in Sri Lanka. There are kings, sub-kings and rulers of provinces in the hierarchy of the feudal administrative system. Similarly, as Obeyesekere (1984) mentions, '[i]n the operative pantheon of the Sinhala the great divine kings are the Gods of the Four Warrant- Viṣṇu, Saman, Vibhīṣaṇa, Kataragama, and other major Gods like Pattini and Nātha. There are major and minor Gods, as there are similar rulers in the secular realm' (Obeyesekere 1984: 54). Further, Obeyesekere (1984) states that similar to kings, gods also have areas of jurisdiction, as well as divine authority over people in their territory (1984: 54). The king delegates his authority in his area of jurisdiction to the sub-kings and governors. Though this authority structure can be seen in the pantheon, it is not as simple as the secular feudal system, as the major deities of the pantheon have similar statuses, and the deities' jurisdictions overlap. Obeyesekere (1984) mentions that '...the authority structure of the pantheon uses the *idiom* of South Asian feudalism, but is not a *replica* of the structure of feudalism' (1984: 54). In addition, the king's power is especially strong in regions or provinces where the palace is located, even though the king rules the whole realm. The deities also have their own main shrine. Like a palace, the region where the main shrine is located is considered the deities' special territory, while there may be shrines elsewhere. However, Obeyesekere (1984) states that '[t]hese boundaries are not immutable: as the importance and popularity of the deity decline, his territory too shrinks, and he may even be forgotten or rendered irrelevant' (1984: 55). Furthermore, though minor deities have their small territories within a larger realm, their territories can expand and they can share attributes with the higher deities if their popularity increases (1984: 55). Though Obeyesekere's explanation is important for the comparison between the hierarchy of feudal administrative system and popular Sinhala Buddhist pantheon, as I will discuss later, it is not sufficient to apply this explanation to the four guardian deities of universal Buddhist pantheon such as Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Virūḍha, Virūpākṣa and Vaiśravaṇa, since they do not have a particular shrine or authority jurisdiction in Sri Lanka. Instead, they are responsible for every direction of the universe.

Winslow (1984) argues that the popular Sinhalese Buddhist pantheon is territory based, rather than a representation of the feudal political administrative system. The territories of deities are not equivalent to territories of the feudal system, which are under the labels of local, provincial and national level of administration. Winslow (1984) argues that '...the hierarchy of deities is represented territorially, not in a feudal way by the interest of land allocations of different sizes, but by the centre-versus-periphery quality of these allocations' (1984: 279). Winslow (1984) further explains that there are a few factors to take into account when considering the connection between territories and deities. One is that the territories of deities may reduce when the deities become more meritorious. The other point is that the value of the deities' territory is not solely based on the size of the territory. The location, character and historical connection will determine the value of the land and its association with higher deities (Winslow, 1984: 275-276). Winslow (1984) notes that '[f]or both of these reasons, it is not always possible, even in theory, to predict a deity's territorial status from pantheon rank alone' (1984: 276). Due to these factors, a small territory may connect with a higher deity and be more worthwhile than a larger but less important territory associated with lower deities. Winslow (1984) argues that:

Rather than higher Gods having the largest territories, instead they have what might be characterised as the better territories, the better addresses, while lower deities inhabit relatively less desirable, albeit often quite extensive, areas that are *adjacent to* instead of *contained within* the areas of higher Gods (Winslow, 1984: 278).

Therefore, as Winslow (1984) argues, Sinhala Buddhist pantheon is not a reflection of the mediaeval Sinhalese political system but a territorial based system. Along with Winslow (1984), I would also argue that it is not a simple task to look at the popular Sinhala Buddhist pantheon and suggest that the pantheon is similar to the feudal administrative system, especially when it comes to deities who do not have particular any residential location in Sri Lanka. Moreover, there are different Sinhala Buddhist pantheons in Sri Lanka, and that makes it difficult to capture all the diversity of different pantheons and present a generalised argument about the Sinhala Buddhist pantheon.

### **The Tripitakaya and the Universal Buddhist Pantheon**

The issues with the popular Sinhala Buddhist pantheon are the locational limitation of deities, the Hindu origin of some of the deities and its foundation in the ancient chronicle of the *Mahavamsa* and folklore. The deities of this pantheon are not universal deities since their territory and power are limited to Sri Lankan territory. The Mahamevnawa monastic movement has also formed a new Buddhist pantheon which is primarily based on the *Tripitakaya*. The deities of the pantheon are then Buddhist deities who have been mentioned in this sacred text. I call the new Buddhist pantheon of the Mahamevnawa monastic movement ‘the universal Buddhist pantheon’ since the deities of this pantheon are not restricted to a particular geographical location, any particular shrine, or jurisdiction areas in Sri Lankan territory. This pantheon then goes beyond the power, authority and boundaries of the popular Sinhala Buddhist pantheon that Obeyesekere (1984) and Winslow (1984) have presented. The power of deities goes beyond the boundaries of the Sri Lankan nation state and spreads throughout the universe. Furthermore, anyone from any background can accept this pantheon irrespective of their class, caste, education, profession, geographical location and religious adherence due to the fact that this pantheon is based on the *Tripitakaya*. Hence, the universal Buddhist pantheon departs from the popular Sinhala Buddhist pantheon that has hybrid nature of both Buddhist and Hindu religious influences. Moreover, the significance of the universal Buddhist pantheon of the Mahamevnawa monastic movement is it radically departs from a feudal political administrative system to a more socially mobilised open hierarchical system.

As I mentioned above, the social composition of the Mahamevnawa monastic movement is complex since there are monks and followers from various classes, castes, educational and geographical locations. Therefore, the ideological foundation and teaching of this movement need to reach and attract all these diverse social compositions of this movement. In other words, this movement has to present a rational Buddhist pantheon

that is based on Buddhist sacred text since it can be accepted by everyone. What this movement does is, creates a new universal Buddhist pantheon based on the Buddhist sacred text the *Tripitakaya*. Since this religious text is generally accepted as the ‘true Buddhist sacred text’, where the Buddha’s real teaching is included and preserved, anyone from any background may agree to the teaching of the Buddha in this text. There are various references to Buddhist deities in this text. Based on these deities, the Mahamevnawa monastic movement presents its universal Buddhist pantheon.

The Mahamevnawa monastic movement divides the deities into two broad categories, real Buddhist and benevolent deities, and non-Buddhist and beneath deities. This division encompasses a strong nationalist sentiment and purifies Sinhalese Buddhism since this movement rejects all non-Buddhist deities from their universal Buddhist pantheon. According to this movement, the real Buddhist deities are deities who have been mentioned in the *Tripitakaya*. These deities are benevolent and virtuous. They have spiritually advanced lives, and they aim to reach the *nirvāṇa*. This notion is similar to the popular Sinhala Buddhist pantheon, as both the deities in Sinhala Buddhist pantheon and the universal Buddhist pantheon follow the path of the Buddha and orient toward the ultimate goal of Buddhism (Kapferer, 1983; Obeyesekere, 1977). The recognition and acceptance in forming the universal Buddhist pantheon then depend on the *Tripitakaya*. I met a Netherland monk of this movement at the Malabe Mahamevnawa branch monastery. He said the following about the *Tripitakaya*:

The Buddha doesn’t live in this present society. But, we can meet him through reading the *Tripitakaya* since it contains His teaching. Buddhism can be only understood by reading it. Unlike other religions, Buddhism is a more philosophical and scientific religion. That’s why I accept the Buddha’s teaching. It is mentioned that the Buddha had direct contact with various deities. These deities are religious and virtuous. If we accept that the ‘true Buddhism’ is written in only the *Tripitakaya*, then we have to accept the Buddhist deities who have been mentioned in this text. I accept that there can be some spirits we can’t see through our ordinary eyes. Someone who has a higher mental capacity may be able to see those deities.

This statement shows that a foreign follower of the Mahamevnawa monastic movement also accepts the *Tripitakaya* as a reliable source of Buddhism due to the fact that Buddhism is more philosophical and scientific. Scientific means here is there are many areas of Buddhism that can be studied scientifically such as the universe, human body and mind, meditation, etc. Buddhism is open to scientific studies to verify whether the teaching of Buddha is right or wrong. Since the Buddha is not alive anymore, the sacred text *Tripitakaya* then provides access to the Buddha’s teaching. Hence, the deities who have been mentioned in this text are also accepted, since the Buddha had direct contact with them and their reference in the text. Therefore, this religious text provides justification for real Buddhist deities that anyone from any background can accept. The Mahamevnawa monastic movement then promotes only deities of the *Tripitakaya* since followers of this movement from various backgrounds can agree to it. Therefore, the

social composition of this movement is very important in creating the universal Buddhist pantheon. Hence, the significance of the universal Buddhist pantheon of the Mahamevnawa monastic movement is its departure from the popular Sinhala Buddhist pantheon, and then the universal Buddhist pantheon is solely based on the Buddhist sacred text the *Tripitakaya*. This is, on the one hand, going back to the textual traditions of the past, but on the other hand, a radical departure from the traditional popular Sinhala Buddhist pantheon.

According to Rev. Gnanananda, the monks, the sermons and the publications of the Mahamevnawa monastic movement, the real Buddhist deities are really important in the *nirvāṇaya* achieving path since they protect Buddhism, the teaching of the Buddha, monkhood and Buddhist lay followers. As this movement promotes, there are many hundreds and thousands of Buddhist deities in various heavens. Based on the *Tripitakaya*, this movement believes in a few main heavens, such as *Chathummaharajika*, *Thawthisa*, *Yaama*, *Thusitha*, *Nimmanarathi* and *Paranimmitha Wasawartha* respectively. In addition to these heavens, there are upper-level heavens also called *Brahmaloka* such as *Brahmaparisajja*, *Brahma purohitha*, *Mahabramaya*, *Pariththabaya*, *Appamanasuba*, *Ahassaraya*, *Pariththasubaya*, *Appamanasubaya*, *Suhakinnakaya*, *Wehappalaya*, *Asagnnasaththaya*, *Awihaya*, *Athappaya*, *Sudassaya*, *Sudassiya* and *Akanittakaya*. The Buddha is at the top of all of these heavens and *Brahmaloka*. According to this movement, the lowest-rank deities are called *bumāta deviyō* who are the deities living closest to the earth. This movement teaches that most of the popular deities in the Sinhala Buddhist pantheon in contemporary Sri Lanka are *bumāta deviyō*. Therefore, most popular deities such as Vishnu, Kataragama, Pattini, Natha, Sumana Saman, Vibhishana, Pulleyan and Saraswathi, Gambara, etc., belong to the *bumāta deviyō* category. This movement rejects all of these deities from their textual universal Buddhist pantheon, except for God Vishnu and God Sumana Saman. God Vishnu is important since he is the custodian god and protector of Buddhism and Sri Lanka, while God Sumana Saman protects Sri Lanka and the Sir Pada Mountain where the Buddha had placed his footprint. Furthermore, God Sumana Saman had listened to the Buddha's preaching directly. In addition, God Kataragama has also ambiguous recognition in this movement since God Kataragama connects with the birth of Rev. Gnanananda due to the fact that Rev. Gnanananda was born after his parents made a vow to the God Kataragama. Most of the other *bumāta deviyō* and devils by and large have either Hindu origin, or both benevolent and malevolent characters.

The Mahamevnawa monastic movement places Buddhist textual heavens and deities over the popular Sinhala Buddhist deities and their power and authority. A monk of the Malabe Mahamevnawa branch monastery told me the following at an informal interview. According to the monk, the deities in the *Chathummaharajika* heaven are higher and more superior than *bumāta deviyō*. The *Chathummaharajika* heaven is located above the earth. In all heavens, a month consists of 30 days and a year consists of 12 months, though the length of a day differs between the levels of the heavens. Fifty earth years is one day in the *Chathummaharajika* heaven, and the life expectancy of the deities in this

heaven is 500 years of such days. The next level up is the *Thawthisa* heaven. One hundred years on earth is one day in the *Thawthisa* heaven. The life expectancy of the *Thawthisa* heaven's deities is 1000 years of such days. *Yaama* heaven is located above *Thawthisa* heaven. One day in *Yaama* heaven is equivalent to 200 years on the earth. The life expectancy of deities in *Yaama* is 2000 years of such days. The next level is the *Thusitha* heaven. Four hundred years on earth is one day in *Thusitha* and the life expectancy of the deities in the *Thusitha* heaven is 4000 years of such days. The next level of heaven is *Nimmanarathi*. Eight hundred years on earth is one day in the *Nimmanarathi* heaven. The life expectancy of deities in this heaven is 8000 years of such days. *Paranimmitha Wasawarathi* heaven is higher than *Nimmanarathi* heaven. One thousand and six hundred years on earth is one day in the *Paranimmitha Wasawarathi* heaven. The deities in this heaven have 16000 years of such days as their life expectancy. Therefore, as the Mahamevnawa monastic movement states, there are many hundreds and thousands of real Buddhist deities in these heavens than a few popular deities in the popular Sinhala Buddhist pantheon.

In addition, the Mahamevnawa monastic movement does not recognize the four guardian deities of the popular Sinhala Buddhist pantheon as the real Buddhist four guardian deities. This movement says that deities such as Vishnu, Kataragama, Pattini, Natha, Sumana Saman and Vibhishana are not the real Buddhist guardian deities. They are just minor deities who live close to the earth. According to this movement, the real Buddhist guardian deities are Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Virūḍha, Virūpākṣa and Vaiśravaṇa, and this movement gives a foremost place for these four guardian deities. Gombrich & Obeyesekere (1988: 31-32) argue that these four great regal deities are not important in popular Sinhala Buddhism, since their images have only decorative function on the walls of Buddhist shrines. Hence, Gombrich & Obeyesekere (1988) point out that these deities have lost their importance and involvement in human matters. However, the Mahamevnawa monastic movement then attempts to re-establish the power and importance of the four great regal deities in contemporary Sri Lanka by going back to the *Tripitakaya*.

The real Buddhist guardian deities are universal deities since they control the earthly directions, not just a small territory. The God Dhṛtarāṣṭra controls the eastern direction. He is the master of the spirits called Gandhabbās. He has 91 sons and all of them are called Inda. God Virūḍha controls the southern direction, and he is the master of spirits called Kumbhandhās. He also has 91 sons and all of them are also called Inda. The God Virūpākṣa dominates the western direction and he is the master of spirits called Nāgās. He has also 91 sons and the name of them is also Inda. The God Vaiśravaṇa controls the northern direction and he is the master of spirits called Yakkha. This god also has 91 sons, and they are called Inda. The God Vaiśravaṇa has nine Yakkhas, and they search various earthly matters and then report to the God Vaiśravaṇa. The nine Yakkhas are Tatolā, Tattalā, Tatotalā, Ojasi, Tejasi, Sūra, Rājā, Ariththa and Nemi. These Buddhist textual four guardian deities are significant because they control four directions of the world (Gnanananda, 2016). Furthermore, these deities do not belong to a particular location, a shrine or a territory in Sri Lanka. Since they are universal deities, they control the whole

universe. Therefore, they can travel everywhere, and they can intervene in the matters of real Sinhala Buddhist followers from any place in the world. Therefore, according to Rev. Gnanananda, the monks, the sermons and the publications of the Mahamevnawa monastic movement, it is easy for real Sinhala Buddhist followers to seek the support of the real Buddhist deities from any place, either in Sri Lanka or outside in any other countries. The Sinhala Buddhists do not need to go to any particular shrine or seek the intervention of any ritual expert to get the support of real Buddhist deities. Hence, the explanations of both Obeyesekere (1984) and Winslow (1984) are not sufficient to explain the universal Buddhist pantheon of the Mahamevnawa monastic movement. I would argue then if the four guardian deities of the popular Sinhala Buddhist pantheon are like local feudal lords, the four guardian deities of the universal Buddhist pantheon are then higher and more powerful than those local deities due to their territories have been defined as directions instead of a particular location in Sri Lanka. Hence, they are more like 'great emperors' due to the fact their area of jurisdiction goes beyond the Sri Lankan territory to the universe. Therefore, anyone from any part of the world can gain access to the deities of the universal Buddhist pantheon. Since the followers of the Mahamevnawa monastic movement live in various parts of Sri Lanka and various foreign countries, they can then seek the support of those universal Buddhist deities since their power and authority has spread all over the earth. Therefore, this movement has challenged the established popular Sinhala Buddhist pantheon, spirit religion and its religious and cultural practices.

## **Conclusion**

The Mahamevnawa monastic movement radically departs from popular Sinhala Buddhist cosmology. The popular Sinhala Buddhist pantheon is based on a mixture of Buddhist and Hindu deities, justification in the historical chronicle of the *Mahavamsa*, Kandyan feudal system, sacred geographical locations and class and caste associations. The Mahamevnawa monastic movement presents an alternative pantheon based on the Buddhist sacred text *Tripitakaya*. Their pantheon is a universal Buddhist pantheon since deities are not restricted to any particular geographical or sacred location in Sri Lanka. These deities have been mentioned in the *Tripitakaya*, and they spread their control throughout the whole universe. Therefore, anyone from any background such as class, caste, education and geographical location can accept it from any part of the world. Moreover, excluding Hindu deities and only including Buddhist deities based on the *Tripitakaya* presents that the universal Buddhist pantheon is a result of a purifying process which attempts to separate Hindu religious influences from contemporary Buddhism.



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<sup>[1]</sup>I use the English word ‘monastery’ to present the Sinhala word ‘asapuwa’ throughout this article.

<sup>[2]</sup> Bond (1992, p. 32) states that ‘[c]osmologically its universe exhibited gradations of being, with the devas ranked at the top in their tiers of heavens, human beings below them, and other creatures and spirits below humanity, down to the Niraya worlds. In addition to being objects of worship or fear, all of these forms of being stood for possible planes of rebirth within the cycle of samsāra’.