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SEATING AS A CULTURAL EXPRESSION: A CRITICAL READING OF SEATING IN NON-SECULAR BUDDHIST CONTEXTS IN COLONIAL SRI LANKA

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Abstract
Objects used to assist posture were associated with socio-cultural values of social status and hierarchy as well as cultural values ever since man began to utilize objects for functional purpose. The colonial Sri Lanka is characterized by emergence of new social categories, culture and identity. The mingling of traditional caste with a new concept of class and role played by newly introduced Christianity was crucial in this regard. These social changes resulted in a change of perception towards material objects creating a seminal change from the earlier practices built upon Buddhist culture. Accordingly, this article examines how seating used for preaching in Buddhist context changed with this socio-cultural change. A literature based study on pre-colonial and colonial usage of furniture was carried out with special emphasis on non-secular contexts. Existing examples from the late 19th century when the changes became clearly apparent were studied in detail. Influence of pulpits and celebrant chairs used in Christian preaching is observed. New meaning was derived from integrated design elements borrowed from Buddhist culture and prevailing forms of Christianity. Additionally, colonial chairs of authority and the new role of the preaching monk as a 'leader' seemed to have been aligned in creating new meaning for seating.

Keywords: *Cultural Objects, Identity, Meaning, Seating Furniture, Social status*

1. Introduction

The material attachment of a society with an object or a group of objects is dependent on beliefs associated the 'value' assigned to that particular object or object group. In addition to material and utilitarian value, certain objects have aesthetic value, some possess spiritual value and some express attitudes towards other human beings or towards the world. As scholars observe in bygone societies, objects were used by a much larger population and were therefore potentially more sincere sources of information than words or written sources. Thus it remains true that objects can make accessible aspects of a culture that are not always present or detectable in other modes of cultural expression. Therefore material objects are potentially more truthful 'expressers' or indicators of a society's cultural attributes.

Since the introduction of Buddhism in 3rd century BC, Sri Lankan society was inseparable from Buddhist culture. Buddhist culture can be identified with state, kingship and the people at the macro level. At the micro level of society was the Buddhist monastery; the center of education and culture (Seneviratne, 2000). As guided by Buddhist philosophy, possession and use of material objects was minimal especially in non-secular contexts. The typical village house would have a short raised platform on which a mat would be laid to sit or sleep on. Use of furnishing including seating for monks was dictated by the Book of Discipline or *Vinaya Pitaka*. They were especially discouraged from using 'high and broad' beds and only certain furnishings were allowed to be used with carvings on. In a symbolical sense, the practice of using an *ásana;* a plain stone seat; to signify and venerate the Lord Buddha before the use of human iconography is recorded.

From 1505 AD to 1948 AD, Sri Lankan society came in contact with the Portuguese, Dutch and British colonisers respectively. This period is considered to be the deciding factor for what was to become 'modern' Sri Lanka (De Silva, 2005). The era is marked by a gradual yet seminal change to methods of governance and justice, social structure, economy, education, religion and the inevitable transfer of cultural attributes of the colonizers. The greatest social change occurred due to the abolition of the *Rajakariya* system and the gradual change of social hierarchy from caste to class. Education, stemming from Christian missionary schools, facilitated upward mobility through the classes and resulted in the creation of the new Sri Lankan middle class. A new class of elites emerged too, earning great amounts through plantations. Imitation of western practices developed prolifically, especially that of British influence which penetrated taste, opinions, morals and intellect of the locals. As Jones (2013) observes, the adaptation of British taste by the Sri Lankan elite was greater than their counterparts in India. Edifices in European styles were built by the

colonizers that were visual reminders of their dominance (Cannadine, 2002). Furnishing of the dwelling environment was at the time a measurement or a valuator for the worth of a particular family who owned the property.

Therefore it became vital for the elite's to maintain their high living standards in order to receive recognition and respect and portray their allegiance to the colonial government (Jayawardena, 2000). As Jayawardena (2000) further notes this was essential at the time to survive the social structure and to climb the social pyramid.

In another twist of fate the influence of Christian values and practices influenced society in the religious realm challenging the established Buddhist culture. In its various forms throughout the three periods of the colonial encounter, Christian advocates were committed to an agenda Buddhism had not faced before: proselytization. The colonizer's governments sponsored Christianity as a whole and only marginally supported Buddhist institutions, if not neglecting them altogether (De Silva, 2005). This resulted in the gradual disintegration of Buddhist culture from the Sri Lankan society. However as the work of Seneviratne, Daniel (2000) and De Silva (2005) supports, towards the end of the 19th century, construction of a religious identity that was in par with the Christian colonizers and converts, became important for the Buddhist who were still the majority. As Seneviratne (2000) elaborates most aptly, the crisis was addressed through Buddhist revival movements. Methods of teaching *dhamma* was intentionally adapted to reflect the Christian style of preaching while the role of the Buddhist monk changed to that of a community leader. Therefore a paradigm shift occurred in the expression of material objects used in monasteries, *dharmasaala, vihara* etc. Where seating is concerned, we observed that despite earlier teachings of minimal possessions, for example the *dharmásana,* from which a monk would teach *dhamma* from, become more throne-like and elaborate towards the latter half of the 19th century.

Though there exist records of colonial furniture collections (Brohier (1969) and Daswatte (2012)) a study regarding the symbolical and expressive capacity of seating is wholly lacking in the domain of historical and cultural design research. Thus it was the intention of this research to critically examine the change of expression in seating used in non- secular Buddhist contexts. We have mainly drawn upon studies of social change, religious transformation and material possession while critically examining historical records and existing examples of seating of like-wise context in the colonial period.

Methodologically, we engaged in a literature based study on 'seating' in the pre-colonial era with special emphasis on King's thrones, seating for the sangha and *ásana* and on the significant socio-economic and religious changes of the colonial period and developments of seating in general. Through this first study we gained background data on the concept and practice of seating in pre-colonial Sri Lanka. Further, we gathered literature based data on the introduction, import, manufacture and socio-cultural perception of seating during the colonial era. Surviving examples were examined in the prominent museums, churches and elite homes. The examples drawn throughout the text to validate our point are from this study.

2. Discussion

2.1 ASPECTS OF SEATING PRIOR TO THE COLONIAL ERA

Daswatte (2006) observes that seating in Sri Lankan commoner's homes of the era was provided by high plinths of the verandahs that were built to keep out jungle animals and flood water. At times, mats were laid down on platforms. The half walls that stood on the edge of the verandah also served as seating while no loose items of furniture – in European sense – were seen in these houses. As critically examined by Tenner (1997) it was in fact a common trait amongst most of the Southern and East Asian peoples to be seated on the ground or on slightly raised platforms. However, it seems that from an early period the concept of a special 'seat' was associated with power and social status. For example, pre- Columbian Mexican rulers were often called the 'He of the Mat'; a direct reference to the association of power with the ownership of the seat (Tenner, 1997). A category of seats known as '*píṯha'* used by Indian kings, are one of the first recorded types of movable seating devices of the South Asian region. These were similar to a small raised stage or platform with short legs. It is indispensable to note that these 'thrones' were made for cross-legged seating. This posture was the natural manner of sitting in these cultures and the specially made *píṯha* of the King succeeded in maintaining that posture while positioning him at a higher elevation.

It is plausible that with the arrival of Aryans from Northern India in circa 6th century BC these aspects of seating too influenced the locals and the later established monarchies. These are likely to have been further developed with the introduction of Buddhism in 3rd century. According to the Mahavamsa, King Kasyapa V assigned the *dharmasangini* to be written on gold leaf and stored upon a *píṯha* in a temple. The chronicle also states that the reason why Lord Buddha visited Sri Lanka for the second time was to solve a dispute among two *Naaga* kings regarding a *pallanka* made of gem stones.

2.2 *ÁSANA* AND THE SEAT OF THE BUDDHIST MONK

The term *Ásana* is derived from the Sanskrit word *ásati* meaning 'sitting' or 'sitting down'. It is commonly found in historical texts while it is at present being used to denote the invitation given to monks to sit; *ásana panaweema* and in formal gatherings where a host would invite the guests to sit; *asun ganna* etc. To denote different types of seats, the noun '*ásana'* is used in conjunction with an adjective; a solitary seat- *ékásana (éka+ ásana)*; without a seat- *anásana*; a seat on which *dhamma* would be taught from- *dharmásana*. A second denotation of the word is its linkage with not the object of the seat itself but rather of the posture in which one would be seated. Therefore we come across terms such as *lalithásana* (*lalitha + ásana;* the posture of the infamous *Avalokitheswara* statue, with one leg folded up on the seat, while the other hangs freely down) and postures in which statues of Lord Buddha are traditionally depicted; e.g.: *weerásana, wajrásana, pathmásana* etc

Paranavitana (cited in Perera, 1976: p.31) notes the interesting practice in which the *ásana* was an object of worship in ancient Sri Lanka. He notes shrines called *ásanaghara* (*ásana*; seat, *ghara*; house) where the only object of veneration was "a throne in the shape of a large rectangular slab of stone, smoothly chisselled, set up on a raised platform". Fernando (1978) argueed that it was common belief among the Buddhists that the existence of the relics of Buddha was akin to his own existence. Therefore the inclusion of relics when building an *ásana* or a 'vacant throne' is presented as proof that the object itself was venerated. In addition, after the course of Buddha's second visit to Sri Lanka, when the dispute over the gem-throne was settled, Buddha himself is said to have sat upon it which later would have made it an object of worship. The Mahavamsa also records the building of a priceless *ásana* built with the first construction of the Lovamahapaya (2nd century BC). This symbolical representation of the Buddha himself in the form of an *ásana* is also established by Coomaraswamy (1979).

It is interesting to note that the first representation of the human form of Buddha depicts Him teaching *dhamma* on a likewise *ásana* found in the older painings of Hindagala Vihara cave in the Kandy district. The paintings date back to the Anuradhapura period (7th century AD) and contains two images of Buddha, one which appears to be a depiction of a *dharmadesana (*teaching of *dhamma*). Scholars believe that this is this scene represents the visitation and teaching of dhamma to Sakka (Indra) while the Buddha was at the Indasala cave. The relative position of the *ásana* and the figures are crucial in the identification of this scene (Silva, 1990). Explanation suggests that the seating device, the postion of Buddha and

relative postions of other subjects in relation to the seated Buddha represent heirarchy and power relations among them.

The Buddhist monks as the followers of Buddha's teachings and preservers of the *dhamma* were considered symbols of Buddhist virtue and values throughout Sri Lankan history. As Ariyesako (1998, p. 166) comments, a Buddhist monk's first and foremost duty was to be well versed in the *dhamma* (the Buddhist doctrine). The manner of which to teach *dhamma* was guided by the Pali canon: *Vinaya Pitaka.* In contrast to the Christian counterparts, a Buddhist monk would always wait for an invitation to teach *dhamma*, so there was no question of proselytizing or any reference to the act or 'preaching' in his conduct. He is also cautioned to be mindful of whether "the time is appropriate and the audience (is) properly receptive" (Ariyesako, 1998)

Reference to pre-colonial furniture in Buddhist religious places is minimal. This is most likely due to the fact that the *Vinaya Pitaka* has laid specific guidelines on the use of all material objects, including furniture. It elaborately dictates that high (*uchchasayana)* and great (*mahasayana)* furnishings were unsuitable for the monks (Horner, 1949). It also notes that a monk may not teach *dhamma*, to one who was seated on a seat while he was seated on the ground, who was seated on a high seat while he was seated on a low seat or who was seated while he was standing. (Sekhiya teaching 57-72; BMC 505- 508 cited in Ariyesako; 1998)

As the *Vinaya Pitaka* points out, furnishings were divided into two sorts: allowable and not. "Allowable; A square seat not large enough to lie down on *(ásandika)* is allowable even if its legs are tall, and the same holds true for a bench with a back and arms. The Commentary notes that this allowance applies only to non-square rectangular seats without a back and arms. Other allowable seats include a wicker bench, a bench plaited with cloth, a ram-legged bench (this the Commentary defines as a bench with legs fastened on top of wooden blocks), a bench with interlocking legs, a wooden bench, a stool/chair, and a straw bench." Seating devices could be decorated. "Not allowable; the Canon forbids the use of high and great furnishings. Here the Commentary defines *high* as above the allowable height and *great* as covered with improper coverings and decorations. Examples listed include: a dais *(ásandi*—a tall square platform, large enough to lie on), a throne *(pallanka*—a seat with carvings of fierce animals on the feet), coverlets. However, it is also stated that if visiting a householder's home, one is allowed to sit on hides or high or great furnishings arranged by them. These were considered the property of the house and therefore monks were required to accept it humbly. This was with three exceptions: a dais, a throne, or anything covered with cotton batting. However, they were not

permitted to lie down on any of these items. If a dais was however included among these, it could be used after its legs were cut down to the proper length. A throne could also be after its fierce animal decorations have been cut off" (Thanissaro 2001, pp68-70).

2.3 COLONIAL CHANGES TO THE CONCEPT AND MANNER OF SEATING

Objects for use in the royal household and monastery were of the highest skill and craftsmanship since ancient times. Buddhism was the undoubted chief patron of arts. The colonial period however, resulted in the disintegration of Buddhism and the arts and crafts with the fall of Buddist institutions and lack of sponsorship (Coomaraswamy A. K., 1956). The Portuguese were the first to bring-together movable furniture such as benches, tables, chairs, screens, bedsteads and wardrobes. Significant additions to language to denote these new items of furniture further prove this fact. (Hussein, 2009, p. 277)

The Dutch period which coincided with the height of furniture development in Europe saw further expansion of variety, style and skill in furniture making. During this period traditional craft guilds were replaced by workshops or *winkels* set up by the Dutch. Each trade had a European master or superintendent (*baas*) and skilled European foremen trained in Europe (*meesterknechten*) of high rank and salary in the Dutch East India Company (VOC) service. Locals whose traditional occupation was carpentry found employment in these workshops and it was from the Dutch that the low-country Sinhalese especially of the south west, learnt to excel in such furniture making (Brohier, 1969, pp. xi- xiii). The quality, suitability of local wood and tradition of high craftsmanship resulted in high quality furniture, soon manufactured for export

The Portuguese who were said to have arrived with 'a sword in one hand and a cross in the other' were particularly determined in converting the local population to Roman Catholicism. Many local land owning aristocrats who had converted to Catholicism did acquire a great deal of wealth and improved their standard of living. A fine example of hierarchical seating can be observed in Wolvendaal Dutch Reformed church (built 1747 AD), where the servants were to be seated in plain benches with a front partition shadowing their view from the congregation. The use of a '*kerk* stool' or church stool; a chair or a simpler stool carried to church every Sunday for Dutch elite to mass by a servant (Brohier, 1969). This type of usage, where the seating device is given such importance and singularity must have been a totally new expression for the locals who were accustomed to sitting mainly

on the floor for religious observances. Also, the cross legged and squatting seating postures seemed to have altogether disappeared.

2.4 STATELY SEATS AND THRONES OF THE COLONIAL ERA

In the making of a new cultural expression for seating in Buddhist religious contexts, the role played by iconic stately seats and thrones of the colonial era is indispensible. One of first indications of a stately gathering is recorded by the Portuguese historian Queyroz, about an audience with the king which took place in the Portuguese period. He further states that he met the king in a large and dim hall in a style or architecture common to Asia which was hung with Persian carpets, with the king dressed in a white kabaya. He further elaborates that the king was seated on a throne of ivory delicately wrought on a dais of six step covered with a cloth of gold. Knox (1958) observes that even in the later 17th century, only the king was allowed to sit on a stool with a back.

According to Brohier (1969) the throne used by the kings of Kandy provides a unique example of state-seats (Figure 1). He describes the basic style of the throne as being Baroque albite with eastern concepts of decorative motif. This throne and foot stool was presented to King Wimaladharmasuriya II by the Dutch Governor Thomas Van Rhee in 1693 AD. Quoting Pearson, Brohier claimed that the throne may have been imported by the Dutch or made in the coastal regions.

Figure 23: Royal Seat, Source: National Museum, SL

This throne holds a unique position in the history, not only because it is the finest example of a seat of power in the colonial period, but also because the elements that constitute the seat are used to express the historical lineage and claim to power that the owner holds. For example: the depiction of a *Soorya* or Sun at the center of the top rail to signify that the Sinhala kings descended from the Solar Dynasty (Brohier, 1969).

2.5 SEATS IN CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS CONTEXTS

Another marked influence is found in the usage of seating and related devices in Christian religious contexts that hold a position of power or authority. Even though various forms of Christianity were introduced through the 450 year old encounter with the colonialists, the common trait was their agenda of proselytizing, albeit in varying degrees. The Christian sects considered in our study, the Roman Catholic Church, Dutch Reformed Church and the Church of England were each specifically guided by their doctrines as to how priests (and other missionaries) should engage in spreading the 'holy word'. Social institutions such as schools and hospitals help spread Christian values and beliefs. However, it was the church, built and sponsored by the colonial party in power served as the main context in which the Christian doctrine was preached. These edifices served as a visual expression to colonial hierarchy, built in styles that corresponded with those of Europe (e.g. Gothic) (Cannadine, 2002). Similarly, furniture in these places reflected their stylistic characteristics. Records on the origin of these furniture are minimum, and it is believed that some were imported directly from Europe while others were made in local workshops. However, two main pieces of furniture are observed as having a profound connection with preaching: the pulpit (Figure 2) and the celebrant's chair (Figure 3).

The word pulpit is derived from the Latin word *pulpitum*, meaning the stage or scaffold. In a church, it refers to the raised structure which was reached from a flight of steps (Anson, 1948, p. 154). This structure was from which the priest or minister preached and was essential in the days prior to methods of sound amplification. Their use has become obsolete over time. Examples of pulpits are observed in the churches of all three Christian sects. Nonetheless it was considered a crucial feature of the Dutch Reformed Church, where the protestant doctrine emphasized much more importance on the 'holy word' and its preaching.

Figure 2: Pulpit of Wolvendaal Church, Colombo

Figure 3: Celebrant's and minister's chairs of All Saint's Church, Hulftsdorp

The celebrant's chair was fundamentally associated with the sanctuary of the church and its altar. The chief priest who conducts the mass or worship is known here as the celebrant. It stood "as a symbol of his (the celebrant's) office of presiding over the assembly and of directing prayer" (McNamara, 2006). It was placed facing the congregation, preferably behind the altar table, but providing a straight view. Emminghaus (1997, p. 112) notes that it was "an expression of the hierarchical organization of the people of God: In the officiant, the Lord himself presides over the worship service. The chief celebrant is his representative." Therefore the celebrant's chair is wholly absent from the Dutch Reformed churches which lacks a separate sanctuary in its plan and calls for equal status of the preacher and the preached in its doctrine. Historically the celebrant's chair is an adaptation of the Episcopal chair (Bishop's throne or cathedra) and fulfills the same function for the community liturgy. The Bible refers to the use of the celebrant's chair; "in the synagogue, it was the right of the teacher to sit on a special stool or chair. The head of the synagogue, on the 'seat of Moses' (Matt: 23.2), sat facing the congregation" (Emminghaus, 1997, p. 112). Therefore the chair was not only a practical piece of seating but held position of theological value.

2.6 SEATS IN NON- SECULAR BUDDHIST CONTEXTS; A CHANGE OF OBJECT, AUTHORITY AND POSITION

Contrary to the limited and closely controlled use of seating dictated by *vinaya* law, towards the end of the 19th century and beyond, observation can be drawn to the usage of elaborate *dharmásana,* the presentation of them by

the laity and the image of the monk's posture from one of meditation to one of preaching.

The *dharmásana* that developed in the late 19th century consisted of two elements; the 'enclosure' and the chair. They were usually a symmetrical structure made of timber, elaborately decorated with carvings. They created a 'space within a space' inside the *dharmasálá* and created a physical as well as a symbolic gap between the preaching monk and the listeners. The chair on which the preaching monk would sit was an upholstered high arm- chair. A cushioned ottoman was usually incorporated in sitting due to the greater height of the chair. Both the chair and the ottoman were skillfully embellished with carvings.

2.6.1 The change of the role of the Buddhist monk and manner of teaching dhamma

The early Buddhist-Christian dialog was a peaceful one, owning to the high level of tolerance characteristic of Buddhism. Wenzlhuemer (2008) records that resident Buddhist monks received missionaries who took engaged in long travels preaching, with great hospitality. Furthermore he notes that on several occasions Buddhist monks helped prepare places of Christian worship or allowed the *dharmashaala* of their temples to be used by the missionaries.

However, the Christian attitude in the majority of instances was not a likewise one. Strathern (1998) commenting on the 'Buddhist-Christian debate of 1543 AD' conducted by the Franciscan missionaries states that these disputes were specifically used to discredit the Buddhist doctrine and convince the indigenous ruler to embrace Christianity: what they considered to be absolute truth. Portuguese Franciscan missionaries considered the Sinhalese Buddhist monks as practitioners of superstitious believes and compared them with other pagan priests. He also notes that they remained ignorant of the Buddhist doctrine (Strathern, 1998).

While the more lenient approach of the Dutch and then the British towards Buddhism facilitated religious freedom, towards the later part of the 19th century the majority of Sri Lankans were faced with a crisis of identity. Seneviratne (2000) aptly argues that the new classes which emerged by embracing the politics, culture and economics of the colonial ruler had to now adapt their religion accordingly. Their approach was twofold. The minority adapted Christianity, the religion of the ruler while the majorities sort to reorganize and redefine the traditional religion to conform to modernity. While Christianity was rejected as a faith, the new Buddhism was modeled on it, consciously or unconsciously. The movement came to be

known as the Buddhist revival and was highly influenced and led by Anagarika Dharmapala.

Dharmapala saw it as a renaissance of 'traditional' Buddhism, although scholars argue the movement is more of a reformation: aligning religion with the notion of 'Sinhala' ethnicity. In his agenda, the Buddhist monk was to play a new and crucial role. The model for that newly invented role was the Christian priest ministering to his flock. The monk of Dharmapala's paradigm is a personality in whom a complex of traits- Methodism, punctuality, cleanliness, orderliness, time- consciousness, dedication, and "non-sensuousness."(to use Dharmapala's own term) – was rationally integrated" (Seneviratne, 2000, p. 27).

This Neo-Buddhism (as referred to by Seneviratne) was modeled on the organizational structure, social structure most importantly the idea of ministering to a flock as seen in Christian practice and culture. In the light of this new role, a new form of *dharmadesana* was vehemently promoted. The new *dharmadesana* was in sharp contrast from the traditional form. It was limited to about one hour, which was one twelfth of its original duration. Furthermore it was devoid of the elaborate ritualism that characterized the major part of the traditional form. Most importantly it gave prominence to a theme, which was included to the sermon in the form of a Pali verse chanted explicitly by the monk. It also lacked the dramatic performative quality that was essential to the 'experience' of a traditional *dharmadesana.* The new *dharmadesana* in its precise theme and format resembled more the sermon that was preached from "the Christian pulpit" than written references of *dharmadesana* of the medieval era (Daniel, 2000, p. 187).

The new identity and the new form of *dharmadesana* resulted in the essential construction of the *dharmasala* within the temple premises. Within it emerged the new form of *dharmásana*. The *dharmasala* was typically symmetrical and had four identical entrances. The *dharmásana* would be placed in the center and consisted of a distinctive, elaborately decorated high seat (Figure 4a&b) (Wickremeratne, 2012). This seat was customarily kept on a central platform or inside an enclosure (Basnayake, 1986).

2.6.2 Emergence of the new class of wealthy laity

The stately seats used by king and other officials, used similar seats of authority in their dwellings also. So they wanted to 'present' the monk in the new position of power with a likewise seat.

Figure 4: *Dharmasana* of Pothupitiya Sri Walukarama Maha Vihara, Wadduwa

The community abides to the temple becoming wealthy with a need to portray that wealth also. Prominently they wanted to gift the temple with various artifacts including 'seats'. Name of donor and to whom the merit should be given is recorded to be well seen on these seats (or rather communicate somehow), to gain recognition within the community.

3. Conclusion

The colonial period of Sri Lankan history portrays a drastic change in the objects and devices used for seating, their methods of manufacture and social power relations associated with a 'seat'. These changes in secular society are reflected in the usage of seating in religious contexts as well. Though the Buddhist monks guided by 'monastic code', cultural diffusion, interpretation and appropriation of another 'cultures and alien practices' had changed their identity, values and social life.

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