

THE SCRAMBLING OF THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE BY THE CONTEMPORARY SINHALESE BUDDHIST TRADERS IN THE CITY OF KANDY, SRI LANKA : A CASE STUDY¹

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"Men express in rituals what moves them most" [Monica-Wilson 1957 :8]

"The first basic condition of bourgeois acquisition is lacking the security of the person and the property of the trader". [Marx & Engels 1991. Vol.33:15]

Introduction

During my fieldwork² in Kandy in 1993, I once approached a commercial stall in the central market in Kandy at about eight o'clock in the morning. The stall-owner was seated at the cash counter. His two assistants, like other traders at other stalls, were busy with the cleaning and dusting of goods, sweeping the floor and organising various paraphernalia needed for the morning religious ritual (*agamika charitraya*)³.

Pretending I was a genuine buyer, I approached the counter warily and politely asked the shopkeeper whether I could buy a packet of cigarettes, as I saw that the stall had opened. One of the assistants promptly replied, '*kade arala naha*' ('the stall is not open yet'), even

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³People know generally that traders are very conscious of the importance of this rite. Buyers dare not approach a shop in the morning to buy anything unless they are certain that shopkeepers have completed the *vandima*. Many instances were reported to me where traders not only dismissed buyers when they came at the wrong time (*avelawa*), but had even been rough or violent with them. In certain cases they even chase customers away.

though it appeared so to me. If a shopkeeper uttered these words and refused to sell something, a foreigner would be quite perplexed. But the obvious ambiguity of *what the shop assistant said* and *what I saw* (the 'opened' stall) did not create any problem for me, because being a Sinhalese myself, I knew, that such behaviour is integral to commercial practice in Sri Lanka, as elsewhere in the Asian commercial diaspora. When the shop assistant said that the stall was not open, what he actually meant was that the shop was not yet ready for business. The significant point to be noted here is that the meaning of the word *open*, as understood by the traders in the morning religious context, does not denote the same meaning when it is used in other contexts. The shopkeepers' phenomenological reading of the term is different from other readings of it in non-commercial contexts, or even within the very commercial context itself but outside the morning ritual framework. Thus, although the stall appeared to be open, for the shopkeeper, in fact, the shop would only actually 'be' open at the completion of the morning ritual.

This paper presents an ethnographic description and analysis of the Sinhalese Buddhist shopkeepers' ritual practice in commercial stalls prior to the opening of their establishments for business in the morning. While highlighting the commercial and wider social aims underlying this practice, the paper also makes an attempt to demonstrate that the performance of the rite dissolves or scrambles the sacred/profane distinction which plays a prominent role in the dominant ideology and discourse of Buddhism in contemporary Sri Lanka.

Shop-Opening Rites: The Ethnography

The ethnographic details of the morning shop-opening rituals that will be presented here are based on a number of *in situ* observations of Sinhalese Buddhist businessmen's practice in the core commercial area of Kandy city. As a result of my visits to all types of establishments - provision stalls, meal houses, hotels, textile shops, green grocers and vegetable sellers - between 6 and 10 every morning over a period of three weeks, I was able to observe how traders conducted the rites. What is presented here, with a number of examples, is the general picture. Of course there are exceptions to and deviations from

the normal practice. Before proceeding further, a few general points are worth mentioning, at least in brief, as they provide the background required for understanding the ethnography and the analysis that follows. For the sake of convenience and clarity, I shall put them in numerical order.

1. Out of the one hundred shops that I observed, I found that in seventy six establishments the owners themselves performed the rite. In a small number it was performed by a close relative of the owner, usually a brother, while in others, a “trustworthy” shop assistant was given responsibility for its performance when the owner was absent. But what is important is that no shop was ever opened for business before the rite was carried out.

2. The Sinhalese Buddhist merchants or shopkeepers use various terms when they refer to this ritual, such as *pahana patthukaranava* or *thiyanawa* (lighting the lamp), *vandinava*⁴ (worship), *dum allanawa* (burning incense), and *deviyan budun vandinava* (worshipping the gods and the Buddha). Some Sinhalese merchants also call it *alleyi karanava*, and Tamil traders use the term *alleththi*⁵ when referring to the rite. The word *puja* is rarely employed by the Sinhalese Buddhist merchants in this context, though Tamil traders use it⁶, and in the case of Tamils, *puja* has an obvious theological meaning, as it connotes ‘an invocation, reception and entertainment of God’ [Gonda 1970 :77].

⁴ The act of *Vandinava* in Sinhalese discourse has at least two meanings. One meaning is physical, the other is religious. The first refers to the respectful physical gesture of salutation, whereas the second denotes religion [Gombrich 1991 :72-73]. But when merchants say ‘*vandinna issella badu vikunmane naha*’ (no goods are sold before worshipping), they give the idea of *vandima* both a religious and a physical meaning.

⁵ The ‘*alletti*’ as a performatory act is related to the practice of Hindu worship, and it is possible that Sinhalese merchants might have taken both the term of reference and the practice itself from Hindu ritual practice [see. Cartman 1957:155]. As a performatory act, *alletti* plays a major role in various Tamil rituals, such as the marriage ritual. Hocart notes, as cited by Yalman [Yalman note 10 in Nash 1966:220] that in traditional Tamil marriage rituals there were two women called *alletti amman* whose task was to take the bride around the marriage ring.

⁶ Tamils call the practice *sandhiya* or *Sandhi* (sin. *Shanthiya*). Ostor also found the practice being carried out in Rajasthan bazaars [see Ostor 1984: 133].

The word 'puja' always encompasses the idea of god and usually reflects the devotee's subordinate relationship to a deity [cf. Babb 1975; see also, Fuller 1992; Logan 1980:123]. Tamil traders, therefore, cannot digress radically from the constraints of Hindu habitus, even in this secular commercial setting.

Most Sinhalese traders, by contrast, prefer to use the colloquial phrase 'kade arima' when referring to the rite, and this is not devoid of religiosity or disassociated from the concept of reverence or respect. Indeed, in relation to the time existing between two acts, the act of 'opening' and the act of 'selling' the phrase 'opening the shop' (*kade arima*) carries with it a sacred meaning, though it does not connote as strong a sense of the religious as does the word Puja. However, *kade arima*, in its usage in this particular context, connotes both honour and respect as well as reverence and homage to some extent as the word *puja* does [Monier-Williams 1899: 641].

3. The ritual the Sinhalese merchants practise at their shops and stalls is not a religious obligation, but it is so for Tamil Hindu traders. The latter group views the ritual as being theologically necessary and religiously obligatory.

4. The time it takes to carry out the rite (*charitraya*) varies. Some traders complete it within five minutes, though the majority of traders usually take about ten to fifteen minutes to finish it. Those who come to their shops early, often devote around half an hour to the performance of the rite. Taking a longer time might suggest deep religiosity, or imply astrologers' prescriptions, but in most cases the duration of the performance is related to the type of business in which the trader is engaged. Retail food merchants (*sillara kada karayo*) and jewellers (*rattaran badu velendo*), for example, take more time than others. In the case of the first, this is because traders have to clear up debris from the previous day, while in the case of the second, it is because the traders concerned sell gold, the most valuable commodity.

There is neither a fixed time (*niyamitha velavak*) nor an auspicious moment (*subha mohothak*) for the performance of the rite as in the case of inaugural shop-opening rituals. The starting time of the rite is dependent on many factors, such as the time it takes for the shop owner to arrive at the shop, the nature of the goods sold in the shop, and the type of commitment various individual businessmen have towards the rite. The exact ritual time generally varies, as I have indicated, but it may also be lengthy if the cleaning-up stage is taken as part of the ritual itself, as many retail traders do. In this preparatory cleaning-up phase, traders usually tidy their cupboards, sweep their shop floors, and some vegetable and provision traders even wash their tools of trade (the scales, weights and the tops of tables where their cash drawers are located)⁷. Here, therefore, the cleaning-up activity is essentially part of the shop-opening ritual itself.

The typical morning ritual advances through three distinct stages, and each of these stages is fundamentally a rite in itself. A trader first performs the turmeric rite. He then performs the incense rite. Finally, he carries out the lamp rite. However, the order of these rites may vary because of their underlying non-obligatory character. But I shall present the sequence of rites in the order in which I have delineated them because this is the order they generally follow.

The Turmeric Rite (*Kaha Vathura Isime Charitraya*)

Turmeric is known in Sinhalese culture as *kaha*. Turmeric water (*kaha vathura*) is prepared by mixing a little turmeric powder with plain water. Most traders prepare it on the day they use it. It has been a long held belief in Asia that turmeric has the power to counteract pollution, and it is used predominantly to purify the floors of temples and shrines. Both at Ganesh *kovila* and Kataragama *devalaya* in the city, turmeric water is sprinkled over the entire floor area twice a day in the morning and in the afternoon.

⁷ According to Ostor, Bengali bazaar traders practice a similar rite. They wash the box which contains money and accounts' [Ostor 1984:133]

The turmeric water rite commences immediately after the cleaning-up stage is completed. Either the shop-keeper himself or one of his assistants sprinkles turmeric water (*kaha diyara*) all over the open space inside the shop where the shoppers or buyers gather to make their purchases. The sprinkling is done with the right hand, while the fluid container is held in the left hand. Traders also sprinkle turmeric water over the floor at the front entrance to the shop (*kade issaraha* or *kada midula*) or doorway (*dorakada*), and this is considered to be extremely important. As one trader put it:

The shops are not only opened for businesses alone, but they are equally exposed to many problems, as well. Through these doorways come thieves and rogues, women with pollution. By afternoon the whole shop is dirty and polluted (*jara wela*).

For traders, then, the front of the shop or the doorway to it is a potential danger zone. I found that in some cases, it was believed that jealous people had placed destructive, magical or sorcerous, material here. Thus, traders feel that the front of the shop or doorway has to be kept clean. The purification process is critical also because cleanliness is believed to attract customers. Moreover, because traders are concerned with maintaining ritual purity, it is understandable why some of them put their trust in Sriyakantha⁸, a Sinhala version of the Indian Goddess, Lakshmi.

This front space of the shop is the (physical) threshold or the liminal space or the 'space-limen', as Victor Turner described it [Turner 1979], which *combines* the outer with the inner and links traders to their

⁸ Sriyakantha is said to be the goddess who is responsible for ensuring cleanliness in all places. She is an invention of the Sinhalese cultural system. As Winslow points out, it is a general belief of the rural womenfolk in Welangama, a village in the district of Kandy, that 'Sriyakantha walks through kitchens at night, checking for cleanliness' [Winslow 1981:232]. She is sometimes confused with Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of prosperity, and in the commercial setting, it is Lakshmi who is more popular. As most Sinhalese Buddhist traders are rooted in the rural cultural system, the Sriyakantha image is still very much alive for Sinhalese Buddhist traders. Rarely is Sriyakantha's image found in traders' stall shrines. This is probably because she is not a tutelary deity.

⁹ For a very illuminating discussion of the phenomenological experience of doors and thresholds see Lang [1989].

clients. The front space or doorway⁹ is very important for merchants because potential buyers are expected to pass through it. Indeed the front space (or the entrance to the shop in the present case) is what Van Genneep refers to as a symbol of liminality [1960: 20-25]. This is because, for him, "*the rites carried out on the threshold itself are transition rites*". They are 'purifications' (or forms of washing, cleansing, etc.) They are "*rites of separation from previous surroundings*" [Van Genneep 1960:20] both physical and periodic.

This zone is important not merely because it is the boundary between two spaces, 'the outer and the inner', but because it is the place where "*the battles take place*" [Bourdieu 1990: 228]. The shop-keepers' competitiveness and the nature of the battle they are engaged in are evident in terms of the way traders decorate the shop front, the semi-sacred physical space which attracts customers. The front area of the shop is aptly described as a 'battle field', and this is the space which determines the value of the shop as well as the success of a trader's business. All entrepreneurs, regardless of the type of trade they are engaged in, are always meticulous about keeping it as neat and tidy as possible. And this is also the place which separates the mere onlooker from the real client or buyer. As soon as a potential buyer steps into this zone, either the shopkeepers themselves or their assistants, who are eagerly waiting at the counter, become impatient and excited. They equally become instantly courteous and polite as the customers enter the shop. This body language of shop-keepers demonstrates how important the physical threshold of the shop is. It is not only the place where the clients or buyers enter the shop, but also where wealth enters, and where aspirations are converted into prosperity.

Both the front and the inside where shoppers gather, receive a considerable amount of attention from traders. The attention they give here is an index of their concern with private property and ownership to which the turmeric rite is becoming increasingly linked. In practising it daily, they not only sustain their ritual culture; but also circumscribe the private boundaries of commercial capitalism.

The Incense Rite (*Dum Allime Charitraya*)

The turmeric rite is immediately followed by the incense rite (*dum allime charitraya*). Both Tamil and Sinhalese traders usually do this with extreme devotion. In all business places, there is an utensil kept for this purpose, known as *dum kabala*. On burning pieces of wood or charcoal, the traders now and then place ground *sambrani* powder¹⁰ or some other powder of their choice as there is a variety of *sambrani* available in the market. To enhance business, some traders use a substance made up of certain indigenous herbs. The list, (*vattoruwa*) which I obtained from a flourishing herbal trader in the city who is also a native doctor includes *pu-sambrani*, *kattakumanjal*, *suwanda kottan*, *devadara*, *agil*, *gugul namalrenu*, *nelum renu*, *ithana* and, *suduhandun*. This informant supplies the substance to many traders in the city, including Tamil traders. It is believed by traders that if the substance is prepared according to a prescribed formula its efficacy is heightened, enabling a business to flourish. Packets of the substance are sold at Rs.15.00, and each of them contains 200 grams of the powder. During the period of my fieldwork three other powders were also introduced to the market - *Suganda dupaya* (*dupaya* means smoke), *Seevali dupaya*¹¹ and *Maha Lakshmi dupaya*¹². I also saw some entrepreneurs use 'empowered powders (*jivam karanalada suvanda kudu*) - [the herbal powders empowered one hundred and eight times with some magical spells] rather than the normal *sambrani*, which I

¹⁰ *Sambrani* produces a pleasant aroma. The powder was originally used by Hindus in India.

¹¹ *Dupaya* means incense. Seevali is an Arahant, a liberated spiritual person who lived in the Buddha's own time. He is very popular among Sinhalese Buddhist traders

¹² This is one of the most interesting powders of all. Its recent introduction to the market is an important innovation. *Maha Lakshmi Suvanda Dupaya* ("Great Lakshmi Fragrant Incense"), as its packet claims, is made up of thirty two different herbs, and it is ritually empowered by the *Jaya pirita* (*Jaya* means success) and the *Maha Lakshmi Sthotra Gatha* (Great Lakshmi verses), and also by the Indian *rakshthranu* verse called 'Sakthi'. This product is a testimony to how innovative eclecticism can be.

mentioned above. All the powders are available from herbal shops and some stores in the city¹³.

The *dum allima* rite usually commences at the mini-shrine located inside the shop. Almost all merchants perform the act at the altar or mini-shrine built on a wall inside the shop, at a place where print images of the Buddha, Kataragama, Vishnu, Ganesh, Lakshmi and Seevali are usually found¹⁴. This mini-shrine or altar is the sacred axis (or focus) of the shop, in the context of the ritual.

The shop-keepers light incense sticks in front of these images either prior to the incense-burning rite (*dum allima*) or after it. The shop-keeper or his agent in this act usually holds the utensil in his right hand and waves it three times before the deities on the altar in a clockwise direction¹⁵. He then repeats the same action at the cash counter. Most traders hold the utensil for a minute or two close to the cash drawer, or under it in certain cases, to ensure that the sacred smoke enters into it. When asked why shopkeepers do this, I was told by Nimal, a vegetable trader, that "This is where the heart (*hadawatha*) of the business is. "The business", he said, " starts here and ends here".

¹³ Not only have various kinds of ritually empowered products entered the market; the number of users has also increased over the last twenty years as many people entered the field of commerce taking advantage of the new open economic policies (*vivurtha arthika pratipatthi*) introduced by the capitalist United National Party Government which was in power from 1977 to 1994.

¹⁴ Some well-established entrepreneurs start by burning incense before the Buddha, while other traders may focus on another deity. The preference itself demonstrates that there are important personal preferences [see Mallikarachchi 1998 chapter 7]

¹⁵ The lamp-waving performance and similar rites usually involve movement from right to left. In most, if not all, ceremonial and domestic rituals one can observe this tendency. For example, in Dorze rituals, as Sperber reports, the ceremonial tour almost invariably starts from the right and proceeds to the left [Sperberger 1975: 61; see also Logan 1980: 43]. The general explanation in the Hindu context (in which most of the rituals originate), is that the right is associated with divinity and life, whereas the left represents darkness and death [Beck 1976:218; V.Das 1977:99ff]. Moreover, it is interesting to note, as Hertz pointed out [in Needham 1973] that physical pre-eminence of right-handedness cannot fully explain its centrality in culture and society.

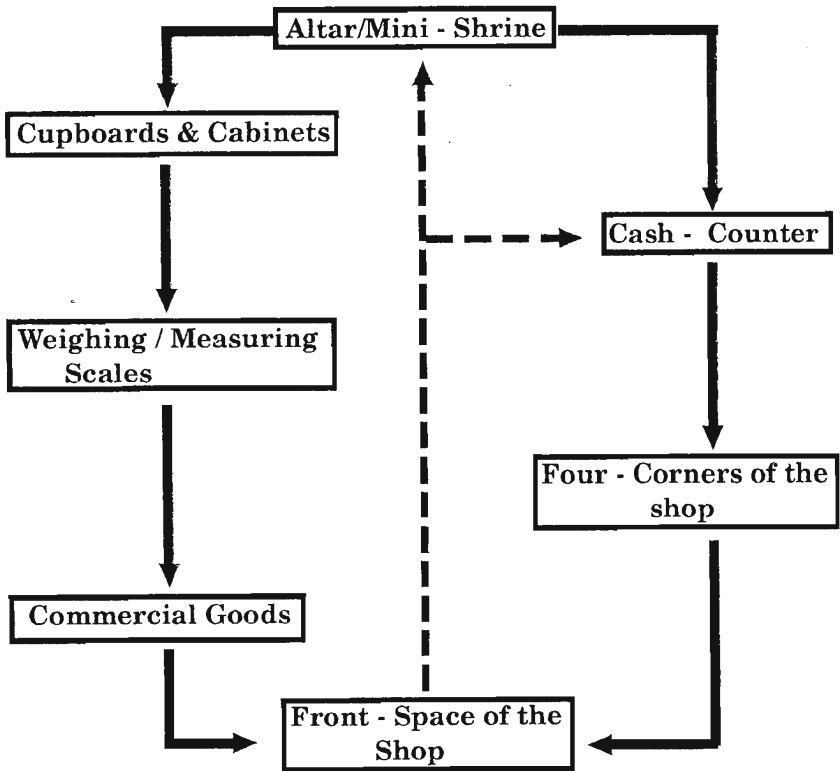
What Nimal, the vegetable trader, meant was that the place where the money is collected should be equally revered. Hemapala, a textile merchant, performed the same action at the cash counter, and he told me afterwards that almost all merchants have a quasi-religious respect for the cash counter, and this is particularly apparent in the morning. Giving respect to the cash counter immediately after paying respect to the shrine's deities demonstrates among other things, that, for business people, the sacred axis (the shrine) and the secular axis (the cash counter or money) are not two essentially distinct or separable axes but constitute one. This means that the performance of the incense rite, dissolves the distinction between the sacred (i.e. the shrine and the deities) and the profane (i.e., the cash desk or money). It dissolves the very dualism at the heart of the religious discourse found in educated middle class and Buddhist monastic circles in Sri Lanka and even in the western intellectual tradition

In the process of the incense rite most traders carry out additional practices. Thus, some textile merchants direct the smoke into their showcases and cabinets. They also expose the measuring sticks (*yara kodu*, *mitara kodu*) to the sacred smoke. In shops where certain daily provisions are sold, the owners often deliberately allow the sacred smoke to pass over their scales, and weights. However, they never actually worship the scales or weights as do the merchants of the Vishnupur bazaar in West Bengal [Ostor 1984: 133]. Yet, many street vegetable sellers worship their weighing scales (*tharadi*) before beginning the first business of the day¹⁶.

Having completed the rite inside the shop, most traders then carry the utensil (*dum kabala*) to the front of the shop, to the threshold zone, which I mentioned earlier in connection with the turmeric rite. There they release some of the sacred smoke into the open space and return once again either to the shrine or to the cash desk where the ritual

¹⁶ This, and the rites similar to it, are occupational rites more than religious ones. Stirrat, for example, reports that the fishermen on the north western coast of Sri Lanka burn incense on their fishing nets before they start fishing [Stirrat 1992: 159]. The *Ayamara* Indians as mentioned by Taussig, also perform a rite called *ch'alla*, (sprinkling of liquor) before fishing, building a house..., or before making a purchase [Taussig 1984 :215].

ends. Whether the rite terminates at the shrine or the cash counter, is again determined by the individual trader. The typical sequence of the incense rite usually takes the following pattern: shrine -> cash counter -> items and all corners of the shop -> front space -> shrine/cash counter.



Stages in the Incense Rite Performed by Nimal

(* Broken Lines indicate variations some traders adopt when performing the Incense Rite)

The Lamp Rite (*Pahana thabime Charitraya*)

A few variations are found in the performance of this rite. Some traders do it soon after the turmeric rite is completed, but the majority of traders prefer to do it after the incense rite. Traders, however, have their own reasons for performing the lamp rite before or after the turmeric rite, but I am not concerned here with this issue as it is trivial.

Two types of lamps are generally used in the rite: the conventional clay pot (*mati pahana*) and the silver plated or copper lamp (Tamil. *ullakku*). The latter type has been used by Tamil traders during worship in their stalls for some time, and its use has now become popular in the stalls of Sinhalese traders as well¹⁷. Explaining their popularity in recent years, a Sinhalese trader said that the use of copper lamps is not only safer but they also do not make the shrine, altar or the shop untidy. Moreover, some traders prefer to use electric bulbs for the purpose, though most continue to practice lighting the lamp manually and use oil and clay pots or copper lamps. Those shopkeepers who are replacing the traditional coconut oil lamp with the electric bulb for use in the lamp rite, usually switch on the latter in the morning after the other two rites have been completed and keep it on throughout the day. What is important to note is that, although the materials and objects used in the rite have been transformed, the form of the rite and its practice remain unchanged.

The lamp rite is practised by all traders regardless of their success in business. Most pavement vendors and peddlers practise it at home before they set out on their business rounds in the morning. A number of them even explained in detail how they start the day with the rite. The following case study is a good example. The verbatim transcript given below is taken from a tape-recording which I made while interviewing Pala, one of my informants.

¹⁷ The use of copper lamps (*ullakku*) by the Sinhalese Buddhist traders is clear material proof of the syncretism taking place in Sinhalese Buddhist liturgical practice through worship of material objects. *Mati pahana* essentially symbolises Sinhaleseness. In Hindu worship, or liturgical practice, the *ullakku* is central. While use of the *ullakku* in the forms of domestic worship in Sinhalese Buddhist households is rare, its presence in Sinhalese shops is becoming increasingly conspicuous.

*I am 38 years old, and married, and I have two small children. I married late due to the hardships our family went through. I was the second in my family and left school having passed the fifth standard. Then I worked in a house as a helper. I left that job after sometime and worked in a hotel as a dishwasher and, subsequently, as a waiter. I was there for fifteen years. With the little money I saved, I started to sell oil cakes (vade) in a small hut in a Colombo suburb. I had good business there, but after two years the owners of the place wanted the premises back and I had to leave. As I could not find a place in Kandy town, I ended up as I am today an oil cake seller (**vade velenda**). I sell home-made short eats (**vade, murrukku, pakade and mashala vade**). My wife and I get up early (at 4.30 a.m.) everyday to make sufficient short eats or oil cakes for the day's sale. I leave home by 6.30 or 7 a.m. Before I leave, I light the lamp for Seevali and for the Buddha. [His altar was naturally a small one, unlike many of the altars in the shops in the town which are elaborate]. I do not actually know whether there is any positive relation between my lighting the lamp regularly and the success of my business rounds. I cannot say exactly (**hariyatama**) whether or not I would be disappointed at the end of the day if I had not followed the rite. But I practise it daily, regardless of the result. The practising of the rite in the morning has become a part of my life (**jeevithaye kotasak**).*

Like Pala, most peddlers and hawkers in Kandy city light the lamp before they leave for their daily business rounds. Like Pala, most of the peddlers, vendors and pavement sellers in the city view 'being religious', which they call *agama sihikirima*, as part of their occupation (*rakiyawwe*) or life (*jivitheye*). Moving to the city's commercial context from the setting of the peddler, it can be seen that the lamp-rite is the most common and popular ritual performed by business people, regardless of their status or success.

In order to describe this simple rite in relation to their intentions and aims, I shall turn once again to Nimal, the retail trader with whom I discussed the incense rite. Having finished the incense rite, Nimal walked to the altar and paid his respects to all the images on it. He kept his clasped palms on his forehead. Then he poured some oil into the three pots on the altar¹⁸ and respectfully placed three wicks (*thira*) in each of them. After this he first lit the middle wick. (He later said that the middle wick is lit for his personal deity). Most merchants have personal deities or *ista devathavan*. Nimal lit the other two wicks next, first the right one and then the left one. He took some incense sticks from the packet kept in a corner of the altar and, after lighting them, waved them around the altar three times before putting them into the holders. As he told me later, this repetitive waving expresses one's commitment. In fact, according to Nimal and many other traders, it is a practical demonstration of one's commitment.

Performing this rite after the turmeric and incense rites, rather than before them, does not in any way mean that it is trivial or less important. For small subsistence traders and pavement vendors it is just as critical as the other two, if not, more important, for it is directly associated with prosperity, the central goal of their economic pursuits. Moreover, the lighting of the lamp is a form of worship as well [Logan 1980; Fuller 1992], and in the case of these traders, it also enables them to discipline themselves, to ensure that they keep their commitment intact. Light (*alokaya*) is associated with prosperity (*saubhagya*) and, in the commercial context with good business.

Summary

As I have pointed out, the Sinhalese Buddhist shopkeepers in the city of Kandy conscientiously practise certain rites (e.g. the turmeric rite, the incense rite, and the lamp rite) in sequential order before they open stalls in the morning. The three rites also have a special meaning for traders in relation to their commercial life. The turmeric rite is

¹⁸ In small boutiques only one clay pot is usually used for the purpose. But as shopkeepers say, it is not the number of pots used that is important but one's commitment to performing the lamp rite.

associated mostly with the front space of the shop, which is vulnerable to pollution. The incense rite, on the other hand, directly links money with the sacred while the rite of lighting the lamp is connected with the idea of prosperity. These are the central concerns of traders, and they are given full expression in the rites. They are also fully expressed during its practice.¹⁹ Businessmen, (big or small), as a practical rule or norm, would rarely contemplate entering into commercial transactions, before carrying out the three rites.

Why do traders perform any ritual at all, and why do they repeat the three rituals I have described every morning? The next section briefly attempts to find answers to these two questions by relating ritual practice to the commercial activities of traders. Prior to that, I would consider what non-traders, particularly the educated Buddhists and monks, think about the kinds of rituals which traders perform.

The Rituals of Greed?

Educated people practise hardly any rituals similar to traders for purposes of advancing themselves in their professions. There are over one hundred lawyers operating in the Kandy court complex, and all of them have offices of their own here. I visited at least half of these offices, but did not find a single lawyer performing either this, or any other rite similar to this, in the morning prior to engagement in work at court; nor did I see any mini-shrines on the walls of their offices. The legal and medical professions are also competitive trades. They are unquestionably entrepreneurial in Barth's sense of the term [Barth 1963]. This is more so today than in the early sixties, as commercial cultural values have permeated into all spheres of contemporary Sinhalese society. Mr. Wickramathunga, a leading lawyer in Kandy, explained why he does not practise such rites.

¹⁹ The non-trader groups in general reduce this to a customary practice. But my research proved that it is not, because the notion of custom does not enable one to grasp the strategic aspect involved its practise. Neither does the word custom enable one fully to understand the reasons why they practise them daily.

*Obtaining a case or not depends on how successful you become as a lawyer and on your knowledge of law and your skill in oratory. **Dum allima** or **deyiyā vandima** (worshipping the deities) would not bring any client to one's doorstep, nor would it enable one to win cases. Those practices are not just pointless (**therumak nathi vada**) but they also waste one's precious time (**vatina kalaya ka damimak**).*

Doctors, teachers and engineers as well as other educated individuals by and large support this view ideologically. For the educated Buddhists, the morning ritual practices of traders are both bizarre and superstitious. The former claim that such rituals do not have any rational basis and hence are contrary to Buddhism itself. Dr. Jayadeva, a general practitioner in the town, told me that these practices are like fantasies (*vikara*), for nothing worthwhile could be gained by practising them. According to this informant, the rituals are meaningless. He stated that 'Buddhism proper' has nothing to do with them, because the rituals that merchants practise in the morning are directed at gaining material advantage and are anchored in self interest. For educated professionals, like Dr. Jayadeva, then, these rituals are rituals of greed. When educated Buddhists, both amongst the laity and in the monasteries, ridicule these rituals or say they are based on superstition and irrationality, they express their condemnation of traders' religious and rituals practice.

What rationalist Buddhists say also reminds one of what Weber has written. Although it is true that Weber was not concerned with the rituals of entrepreneurs and never referred to them as rituals of greed, he generally believed that such types of ritual were magical and superstitious and that they acted as obstacles to the rationalisation of economic life [See Weber 1958]. But for the Sinhalese Buddhist merchants in Kandy the rituals they perform are not obstacles at all. They are inspirational, especially in a world which, as they say, is extremely unfavourable to them.

The World of Sinhalese Buddhist Traders

By means of commerce in Kandy city, the Sinhalese Buddhist traders, and the merchants generally, make and remake their world through business relations and transactions. They not only do business but talk about business incessantly with their colleagues, sales assistants, and clients. They also, discuss business with their family members. Much of their time is devoted to contemplate business and to making plans and targets for business success, and most traders see the tasks they set for themselves as a big challenge. Indeed, for traders every new day is a day of challenge (*abhiyogathmaka dawasak*)²⁰. As one trader said:

*Business is a challenge, a challenge of every sort. Trading is a gamble (**suduvak**), a race (**tharangayak**). You do not gamble, or take part in a race, to lose. You know how much effort we put into selling something to a customer. When we succeed other traders lose. When they succeed we lose. You've got to be very attentive (**kalpanawen**) observant and alert (**parikshaven**). This is because commerce is a challenge (**velandama abhiyogayak**). It is the taking up of a challenge. Every new day, therefore, is a test of our efficiency, courage, and strategy (**upayaseelikama**).*

Other traders often reiterated what this trader told me, and I will now examine the nature of the type of challenge Sinhalese Buddhist traders claim that they face.

Karunadasa runs a small tea boutique on Railway Station road, and he had been doing business here for ten years when I met him in 1990. While carrying out business at the boutique, he bought a passenger transport van with the help of a Finance Company. They loaned him 80% of the money required to purchase the van. But due to the organisational and financial problems he faced, he was unable to pay

²⁰ Traders are always mindful of the importance of astrologically calculated auspicious moments because of the challenges they face and also because of their strong belief in astrology.

the necessary instalments to the finance company. The arrears piled up and the van was eventually taken back by the Finance Company. But Karunadasa had still to pay off all the arrears in 6 instalments, and a considerable amount of his earnings from the tea boutique are still being paid to the finance company. He told me that nothing had worked for him and that he was going thorough a very bad time. Once he even related his failure to the competitiveness of the transport business itself. And he also told me that he suspected that someone who did not want him to progress had probably used sorcery to harm him.

Lal, who recently opened a 10 feet x 10 feet studio on the first floor of an old building in upper Kotugodella Street, informed me that he was struggling because he had to compete with long established studios like "Mallikas", "Lakshmans" and the "Phoenix", as well as with many free-lance photographers operating in the city. The bank loans he took also became a formidable liability to Lal.

Ratne *mudalali* is a more established trader than the other two mentioned above. He has been involved in trade for over thirty years and runs a shop in Dalada Mawatha. He also has two small industries, a garment factory and an umbrella factory. A story he narrated made me aware that the challenges he continually has to face do not come from commerce alone but sometimes, suddenly, from elsewhere. Ratne informed me that he received a telephone call one morning at about 4.30 a.m. and found out that his shop in Dalada Mawatha was on fire. The whole shop was burnt down in about an hour. He could do nothing, and he only managed to save a little of his furniture. This was not the work of a jealous person but, as he told me later, it was due to a fault in an electric wire. The loss was compounded because his insurance policy had only just expired, and he was about to renew it on the very day his shop was burnt down. He said that the total loss he incurred as a result of the fire was about three hundred thousand rupees.

Most businessmen, whether old or young, often speak of another crucial challenge or problem that they have to face, namely, the problem of the evil eye (*asvaha* - *as* = eyes *vaha*= poison) or envy (*irshyawa*)²¹. This is an important factor in the immediate experiential world of merchants in Kandy city, as elsewhere in the country. Most Kandy city traders did not know how it works, but as Hocart said, those who do not know how the evil eye works, know that, "it works and they fear it" [1938 :156]. The evil eye and envy have become a very potent force today due to the rise of the commercial economy, class competition, and the widening gap between the 'haves' and 'have nots'.

Most merchants in Kandy are fearful of the evil-eye, which is known as *asvaha*. The merchants' belief in evil-eye and evil-mouth is very strong. Some traders secretly perform inside their shops a short magical spell known as *asvaha mathirirma* to nullify the effects of the evil eye or evil mouth. They also perform periodically a lime cutting (*dehi kapima*) ritual to ward off misfortune. Some traders utter a spell every year, while others utter one on any occasion when they suspect that they have become the object of attack. Some traders also visit ritual experts for this purpose. Getting solid or reliable proof, however, is nearly impossible in most cases. This underlines how strong the belief is. It is important to take note that there is a close relationship between the belief in the evil eye and the morning ritual practices, which I have described. Firstly, it is held that the evil eye, or even a sorcery attack, is motivated by jealousy, which has a negative effect on business. In anticipation of this kind of attack or misfortune, traders also engage in their morning ritual practices. Secondly, they also obtain instructions on how to ward off misfortune from exorcists and astrologers, who often stress that carrying out their morning ritual practices brings blessings

²¹ Although these are interesting aspects to probe into, particularly, when self-interest and competition play a central role in Sri Lankan commercial city culture, no serious attempt has been made to analyze or interpret these aspects of the Sri Lankan belief system. However, a number of studies are found in relation to the Indian sub-continent from where these belief systems could have originally arisen : Maloney (ed) 1976: There is also an article which directly deals with the traders, see DeCunha [1886-1889 :128-132].

and wards-off of evil. Traders carry out their rituals in part, to counteract the evil eye or jealousy in which the evil eye itself has its roots [Woodburne 1992: 56]. Admiring glances, according to most businessmen, are blighted by jealousy. An admiring glance thus results very often in the evil-eye being cast. Envy in the community of Sinhalese merchants in Kandy is counter-balanced by caste unity, regional identity as low-country Sinhalese and the intensification of Sinhalese nationalist feelings. These sentiments are becoming prominent due to commercial competition with Tamils and Muslims²².

Although adherence to ritual is supported by life experiences of Sinhalese Buddhist traders, the important question is why they believe they have to repeat the rite everyday.

Ritual Repetition

The traders' morning rituals are closely connected with the idea of beginning a new day, a day with new hopes and new aspirations. Practising these rites daily, therefore, is considered an essential condition for commercial success, and an integral element in commercial activity. Viewed as such, then, traders' 'commercial-cum-religious-ritual' practice could be seen as a way of 'doing' something [Parkin 1992; also Bell 1992], or as a ritualization of tradition, as Bloch [1987], Moore and Meyeroff [1977] have stressed.

²² Jealousies and rivalries are universal phenomena among merchant class people in every age. Taussig gives an example from the Bolivian context where those who are oriented towards business face set backs due to the alleged envy and maliciousness of certain individuals [see Taussig 1984: 80]. He also mentions elsewhere how shop keepers use magic to protect their businesses [Taussig 1984: 117]. Kapferer communicated to me personally that he found instances from his own field area, i.e. the town of Matara in southern Sri Lanka, of traders seeking help from sorcerers when their problems become too difficult to solve by peaceful means. Sometimes business rivalries cut across even very close kinship relations. I found in Kandy city some instances where merchants used sorcery against their own sons-in-law and cousins. For example some city dwellers connect the downfall and death of a well established and well known motor-spare parts trader, Mahinda *mudalali* (this is his real name) in 1985 to sorcery attack, though others relate it to one serious commercial miscalculation on his part.

Yet, these perspectives provide little assistance to our understanding of the shop opening rites. This is because, as much as it is essential to see *what* rituals *do*, or what objective trajectories they take, it is also important to see *why* rituals are done or performed and *what* motivates actors to *do* them. It is necessary to consider the strategic manipulation of both the idea of ritual itself and the method of its presentation. The critical question is why traders *do* these rites everyday and why they do them in their shops rather than at their residences. The fact that business people carry out daily rituals obviously signifies something that is important. But to analyze their behaviour, it is first necessary to look at the notion of ritual repetition in general.

Academic discourse on this has identified two modes of practice. Tambiah has pointed out that it is important to make this distinction explicit [Tambiah 1985: 135-146]. One mode of ritual repetition is to ensure the periodic restoration of the entire ritual performance itself. In the Sinhalese context, for example, there are the healing rituals [Yalman 1964], exorcist rituals [Kapferer 1983, 1997], and the Kandy perahara rituals [Seneviratne 1978]. Some of these are normally recognised as annual restorative rituals which correspond to seasonal changes [Drewal 1992:2; Schener 1985: 35-116], and here there are long gaps of time between the repetitions [Drewal *ibid*: 2]. The other mode of ritual repetition is the one that takes place within a single ritual performance [Kapferer 1983, Lex 1979].

Although the morning shop-opening rituals appear to be minor and brief, they entail both these modes. They fall into the periodic mode, as there is at least a 24 hour gap between the enactment of it on a morning of any given day and the second enactment of it the following morning. The morning shop opening rituals also share the second mode, as they have repetitions within the ritual, however small and brief they may be. The repetitive acts in the first are formal, culturally conditioned and religiously sanctioned. The second, namely, the daily repetition is an occupationally necessitated one, and the motivation for doing it, therefore, is generated by traders' commercial interests and needs.

Repetition *within* the morning commercial ritual may not appear to be explicit, but a closer look at its practice reveals that certain acts are undoubtedly repeated. In commercial stalls, numerous repetitions cannot be seen, but certain acts are repeated three times, and certain verses are recited three times²³ by some traders. These are culturally given forms of worship or liturgical practice learnt as a result of being born to Buddhist families.

Apart from commonly seen forms of worship, which are repeated three times, a typically repeated act in the shop opening rituals is the incense rite. It is characteristically repeated three times at the cash counter and at the altar inside the shop or stall, as I have already indicated. These repetitive acts unify the secular and the sacred. Nimal's behaviour, which I described earlier, demonstrates this clearly. Nimal repeated the act three times at the altar, then at the cash counter, and later at the altar again, and his act of repetition brought together or integrated both time and space as well as money and even the in-dwelling stall deities.

It is true, then, that repetitive acts, whether they are minor or major, elaborate or simple, certainly bring some stability to a rite, or ritual act, as Moore and Myerhoff have suggested (1977), and as Firth has explicitly stated [1964]. But as the ethnography I have presented demonstrates, the performance of the ritual also brings forth a psychological stability to the performer. As Kumaradasa, a wholesale vegetable trader in the central market put it:

*When the rite is performed, my confidence remains intact throughout the day. If I do not do it, I feel bad. I cannot explain this in words, but it is true. You may ask other traders. I am sure they too will confirm what I said. It's usefulness to business cannot be quantified (**pramana karanna baha**), but I can tell you that, it gives*

²³ The number three in Buddhism plays a central role in Buddhist theory and practice, both ontologically and cosmologically. Numerically fixed repetitive acts must have penetrated into Buddhist ritual, whether exorcistic or domestic, through Hindu, Tantric and Malayali influence.

wonderful (puduma) encouragement (dhairrayak). No one would fully understand this except another trader.

As this informant's comments suggest, both the rite and its repetitive practice help traders in their day-to-day commercial activity. Due to the unpredictable and insecure nature of business or business occupations, it is understandable why traders tend to repeat the rite everyday.

In 1989, Jaye, another vegetable wholesaler and retailer in the central market, sent his lorry to Nuwara Eliya about 45 miles from Kandy, to bring a lorry load of potatoes. Because of the political troubles in the country at the time, the potatoes took four more days than usual to arrive. Jaye also had to spend an extra three or four thousand rupees to get them to the Kandy market. An additional problem also arose when the potatoes finally arrived in Kandy. The central market had closed down for three whole days due to a sudden outbreak of violence in the city. Thus, Jaye not only lost the profits he had hoped to gain; he even lost his capital. He opened his stall again a week later, and, as he told me, when he did so, he paid special attention to the performance of the morning ritual. Extra attention to the ritual is usually given by all merchants when they experience substantial loss as well as when they gain high profits. For example, when trader Gune finished a car deal one day and unexpectedly made a profit of Rs. 25,000 he was extremely happy, and he told me that on the following day he gave more attention to the performance of the rite.

The two types of cases I have presented above are commonly reported. Thus, when a trader has a good business day, he will perform the morning rite the following day with special care. Similarly, when a trader is disappointed in business on one day, he will carry out the morning ritual the following day with great care. This is because, like the Kabyle [the natives of Kabylia in Algeria], Kandy traders, in the worst type of situation hope to achieve the best results and in the best situations they expect the worst to happen [Bourdieu 1990: 231]. Here, then, the morning ritual in a sense is subordinate to economic practice, as the latter determines or affects the performance of the former. It is

reasonable to assume, therefore, that the main motive for performing the rite or the degree of care taken when doing it is inseparable from economic circumstances. Yet, it must be pointed out that the rite is not merely related to economic phenomena, because non-commercial factors or elements are also incorporated into it. More importantly, it unifies the religious thought and sentiments of entrepreneurs with commercial actions, in other words it blends commercial thoughts with religious actions.

Ritual as Social Capital

During interviews with traders I found that ritual practice is not only characterised by commercial interests but that it is linked to other motives too. The daily practice of rites inside traders' establishments is a way of showing to the general public that traders too are pious, religious men rather than being greedy or rapacious. Seeking social recognition undoubtedly is one of the aims of all traders, including the Sinhalese Buddhist traders in Kandy. Kandy city traders crave for social recognition and this is understandable given their predicament in the city. They believe that the rites they perform inside their shops or stalls in the morning serve this purpose in a small yet decisive way. Thus, while the commercial meaning or symbolism in the turmeric rite, the incense rite, and the lamp rite is clear, when performing the ritual daily, traders also have an important social objective in mind. It is important for them, as I have stressed, to show to the public that they are not 'greedy' traders but traders who are mindful of religion when they engage in commerce.

The morning rituals practised by the Sinhalese Buddhist merchants in their stalls are widely considered by the general public as having a genuine religious form, despite the fact that non-trader middle class groups and some members of the *Sangha* refer to them as being 'non-religious' or 'commercial rituals without a religious content', or even as being 'rituals of greed'. The sympathetic attitude expressed by others in respect of traders' rituals, means that traders receive some respect. Indeed, some of the shoppers whom I interviewed said that, despite the fact that trading people are often criticised, they are mindful of religion

when they open their shops (*agama sihikirima*) and this should be acknowledged and they should be respected for thus. I also heard that when one small retailer campaigned for a seat in the municipal council, three or four years before my fieldwork began, one of his associates addressed the public at a rally in George E. de Silva Park in the heart of the city and even drew the attention of the audience to the retailer's religiosity. The speaker, I was told, claimed that in his long association with the trader he could not remember a single day on which the trader candidate (*apekshaka vyaparika mahatha*)²⁴ had opened his stall without being mindful of the Triple Gem (*thunuruwan*). This is the type of social capital that merchants accumulate by being 'religious'. Their not selling any goods until *vandima* is completed is also connected with this social aim.

In most of the towns and villages today such a characterisation is helpful; it may have even certain pragmatic advantages in the locality - at least such a person may wield some extra influence over the others.[Khare 1977: 120].

The Sinhalese Buddhist traders in Kandy city, especially the established few, have achieved this kind of influence through piety²⁵. Their 'religious' or ritual behaviour inside their shops is thus intended to solve two problems with a single stroke. Firstly, this behaviour gives them some confidence and a sense of order in their commercial practice. Secondly, because religion itself is an important source of social capital (and it has been so in Sinhalese Buddhist culture for many centuries), the Kandy Sinhalese Buddhist traders try to accumulate it by means of their daily ritual practices. Indeed, as Bourdieu has rightly noted, the accumulation of religious capital "*is perhaps the only form of accumulation when economic capital is not recognised*" [Bourdieu 1990:

²⁴ In public gatherings and functions such as weddings and funerals, traders are normally called *vyaparika mahatha*, which is a term of respect. Traders, particularly in the younger generation, like to be called *mahatha* or *mahatthaya*. It differs from the term, *mudalali* because the latter can be used in a pejorative sense.

²⁵ Two brilliant accounts of the relationship between piety, power and business activity are found in Tambiah [1984] and in Ortner [1989].

118]. This undoubtedly applies in the case of Kandy city traders. If they wish their economic success to be recognised at all, they have to translate it into religious capital. This does not mean that they are not religious in a more traditional sense or try to accumulate spiritual merit; but this is not the main incentive for them when they engage in religious practice. Hence, their ritual practice is essentially strategic.

The strategy found here, however, differs from that present in the ritual structure itself, as in the case of demon exorcisms (*Yakthovil*) [Scott 1994]²⁶. It is a strategy that is consciously worked out by traders in practice. Individuals or agents, as Bourdieu has stressed, master the *modus operandi* of rituals 'only by making them work practically, in a real situation, in relation to practical functions.' [Bourdieu 1990: 90]. This obviously means that individuals engage in cultural practice, especially in its religious form, to achieve their occupational or social aims. It is thus a conscious activity, and from this point of view, ritual cannot be seen as merely a stereotypical repetition, or just a custom²⁷, as elite Buddhists state. It is also to be understood as being a representation or an image of how traders view themselves and of how they wish to be seen.

Conclusion

The ethnography presented above reveals interesting facets of the way the Sinhalese Buddhist traders practice shop-opening rites. The morning shop-opening ritual of the Sinhalese Buddhist traders is made up, as I have shown, of three sub-rites: the turmeric rite, the incense rite and the lamp rite. Traders view each of them from the perspective

²⁶ Scott discusses how structures are strategically intertwined to achieve their objectives in *yakthovil* rituals. And this is why he proposed "to undertake a close examination of a small number of those 'techniques' or 'chains of technique' that constitute the 'strategy' *yakthovil* employs to achieve its ends" [Scott 1994: 206]. But the strategic role of individuals in ritual seems to have been ignored by Scott.

²⁷ Custom is not an appropriate term to explain the shop opening ritual of the traders because custom conceals both the strategic aspect and the trajectory of the present problematic the traders find themselves in (see also Note 18 above). As Gilbert Lewis rightly says "To speak of some observance as 'merely customary' comes close to admitting his failure to grasp the situation and understand it" [Lewis 1980: 12].

of commerce or commercial activity. In the paper, I showed that the various problems and difficulties that the Sinhalese Buddhist traders face, such as competition, and the risk of being made economically unstable, as well as the dangers they face from the 'evil-eye' the 'evil mouth'- and from sorcery, are important factors which motivate them to engage in ritual practice. Moreover, a morning shop-opening ritual is not just a ritual that is customarily and habitually performed by the traders to enhance their businesses. They are not rituals of greed either, as the educated elites often claim.

Yet, as I have stressed, this does not mean that the business motive is unimportant for traders. In fact, it is one of their central concerns. But to reduce their ritual practice to this alone would not be fair, as they also do it to achieve their social aims. This is clear when one analyses the behaviour of traders particularly in relation to insurance schemes. Most established traders insure their shops through the National Insurance Corporation, which provides comprehensive cover or protection against loss due to fire, burglary, riots, floods and even terrorism. This is called Insurance Policy for Commercial Property [*Sesatha Velanda Rakshanaya*], and the policy covers retail shops, textile shops, provision stalls, restaurants etc. The insurance company colourfully advertises its packages in daily newspapers with a captivating message. Yet, despite having insurance, traders still practise the morning ritual.

This shows that the morning ritual practice, for traders, is an important way of practising their business as well. They thus utilise strategically, the modern insurance provision on the one hand, which is a feature of the commercial capitalist system, as well as the religious or 'culturally given insurance system' on the other in order to meet their objectives. Like many western businessmen in the New Age movement [Heelas 1996 : 64-66], Kandy traders also try to benefit from both types of schemes from the divine insurance scheme and from the earthly insurance scheme (provided by the commercial sector).

This morning ritual practice of merchants, therefore, whilst being associated with fear and pessimism as well as optimism, enables traders to seize commercial opportunities and to expand their businesses. While

educated Buddhists try to separate religious from economic practice, both at the practical level and at the ideological level, merchants unify the two. Here it is worth taking note of the role of the Hindu orthodox texts in keeping apart economic and religious activity. To achieve total efficacy, and to observe the rites accurately, the Hindu texts have stipulated the rituals to be performed on days the traders do not engage in business [Basu 1974]. What is practised by Tamil Hindu traders today is quite the opposite, and this is also the case for Sinhalese Buddhist traders. Sinhalese Buddhist traders, in particular, as I have shown, perform 'religious' rituals almost everyday saving only the days they are not engaged in business. Not only is the close relationship between economic activity and religion demonstrated here, but it also illustrates the symbiosis that exists between trading (or economic) activity and religion and ritual. This is further evident when one examines the images of deities or divine figures found at the mini-shrines in their stalls [Mallikarachchi 1998 Chapters 7&8].

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