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**Anne M. Blackburn: Buddhist Learning and Textual Practice
in Eighteenth-Century Lankan Monastic Culture**

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CHAPTER ONE

“Destroying the Thick Darkness of
Wrong Beliefs”

TOWARD the end of the 1770s, a poet writing at the request of a powerful Buddhist monk on the island we now know as Sri Lanka juxtaposed four images of Lankan Buddhist life.¹ The first, with which he described the time before his patron’s monastic order came into being, was an image of darkness, hypocrisy, and delusion. It described a time in which, according to the poet, Buddhist monks betrayed the ideals of monasticism.

Not bearing [proper] qualities in [their] minds,
bearing [only] the form of the monastic community with [their] bodies,
distant from the sun of the teaching,
[they were] in darkness for the period so described.

With the second, the poet alluded to his patron’s teacher, the monk responsible for founding a new monastic order—the Siyam Nikāya (Siamese Order)²—to which the patron belonged. Crafting his verse, the poet emphasized a transformation of Lankan monasticism by playing images of darkness and light against each other. At the poet’s hands his patron’s teacher was depicted as the agent of an illumination vast enough to embrace all of Lanka.

Like a person staying away from kaduru poison,³
he left the layman’s home that offers suffering.
He illuminated this Lankan isle.
What had been like a darkened home,
[came to seem] like a tree full of lights.

Our poet understood this broadly transformative illumination as the result, above all else, of heroic Buddhist learning. Two heroes stood out in his imagination: the leader of the monastic community and the king of the royal court. According to the poet, King

¹ His poem, *Samgharājavata*, is discussed at length in Chapter Four. The quotation in the title is from SV v. 194.

² A *nikāya*, in this context, is a group of monks who accept each other’s higher ordination as valid and who perform monastic rituals together. See further Chapter Two.

³ The poison of the kaduru tree, contained in the tree’s inviting blossoms.

Kīrti Śrī Rājasimha took the sovereignty of Lanka.
 Like the sun bringing light to Buddhist teachings and institutions,
 destroying the thick darkness of wrong beliefs,
 he had *Butsarāṇa* learned and Buddhist teachings spread everywhere.

The extended enlightenment of Lanka was only possible, however, because royal support for Buddhist instruction was matched by the preparation of monks as teachers and scholars. This preparation was assured by the leader of the monastic community, or *saṃgha*.

[His students] lived near the Lord [lit. king] of the Monastic Community,
 who possessed infinite knowledge.

They descended into the ocean of advanced learning, investigating.
 With the eye of wisdom they saw grammar and logic [related to]
 Sanskrit, Pāli and Sinhala.⁴

The lordly Buddhist teachings and institutions of Lanka existed everywhere.⁵

These images, taken from the hagiographic poem called *Samgharājavata* (The Activities of the Lord of the Monastic Community), take us to the heart of an eighteenth century transformation of Lankan Buddhism. The events to which these images allude, and the manner in which the images themselves are constructed, point to a moment of significant change in the dominant understandings of what it meant to be Buddhist, a monk, and learned in Lanka. The form and focus of the poem demands our attention for reasons extending well beyond the history of Lankan Buddhism, however. Taken seriously as a culturally located articulation of aesthetic and religious ideals, the poet's creative labor brings to light dimensions of South Asian history hidden by Orientalist and post-Orientalist historiography. The poet's vision — elite, public, patronized, and preoccupied with the relationships between monasticism, religious learning, and religious transformation — crystallizes the key arguments of this study. His verses invite a new historiographic perspective on pre- and early-colonial South Asian histories. This perspective brings into view the dynamic processes through which South Asians created and contested local understandings of “tradition” and claims to authority. In other words, it highlights the fact that a politics of representation and knowledge characterized South Asian societies both prior to and simultaneously with its better-known colonial counterpart.

Three arguments are central to this study. First, I challenge the con-

⁴ Sanskrit, Pāli, and Sinhala were the literary languages most important to Lankan Buddhism. See Chapter Three.

⁵ These verses are, respectively, SV vv. 70, 205, 194, and 191. “Buddhist teachings and institutions” translates *sāsana*. *Butsarāṇa* is an important devotional text, composed in the thirteenth century.

ventional view that an essentially stable and monolithic “traditional” Theravādin Buddhism existed in South and Southeast Asia prior to the intensification of colonialism that occurred in the nineteenth century.⁶ In doing so I underscore a historiographic irony and show that post-Orientalist emphases on colonial “constructions” of South and Southeast Asian cultural traditions have diminished rather than enhanced our understanding of precolonial and colonial histories. Second, developing a methodological tool appropriate to my challenge, I argue that the idea of “textual communities” provides a useful concept with which to analyze processes that encourage the continuity and the transformation of cultural forms within South and Southeast Asian religious communities at different times, and for varied reasons. At the same time, however, I also suggest modifications to the way that textual communities are described in recent scholarship. These modifications are relevant to the European contexts for which the concept of textual communities was first developed, as well as to those outside England and the continent. Third, providing a sustained example of transformation to counter claims for a stable “traditional” Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia, I show that a reformulation of the social organization and the intellectual practices of Lankan Buddhist monasticism took place during the eighteenth century. This reformulation transformed the character of Buddhism in Lanka by altering the way that lay and monastic Buddhists understood the texts and practices most deserving of their attention. It was crucially influenced by three factors: the formation of a new Buddhist monastic order, the systematization of monastic education, and the development of a commentarial genre called the *sūtra sannaya* (an explanatory commentary written in Sinhala for Pāli *suttas*) for use within the new educational system.

THE PROBLEM OF “TRADITIONAL” BUDDHISM

Studies of Buddhism in Lanka and Southeast Asia tend to emphasize substantial continuities in religious thought and practice from the time the Theravāda was established in a specific cultural area⁷ until the ad-

⁶ Theravādin Buddhism is the form of Buddhism that now dominates Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. For a more detailed account of its beginnings, see Chapter Two. Unless otherwise indicated, in this study “Buddhist” means “Theravādin Buddhist.”

⁷ The pace of the introduction of the Theravāda varied throughout the region. The following dates are commonly accepted for the beginnings of Theravādin communities: in Lanka, the third century B.C.E.; in Thailand, the twelfth-thirteenth centuries C.E.; in Burma, the eleventh-twelfth centuries C.E.; in Laos, the fourteenth century C.E.; in Cam-

vent of intensive colonial influence during the nineteenth century.⁸ The most articulate English-language spokesman for this perspective on Buddhism in pre-nineteenth-century Lanka is Richard Gombrich, whose studies consistently emphasize the conservatism of Theravādin Buddhism from at least the fifth century C.E. until the nineteenth century.⁹ In Gombrich's view, "The confrontation with Christianity is the one great and sudden break in Sinhalese Buddhist history, far more significant than the vicissitudes which affected the fortunes of the Sangha during the previous two thousand years" (1988, 23).

The idea of thirteen centuries of conservative "traditional" Buddhism followed by a nineteenth-century "watershed" (Gombrich 1988, 172) has had a deleterious effect on the study of Buddhist history in Lanka, as have the closely related views on the history of Buddhism in Southeast Asia that stress persistent structural tensions in Buddhist societies from the third century B.C.E. into the nineteenth century C.E.¹⁰ Although those scholars who emphasize the singularity and continuity of "traditional" Buddhism have made very significant contributions to the study of Buddhist South and Southeast Asia, the very authority they command has allowed historians to shirk the task of investigating the pre-nineteenth-century history of Buddhism in Lanka and other regions identified with the Theravāda. Our tendency to accept our own "traditional" authorities has been compounded by several factors. First, to write histories of Buddhist communities in periods before the nineteenth century is a daunting task. The sources for such historical accounts are largely literary or commentarial, written in an array of translocal and local languages and structured tropologically according to the demands

bodia, the eleventh-twelfth centuries C.E. (Swearer 1995). It is important to realize that the rise of monastic orders affiliated with the Theravāda did not mean a quick or complete transformation in the religious ideas and rituals of any region. See, for instance, Bizot (1976) and Strong (1992).

⁸ Discussions of Buddhism from the nineteenth century onward typically emphasize Buddhist responses to Christian missionary activities and to the demands of rationalist, scientific visions of the world articulated by European scholars. These studies of what is often described as "modern" or "modernist" Buddhism often stress the growing importance of lay Buddhist practice and lay autonomy from monastic communities, as well as monastic debates on the proper role of Buddhist monks. See, for instance, Bechert (1988), Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988), Malalgoda (1976), Obeyesekere (1970) and Swearer (1995).

⁹ Heinz Bechert, to whose work Gombrich's formulations are in part indebted, also assumes a relatively consistent "traditionelle Theravāda-Buddhismus" lasting at least from the third century B.C.E. to the nineteenth century C.E. and defined in part by a pattern of monastic degeneration and reform (1988). See also Gombrich (1971).

¹⁰ The most influential of the latter has been Tambiah (1976). On Gombrich's historical analysis, see also Malalgoda (1972, esp. 160).

of politics and aesthetics. More than historians of Buddhist (and non-Buddhist!) South and Southeast Asia would like to admit, our historical scholarship has been limited by the languages we fail to engage.¹¹ Second, historians of Buddhism remain deeply influenced by the double legacy of Weberian historico-sociological and text-critical approaches to the study of Buddhism. Whether entranced by the drama of “early Buddhism’s” dramatic claims for an “other-worldly asceticism” or drawn by the text-critical invitation to work backward toward what the Buddha “really” taught, many historians of Buddhism have focused their attention on the early formative period “witnessed” by canonical texts.¹² It is perhaps not unreasonable to think that such a focus is at times sustained by the lingering traces of an Orientalist tendency to see the “natives” as ill-equipped (and mercifully temporary) custodians of Buddhist texts rather than as the makers and users of such texts.¹³ As Lopez notes, “with rare exception, there was little interest in the ways in which such texts were understood by the Buddhists of Asia” (Lopez 1995, 7).

It is not only the complexity of the evidence for Theravādin Buddhism as lived and organized prior to the nineteenth century that makes studies of the later colonial period attractive, however. The urgent ideological commands of postcolonial (sometimes nationalist) and post-Orientalist scholarship have made it instinctive, and often nearly unavoidable, to deconstruct the impact of colonial conditions on religion, ethnicity, caste, class, gender, and so on. Such studies are often sophisticated and provocative.¹⁴ We must recognize, however, that the claims made by such studies are often greatly weakened precisely because we do not know enough about Buddhist communities prior to the latter portion of the nineteenth century to make secure arguments about changing or continuous modes of religious practice, or about the interaction between religious identities and political institutions.¹⁵ As Carol

¹¹ There are, of course, important exceptions such as Hallisey (1995) and Pollock (1995).

¹² For arguments against the transparent authority of such texts see Schopen (1997) and Strenski (1983).

¹³ “However, there are two underlying strategies that characterize the orientalist way of looking at things. One is the tendency to constitute a particular space as inherently timeless (or confined to its past, which is much the same thing)” (Breckenridge and van der Veer 1993, 17). For a useful discussion of Orientalist forms of knowledge, see Ludden (1993). On the “ideologies of empire” that shaped the Euro-American academic study of Buddhism, see Lopez (1995).

¹⁴ On Lanka see, for instance, Jeganathan and Ismail, eds. (1995), Malalgoda (1976), Roberts (1982, 1997), Rogers (1987), Spencer, ed. (1990), and Whitaker (1999).

¹⁵ I construe this last term broadly enough to include the informal institutions that sustain communal and regional interests.

Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer have observed, “Part of the difficulty with the ‘colonial discourse’ mode of entry into the politics of ‘otherness’ is that it locates the otherness of the other wholly (and even solely) in the colonial moment, thus eliding the question of pre- or non-colonial differences of consequence” (1993, 10).

We still know far too little about what it meant to be “Buddhist” in Lanka in any period before the late nineteenth century, about the religious institutions that shaped an understanding of identity and “tradition,” and about the social and political activities that embraced and constrained all forms of Buddhist practice. Arguments that assume the existence of a relatively stable “traditional” Buddhism in Lanka and other parts of South and Southeast Asia make it harder, not easier, to write histories of these Buddhist communities before, during, and after the advent of colonialism. Sheldon Pollock’s incisive comments are apposite here: “What troubles me is, first, the strong formulation of this [post-Orientalist] interpretation, whose logical extension is that colonialism in South Asia produced certain forms of domination *tout court*; and second, the thinness of the history of precolonial domination on which, ironically, this new historicism is based, and, moreover, its potential for precluding such an analysis. . . . If we want to argue that colonialism reconstituted tradition, should we not do a careful reading of the earlier tradition (or rather, traditions) that was the object of transformation?”¹⁶

Yet the roots of the “traditional” commonplace are still more complicated. Indeed, conventional understandings of “traditional” Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia are strikingly overdetermined. Scholarly understandings of the “traditional” monolith emerge in significant part from a naïveté on the part of historians who read indigenous Buddhist historical narratives. Contemporary historians of Buddhism, time and again, draw the rhetorical structure of these indigenous narratives into their own scholarly work without attending to their rhetorical character. By this I mean that historians of Buddhism appropriate tropes such as decline-and-revival and degeneration-and-reform, coming to see these tropes as straightforward descriptions of recurrent trends in Buddhist societies. In doing so, historians fail to recognize the conventional motifs through which what might be called a “dominant discourse” effaces the processes of change that have allowed it to assume this position of dominance.¹⁷ I am arguing, in other words, that historians of Buddhism

¹⁶ Pollock (1993), 97, 99–100. See also Hallisey (1995, 49–50).

¹⁷ See, for instance, Carrithers (1979a, 1979b), Gombrich (1988), Dewaraja (1988), Malalgoda (1976), and Tambiah (1976). For an economic analysis of royal participation in the reorganizations of monasticism often referred to as evidence of “revival,” see Aung Thwin (1979; 1985).

in South and Southeast Asia have failed to see that indigenous voices of recurrence and repetition construct the history of Buddhism as, essentially, the history of the constant movement between decline and revival or, as our poet would have it, between darkness and light. These voices do not simply describe. Oddly, historians of Buddhism (and historians of South and Southeast Asia generally) have rarely applied the critical insights of post-Orientalist scholarship when writing histories of pre- and early-colonial contexts. Scholars are increasingly sensitive to the way that colonial scholars and administrators shaped the essential traditions of the colonized by writing privileged representations of these traditions (such as “Buddhism”) into “official” history. However, historians of Buddhism, for instance, have not recognized that the Buddhists whose texts they read were led by equally powerful understandings of natural dominance, and equally powerful conventions of representation, to depict the history of Buddhism as one of periodic returns to essential purity. Historians of South and Southeast Asia have rarely noticed that, long before the British East India Company and the Dutch Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (V.O.C.) controlled Asian lands and waters, Asian participants in religious and political communities used written representations to construct “tradition” and to efface change in the interests of an accepted (or emerging) hierarchy.¹⁸

TEXTUAL COMMUNITIES

It is one thing to declare that one’s elders and betters are mistaken in some important respects, and quite another to offer an alternative. In the ensuing chapters I offer an alternative to the conventional view of stable, “traditional,” Buddhism by focusing on one period in the history of the Lankan Theravāda that I believe is better described as a moment of reformulation than as a period of reformation. Taking my cue from the eighteenth-century poet who linked the illumination of Lanka to the spread of Buddhist teachings, I begin to ask questions about the nature and place of Buddhist learning in eighteenth century Lanka. And, curious to probe beyond the poet’s heroic vision, I explore the degree to which the two leaders — of the court and of the monastic community — might be seen as responsible for key aspects of the reformulative process. Since most of the evidence available for writing histories of South and Southeast Asian Buddhism before the nineteenth century is textual (in a narrow sense), any effort to dislodge the “traditional” monolith

¹⁸ For a discussion of some of the problems involved in applying Said’s perspectives to Buddhist Studies, see Lopez (1995a, esp. 11–12).

must provide a new approach to the interpretation of these texts.¹⁹ In developing such an approach, I take up the following subjects: the textual forms that shaped lay and monastic understandings of proper Buddhist action during the latter two-thirds of the eighteenth century; how these textual emphases differed from those that characterized other periods; how the contents of texts influenced those who encountered them in oral or written form; and the role that changing patterns of textual composition, redaction and reception played in the definition of new religious groups.

I have found the idea of textual communities, a term first used to analyze literacy and textuality in Europe, helpful to an exploration of these themes. Writing a history of eighteenth-century Lankan Buddhism from the perspective of textual communities provides a way to examine the Theravāda as “a tradition dependent on local conditions for the production of meaning” (Hallisey 1995, 51). Thus I speak of the emergence of a new textual community in Lanka during the latter two-thirds of the eighteenth century. In my use of the term “textual community,” I differ somewhat from scholars who have developed the concept for work on European contexts. The modifications I introduce are rooted in my attempt to apply the concept of textual communities to a single Asian context, yet I believe that these modifications are relevant to those who study textual practices in areas distant from eighteenth-century Lanka.

The idea of textual communities was first broached by Brian Stock in his study of rising literacy rates in Europe during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Stock analyzes the development of an unprecedented degree of literate influence on society, due in substantial part to the appearance of textualized vernacular languages. As literacy “penetrated medieval life and thought,” Stock claims, it “brought about a transformation of the basic skills of reading and writing into instruments of analysis and interpretation” (1983, 11). Thus a text-based rationality emerged in Europe, and this affected the way that men and women understood their own experience as individuals and as members of social groups. Building on these basic assumptions, Stock uses the idea of textual communities to describe dissenting religious groups in eleventh-century Europe. He argues that authoritative texts and literate interpreters of them helped to constitute these new religious groups distinguished by their dismissal of beliefs and practices not legitimized through texts. Certain characteristics identified these groups as textual

¹⁹ That textual evidence dominates the record does not mean that archaeological and art historical evidence should be ignored. For useful examples of its application see Schopen (1991; 1997) and Holt (1996).

communities, according to Stock. First, they included an individual who mastered the written version of a text before using it to reform the community's thought and action (90). Second, their members were not necessarily all literate but were bound by their acquiescence to the authority of a literate interpreter of the authoritative text or texts. Third, the community's members formed a voluntary association in which community activities took “place around an agreed meaning for the text” (522). Fourth, the group was defined by the adoption of “a type of rationality inseparable from the text” as a norm for behavior, with the effect that activities not authorized by the text were dismissed as popular and inappropriate and there was a “turning away from ritual and symbol and towards an intellectualism inseparable from the study of texts” (523–524). Because texts formed the central point of orientation in these communities, they shaped the experience of literate and nonliterate members of these communities; “as texts informed experience, so men and women began to live texts” (4).²⁰

When adopting the term “textual community” to analyze the Lankan Buddhist context, we find that Stock's characteristics do not map perfectly onto the Asian evidence. For instance, although there is evidence that at least some literate leaders of the Siyam Nikāya understood encounters with particular textual forms as useful tools with which to reorient monastic practice—in a manner somewhat akin to the “reformatory” characteristic of textual communities as discussed by Stock—there was no single text or set of texts identified as the distinctive doctrinal point of orientation for the monks who participated in the Siyam Nikāya's educational institutions. Nor are there good grounds for emphasizing either a strong sense of voluntary association as characteristic of the new Lankan textual community or consistent levels of self-conscious reflection on the communal nature of the interpretive stances adopted toward particular texts. Given a slightly looser defini-

²⁰ Several aspects of Stock's argument have been criticized. Clanchy (1983) queries Stock's assertion that the eleventh and twelfth centuries saw a radical increase in actual literacy rates, whereas Graham (1987) provides convincing evidence of the coexistence of orality and literacy. This diminishes the argument that the rise of literacy brought about dramatic changes in individuals' experiences of communication and cultural authority. Finally, the claim that rising literacy led to substantially new levels of standardization and systematic rational thought have been weakened by revisions to the early work on orality and literacy (e.g., Goody 1968; 1977) on which Stock relies (esp. notes 14–16). In this regard see, for instance, Graham (1987, 17–18; 176 nn. 4, 6). Street (1984) provides an incisive discussion of two opposed approaches to the study of literacy (sometimes discussed as “literacies” or “literary practices”). The central debate concerns the propriety of discussing literacy as an autonomous variable that operates independently of specific social contexts. Fabian (1993) suggests that attention to reading as an activity may offer a corrective to dematerialized studies of literacy.

tion, however, the term “textual community” remains a useful tool with which to think about the lives of texts in relation to the lives of men and women. I use the term to describe a group of individuals who think of themselves to at least some degree as a collective, who understand the world and their appropriate place within it in terms significantly influenced by their encounter with a shared set of written texts or oral teachings based on written texts, and who grant special social status to literate interpreters of authoritative written texts. Although members of a given textual community are oriented by and toward shared texts, their interpretations of these texts are not homogeneous.

In thinking about the processes through which texts came to influence the way eighteenth-century Buddhists understood their place in the world and the actions they should undertake, as well as the connection between interpretive command and social status, I am drawing on certain refinements to Stock’s work suggested by Martin Irvine. Most important for my purposes are two elements. The first is Irvine’s attention to the circumstances that sustain accepted interpretive strategies within a textual community. A second is his insistence that relationships of hierarchy and inequality are created when particular individuals and groups are identified as custodians of authoritative interpretation. In Irvine’s words, “A textual community is formed by the two dimensions of the social function of texts, which are as inseparable as the two sides of a sheet of parchment—a received canon of texts and an interpretive methodology articulated in a body of commentary which accompanied the texts and instituted their authority. . . . The apparatus of interpretive discourse was formalized in the methodology of the arts of discourse and articulated in a body of commentary and criticism that authorized the received texts as objects of serious study and as expressions of a collective cultural memory” (1994, 15). This interpretive methodology not only defines specific “texts as repositories of authority and value”; the ability to interpret according to this authoritative method also defines the interpreter as a powerful member of the larger society in which the textual community participated, by creating a particular identity and social position (2).

The Lankan context suggests new questions appropriate to the study of textual communities in Asia and elsewhere. First, I argue that it is important to look closely at the social conditions that promote a stable and self-replicating interpretive authority within a single textual community and at those that allow for interpretive shifts and challenges. Whereas, for instance, Irvine makes a strong case for the comprehensiveness and stability of *grammatica*²¹ over four centuries, the Lankan

²¹ The “whole discipline concerned with literacy, the study of literary languages and texts, and the principles for interpretation and criticism” (Irvine 1994, 5).

monastic elites whom I discuss found room to develop substantially new understandings of textual authority and interpretive propriety. In the course of time, however, with the systematization of education, these new views on authority and interpretation reached a position of dominance stable enough to affect Lankan Buddhist culture for at least two centuries. Thus, social and institutional factors that affect the stability of an “interpretive methodology” deserve sustained attention. Second, the Lankan case underscores the importance of exploring the ways that a textual community’s dominant interpretive strategies are sustained and challenged by the institutional location of those who engage these strategies. Where Irvine sees a textual community’s authoritative strategies of interpretation as stable, pervasive, and bound to subtly normalizing social hierarchies, I suggest that we remain alert to the possibility that these strategies will have varying degrees of impact on individual acts of interpretation. Individual and collective practices of discipline and devotion, for instance, affect the degree to which authoritative trajectories of interpretation are accessible, compelling, and internalized. Similarly, as the social status of a textual community’s members varies, so may their degree of openness to the dominant interpretations of the community. The Lankan context strongly suggests that there is more room for variation and resistance in interpretation than current models of textual community allow for.

TRANSFORMING LANKAN BUDDHISM

I understand the reformulation of Lankan Buddhism during the eighteenth century as a transformation caused by the intersection of three shifts that took place within the island’s Buddhist community: a change in the social organization of Buddhist monasticism, the emergence of new ways of conceiving the intellectual practices appropriate to monasticism, and the introduction of a particular textual form into these practices. A claim as far-reaching as my claim for “transformation” demands extensive evidence, which I find by examining Lankan Buddhist monastic institutions and practices from several perspectives. I look closely at the transmission and standardization of elite religious education in a context dominated by manuscripts rather than by printed texts, and explore the links between monastic reading, interpretation, and the constitution of monastic identities suitable to the new Siyam Nikāya. Since the education of monks was a socially organized phenomenon that brought monks and lay Buddhists into specific relationships, I also write about the way that the shared needs of royal and monastic leaders led to the systematization of educational advancement and patronage, and about the impact of the newly organized monastic

education on the nature of other lay-monastic interactions on the island. In doing so, I explain that the use of *sūtra sannayas* to train monks as preachers created a new textual community that encompassed lay and monastic Buddhists in Lanka. This textual community was defined in part by a new view of proper learning and authoritative textuality, a view that had considerable impact on Buddhist activities in Lanka during the nineteenth century and beyond. In fact, the character of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Lankan Buddhism was caused in part by the changes in the organization and focus of monastic education that took place between the 1730s and the 1780s.²²

By examining the eighteenth-century reformulation of Lankan Buddhism from the perspective of textual communities, I bring into view important aspects of Lankan history prior to the intensification of colonialism in the late nineteenth century. The educational institutions and textual practices of this new community of lay and monastic Buddhists were significantly untouched by the slowly encroaching powers of the Dutch, French, and British colonial establishments. By offering a new reading of indigenous Lankan histories that emphasizes their importance to the emergence of this new textual community, and by drawing attention to the diverse acts of interpretation engaged in by the community's participants, my work provides a new way to think about "the invention of tradition" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) and the limits to it in pre- and early-colonial contexts. Further, because I argue that the new textual community that arose in the eighteenth century influenced the nature of Buddhist practice and self-understanding during subsequent centuries, this study complicates the usual post-Orientalist view of the construction of knowledge and tradition. The evidence for an eighteenth-century reformulation of Lankan Buddhism shows clearly that Asians not only reconfigured "traditional" practices in response to colonial definitions of desirable knowledge. In addition, local definitions of desirable knowledge clearly helped to set the terms for the colonial construction of Asian "tradition" as well as for local responses to that which was newly defined as "traditional."

MEDIEVAL TEXTUAL COMMUNITIES?

The discussions of textual communities on which I draw, as well as analyses of other textual practices (such as reading and memorization),

²² I focus on this period, which I identify with the "early" Siyam Nikāya. This period begins with the emergence of a distinctive group of monks under the leadership of the monk who became the Siyam Nikāya's founder – Vāliṅga Saraṇaṃkara. It concludes with the deaths of Saraṇaṃkara and his chief patron (Kīrti Śrī Rājasimha) in 1778 and 1782, respectively.

were developed on the basis of the history of textual production, transmission, and reception in Christian Europe between the fourth and fourteenth centuries. Questions naturally arise about how I understand the application of these analytical perspectives across time and space, and how I justify the analogical application of a twelfth century French case, for instance, to an eighteenth-century Lankan one. To answer such questions, I first examine some of the conventional periodization schemes used in studies of Europe and in studies of Theravādin South and Southeast Asia.

The primary scholars of textual practices in European Christendom on whose work I draw in this study — Mary Carruthers, Rita Copeland, John Dagenais, Martin Irvine, and Brian Stock — all use the terms “medieval” or “middle ages” to describe the temporal focus of their work. However, as one would expect, there is no uniformly accepted approach to periodizing European histories. Although a threefold periodization of the Middle Ages is quite common, according to which the Early Middle Ages fall between 300 and 1050 c.e., the High Middle Ages between 1050 and 1300 c.e., and the Late Middle Ages between 1300 and 1500 c.e., Norman Cantor argues against 1500 as the dividing line between the late Middle Ages and modernity. According to Cantor, the start of “our modern industrial mass society” and “the start of the long withdrawal from the Christian faith” makes the early eighteenth century a turning point between the Middle Ages and modernity (1973, 6–8). Jacques Le Goff pushes the chronological boundaries of the medieval still further with his argument for an “extended Middle Ages” characterized by “a set of slowly evolving structures” that lasted from the third century until the middle of the nineteenth century. Le Goff prefers the nineteenth century to the eighteenth as the cusp of modernity, since it is only in the nineteenth century that the experience of industrialized society and mass education became characteristic of European society (1985, 21).

Historians of South and Southeast Asia have recently begun to address the problems involved in writing historical studies that use terms and periodization schemes developed in relation to European religious, educational, and industrial changes. One result of this has been a move to apply the methods of the Annales school to study history over the *longue durée* in specific Asian regions. An excellent example of this approach is Anthony Reid’s work on Southeast Asia between 1450 and 1680, which contends that societies across Southeast Asia shared important developments during this period.²³ These included increased com-

²³ Reid notes that the fourteenth century is arguably a better starting point for the early-modern period but that the paucity of evidence from this period discourages its use (1993b, 16).

mercial and urban activity, the appearance of new military technology, a movement toward more centralized states, and an unprecedented stress on orthodox, textually oriented religious tradition (1988, 1993a, 1993b). Reid is one of several historians (often using quite different methods) who argue against the view that precolonial civilizations were “extraordinarily conservative, if not static” (Lieberman 1997, 449).

The movement to define an early modern period spanning the years between 1450 and 1670 or 1800 is seen by some as a helpful departure from the “Orientalist encapsulation of the study of indigenous precolonial Southeast Asia” (Lieberman 1997, 450). However, many questions remain about what is involved in identifying “early modern” contexts within Asia or over still larger regions.²⁴ In particular, historians debate the importance of using materialist criteria (such as demography, monetary flows, or climate changes) in relation to nonmaterialist ones (such as shifts in indigenous self-representation (Wyatt 1997) or the “vocabularies that cut across local religious traditions” (Subramanyam 1997).²⁵ There is also little consensus about the usefulness of projecting contemporary nation-state boundaries backward in historical analyses. These arguments about whether and how it is appropriate to speak of early modernity are closely related to arguments about nationalism and protonationalism.²⁶

The regional and temporal focus of this study (Lanka roughly between the years 1730 and 1780) and the primary object of inquiry (a transformation of Buddhism rooted in changing monastic organization, education and textual practices) pose significant challenges to periodization. Although the years with which I am concerned fall within the most generous chronological range assigned to early modernity, the fit between this context and definitions of early modernity is poor. For instance, although coastal cities grew as they became centers for colonial administration as well as shipping and fortification, this growth was by no means matched in the capital of the highland Kandyan Kingdom where the Siyam Nikāya first developed. Moreover, we have no clear indications of the impact that greater urbanization on the coast had on

²⁴ In this regard see the special issue edited by Lieberman (1997).

²⁵ Subramanyam’s work identifies the following characteristics of early modernity: the definition of “a new sense of the limits of the inhabited world,” an exacerbation of long-term structural conflict between settled and nomadic societies, the rise of a slave trade to new levels, the beginning of new cash crops, changes in “political theology,” the emergence of notions of universalism and humanism, a change in “the nature and scale of elite movements across political boundaries, effective fluidity between ‘cultural zones,’ and pan-religious vocabularies for organizing experience.”

²⁶ See, for instance, the tensions between the views set out by Lieberman (1997) and Anderson (1991).

the development of monastic institutions during this period.²⁷ Political organization in Lanka at this time was in considerable flux. Colonial powers backed by some local elites drew the island into the embrace of empire, while the central Kandyan Kingdom attempted to maintain independence but remained highly vulnerable to the colonial powers and to threats from within local elite communities. Finally, there is no clear evidence of an unusually strong interest in religious orthodoxy or religious textuality. No political or religious community was in the position to define orthodoxy; more important, the very idea of orthodoxy seems to have been quite foreign to the Buddhist communities of the time. We see a continuation of debates about proper disciplinary practices for monastic Buddhists, and perhaps about proper devotional activities for all Buddhists, but not yet any attempt to codify the beliefs appropriately Buddhist to any greater degree than was customary from at least the twelfth century onward.²⁸ Although I will show that specific Buddhist communities developed new ideas about what sorts of religious texts were most desirable and efficacious, there is no sign that Lankan Buddhists in the middle of the eighteenth century were more concerned with textually oriented forms of Buddhist practice and identity than they had been since at least the twelfth and perhaps the fifth century. Finally, there is no clear evidence that the technologies of textual production, transmission, and reception changed significantly before the nineteenth century.

By 1730, however, many inhabitants of Lanka were undoubtedly aware of their participation in activities often now theorized as characteristic of modernity (e.g., Collins 1998). For instance, it was increasingly clear that they were (perhaps reluctant) participants in a new form of global economy driven by the demands of growing capitalist economies in colonial homelands. It is certainly the case that these demands altered the constraints on political organization, and on social and economic advancement. The presence of Christian missionaries (Catholic and Protestant) undoubtedly posed certain challenges to the existing pluralism of beliefs and devotional practices oriented toward the Buddha, a range of Indian deities, and the prophetic monotheism of Islam. We know very little about how such pluralisms were conceived by local

²⁷ The sources are richer, however, by the time we turn to the middle of the nineteenth century, on which see Roberts (1982). For studies of pre-nineteenth-century commercial activity and their effects on the island's social institutions, see C. R. de Silva (1992), K. M. de Silva (1981), and Dewaraja (1988).

²⁸ The twelfth century is a useful marker for these purposes for reasons discussed in the first section of Chapter Two. Although Reid argues for a “retreat of the ‘scriptural trend’” in insular Southeast Asia in the late seventeenth century (1993, 16–17), Lieberman (1993) and Ishii (1993) assume its continuity for mainland Southeast Asia.

populations before or after the advent of assertive Christian activity. It does seem clear, however, that the Christian presence did not yet constitute a powerful influence toward scripturalism or reformism, two -isms often connected to the experience of modernization.²⁹ Nor is it likely that the presence of European strangers and certain technological innovations had created a dramatic rupture in the understanding of the world set out in earlier Buddhist cosmologies.³⁰

The imperfect fit between the Lankan context and discussions of Asian early modernity should come as no surprise, since any attempt to develop a periodization scheme necessarily privileges some cultural variables over others and analyzes them with the greatest accuracy. I try to keep several interpretive trajectories in view at the same time, and for this reason have decided to forsake the use of terms like “medieval,” “early modern,” and “modern” altogether, in favor of an approach that describes the phenomena in question and assigns them only a date. Doing so makes it easier to examine several different types of social process and institution simultaneously without allowing interpretive emphases from one form of analysis to bleed into another. For instance, subsequent chapters examine a range of social events and contexts: translocal political and economic structures; local and regional forms of political organization and patronage; shifts in the organization of, and activities undertaken by, local religious institutions; and the text-oriented activities characteristic of a new Buddhist textual community. I emphasize different variables and causal patterns, and different rates of change, when analyzing particular aspects of Lankan culture that have bearing on my argument for an eighteenth-century reformulation of Buddhism. Even as translocal political and economic contexts continued to shift throughout the period of focus, for instance, aspects of royal patronage remained consistent with that characteristic of earlier periods, and when inconsistent were often determined more by pressures at the local level than at the translocal level. Changes in monastic organization during this period have less to do with colonial experience than with the power of individual personalities in conjunction with local political interests. The nature of textual practice shows continuities in technology, moderate continuities in motivation and discontinuities in content that are difficult to explain but are probably due to the convergence of dominant monastic personalities and local shifts in devotional emphasis.

We might say, then, that an uneven rate of change characterized the social activities that touch on the object of this study. Thus, any attempt

²⁹ See, for instance, Geertz (1971) and Seneviratne (1999).

³⁰ On which see Collins (1998) and Reynolds and Reynolds (1982).

to analyze these activities in the Lankan case by developing a comparative perspective on them will proceed most effectively not by comparing Lankan and non-Lankan materials on the basis of a broad periodization scheme (matching up the Middle Ages on two continents, for instance), but by looking closely at separate social activities to see where broadly analogous situations might be found in other cultural settings. In this study I draw on studies of European Christian cultures only in the analysis of royal-monastic patronage relations that sustained the growth of new educational systems, in examinations of the technologies of learning and discipline related to monastic life, and in discussions of textually oriented community identities within and beyond the monastic world. Studies of learning, and especially monastic learning, in European Christian settings between the fourth and fourteenth centuries are appropriate because the dominant understanding of monastic and clerical learning, the patronage institutions that supported it, and the technologies used to sustain it were all closely similar to their counterparts in eighteenth-century Lanka. They are therefore a useful basis for the attempt to gain a new purchase on the Lankan case and to make the Lankan case accessible to other scholars. The similarities I isolate to defend this view are the following: the use of manuscripts rather than printed books;³¹ the characterization of learning as a religiously significant activity understood as an act of devotion, as a responsibility to the life of the larger religious community, and as part of ethical inculcation;³² the importance of commentarial genres in the transmission and standardization of clerical and monastic understandings of religious teaching;³³ the role of royalty and court elites as key patrons of monastic and clerical learning;³⁴ and the relationship between monastic and clerical self-definition and the development of educational institutions.³⁵ Literacy rates may not be comparable, though there is some disagreement about the rate and regional effects of rising literacy in Europe. Holt (1996) and Seneviratne (1999) note low literacy rates in Lanka before the nineteenth century, whereas Carruthers (1990) and d’Avray (1985) note evidence for considerable levels of lay literacy in Europe from an

³¹ For Europe see Carruthers (1990), Clanchy (1983), Dagenais (1994), Petrucci (1995), and Rouse and Rouse (1979). For Lanka see Malalgoda (1976), Perera (1962), and Somadasa (1987).

³² For Europe, see Carruthers (1990) and Leclercq (1982). For Lanka see subsequent chapters of this study.

³³ For Europe, see d’Avray (1985), Irvine (1994), and Rouse and Rouse (1979). For Lanka, see subsequent chapters of this study.

³⁴ For Europe, see Irvine (1994) and Nardi (1992). For Lanka, see subsequent chapters of this study.

³⁵ For Europe, see d’Avray (1985), Irvine (1994), and Nardi (1992). For Lanka, see subsequent chapters of this study.

early period, though perhaps especially in urban areas after the twelfth century.³⁶

Despite these comparisons to European contexts, my analysis should not be understood either as the pursuit of a lowest common denominator able to support arguments for similarity between European and Asian cultural spheres or as an argument in support of an Orientalist view of Asian laggardliness on the continuum toward modern self-realization. Rather, by developing a more explicitly comparative conversation about the history of textual production, transmission and reception in relation to religious institutions, this study begins to provide the tools with which to make more subtle arguments about the conditions of possibility for, as well as the meanings attributed to, these forms of textual practice. My study allows scholars of the Theravāda to reconsider the relevance of textual production, transmission, and reception in a particular cultural setting. It also alerts scholars of many textual communities linked to and shaped by religious institutions that the interpretive models drawn from European Christendom are part of the beginning, but not the end, of an analytical journey. In putting the matter thus, the study is quintessentially anti-Orientalist. Rather than arguing that eighteenth-century Lanka is to be understood in terms of “medieval” Europe because Asia languishes behind the West in a humid stupor and because “real” history is made up of structures and events that follow a particular trajectory discernible in Europe, this study argues for and exemplifies forms of analysis that assume the usefulness of a dialogical, rather than monological, analysis of cultural contexts in terms of one another.

THE STUDY

The remainder of this study develops over six chapters. In chapter 2, “Contextualizing Monasticism,” I offer a brief sketch of eighteenth-century Lankan religious and political organization as a backdrop to subsequent discussions of monasticism, education, and textual practice. This chapter indicates the key players in Lankan religious and political life—Dutch colonials, Kandyan kings, Lankan aristocrats, Southeast Asian polities, brahmins, monks, and Muslim teachers. Chapter 3, “Marks of Distinction,” contains an overview of the Siyam Nikāya’s formative period with special attention to three stages in the development of the new order’s educational institutions. Providing the first de-

³⁶ But compare the views of Carruthers and d’Avray with Clanchy’s comments on the variable levels and meanings of literacy (1983).

tailed discussion of pre-nineteenth-century Buddhist education in South and Southeast Asia, I describe the creation of a widespread monastic educational system. In doing so, I discuss the possibilities for the standardized transmission of religious learning in a pre-print era, and emphasize the centrality of education to the collective identity of the Siyam Nikāya.

Chapter 4, “‘They Were Scholars and Contemplatives,’” elaborates the claim that scholarly acceptance of the “traditional” commonplace stems in part from a misreading of indigenous Buddhist histories. By looking closely at the way five eighteenth-century Buddhist histories develop a long-standing trope of decline-and-revival I am able to identify the emergence of an innovative discourse on monasticism in Lanka. This discourse was first articulated at the same time as the Siyam Nikāya began to command authority, and was sustained in large part by written representations made by authors connected to the Siyam Nikāya. In that chapter I argue that the impact of the new discourse on monasticism was considerable.

With chapters 5 and 6 I argue for the rise of a new Buddhist textual community in more detail by looking at the place of a single commentarial genre in the life of the early Siyam Nikāya. I argue that *sūtra sannaya* commentaries had a substantial impact on Lankan Buddhism. Chapter 5, “‘He Benefited the World and the *Sāsana*,’” shows this with respect to the second stage of the Siyam Nikāya’s formation. I discuss the rising popularity of the *sūtra sannaya* genre, showing that it became a prestigious one for Siyam Nikāya monks, and develop a close reading of the first *sūtra sannaya* composed during the eighteenth century — *Sārārhādīpanī* (Illuminator of Excellent Meaning). I explain that the composition of this text by the Siyam Nikāya’s founder distinguished this monk as learned and worthy of respect. Here my analysis explores the links between language and prestige, explaining that favorable “linguistic pedigrees” were created when the Siyam Nikāya’s founder composed *Sārārhādīpanī*. Turning to an analysis of the rhetorical possibilities of bilingual commentary, I make yet another argument for the effect of the *sūtra sannayas* during the second stage of the Siyam Nikāya’s development. There I explain that *Sārārhādīpanī* provided a point of disciplinary orientation for the first monks connected to the Siyam Nikāya, and that it also served as a subtle criticism of the Siyam Nikāya’s monastic competitors.

Chapter 6, “Readers, Preachers, and Listeners,” continues to elaborate evidence for the rise of a new Buddhist textual community in eighteenth-century Lanka. Looking this time at the third stage of the Siyam Nikāya’s formation, I examine two related processes of reception by developing a close reading of *Sārārhādīpanī* from the perspective of

monastic readers and by exploring more and less constrained instances of monastic reading. Finally, I argue for the impact of the *sūtra sannaya* commentaries well beyond a narrow circle of literate monastics by showing that the images and arguments contained in these commentaries entered the life of a larger Buddhist community that responded to *sūtra sannaya*-based preaching.

A brief concluding chapter, “‘Let Us Serve Wisdom,’” argues for the impact of the Siyam Nikāya, its educational system, and the eighteenth-century popularity of the *sūtra sannayas* well into the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Criticizing discussions of “Protestant Buddhism” for too great a preoccupation with the Euro-American impact on Lankan Buddhism, I show that the roots of Protestant Buddhism’s “fundamentalism” lie in the eighteenth-century activities of the Siyam Nikāya. As this discussion unfolds, I explain that early Orientalist understandings of Buddhist textual authority were made possible by the educational developments that took place in the early Siyam Nikāya.