

Dhamma Sermon and Popular Buddhism within the Confront of Digitization

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Abstract

Along with era 4.0 digitalization involves several aspects of modern social context and religion is one of the prominent. When it comes to Sri Lankan popular Buddhism numerous changes can be identified through digital platforms like social media. This research attends to understand the evolutionary patterns of Buddhist Dhamma sermons applying two cases selected from Facebook. Attaragama Pragyalankara Thero, also known as “Kotuwe Podi Hamuduruwo” is a key figure which emphasizes the characteristics of modern popular Buddhism. Two posts regarding his propagations of Dhamma browsed through random Facebook pages applied to understand the characteristics of the modern evolutionary process of Buddhism. The main objective of this study is to introduce a new-found model for digital religious studies by utilizing digital anthropological knowledge to understand the digital behavior of Sri Lankan religious contexts. For the analysis of this phenomenon researcher applied the 5th principle of digital anthropology named, ambivalence and the principle of openness and closure, proposed by Daniel Miller and Heather Horst in 2012 through their work titled, “Digital Anthropology”. Different patterns in language, as well as the variations compared to traditional Dhamma sermons identified through literature, were identified from the data collected from the relevant posts. As an examination based on qualitative data, this research considered various literature to fulfill the research gap. One of the key conclusions that arise from the research is that digital anthropological knowledge is a way to understand modern popular Buddhism. Comparing traditional customs with modern-day and analyze them utilizing digital anthropological principles emphasize the evolutionary patterns of contemporary Dhamma sermons.

Keywords- *Digital, Culture, Anthropology, Popular Buddhism, Dhamma Sermons*

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Introduction

The modern world is dominated by digitization from several aspects. From developing countries to developed countries, this binary coding process contributes to the development of variety of fields. When it comes to digital anthropology, a field of study emerged during the latter part of 19th century focuses to understand the behavior of mankind in digital environment. Digital anthropology is a discipline fit in to the division of cultural anthropology. Considering cultural anthropology, religion plays one of the prominent roles. Buddhism is not only a religion although a unique cultural aspect in Sri Lankan social context. This paper based on these two prominent factors (digitalization and Buddhism) and seeks to understand the evolutionary process in the modern-day popular Buddhism, utilizing the characteristics of the era of 4.0. Main objective of this study is to introduce a new model for digital religious studies by utilizing digital anthropological knowledge to understand the digital behavior of Sri Lankan religious contexts. How to propose a model utilizing digital anthropological knowledge to understand the changes in popular Buddhism? is the existing problem of this research. To fulfil these objectives within a framework, researcher applied one of the prominent factors in modern popular Buddhism, the propagation of Dhamma to examine the characteristics of modern evolutionary process of Buddhism.

Gananath Obeyesekere and Richard Gombrich plays one of the most leading roles when considering the early works which attended to understand the changes of Sri Lankan Buddhism. Their controversial ideas on “Protestant Buddhism” built novel dimensions in religious studies in Sri Lanka and their theoretical aspects still utilized by scholars for their academic addresses. Obeyesekere and Gombrich (1988) pointed out the change in the cosmology and the creation of new religious roles which interconnected matters based on gods and other figures. Although they argued that strictly Buddhist ideas, roles, and institutions have not remained unaffected by the new trends according to that period. Anyhow, their proposed concept called “Protestant Buddhism” caused novelty in the practices of Buddhism and prepared the field for a new term called “Applied Buddhism”. Sri Lanka has been conventionally considered a fort of Theravada Buddhism. According to Tilakaratne (2020) the organizational aspect of modern Buddhism, the sasana, comprising the four groups of bhikkus, bhikkunis and upasakas and upasikas, has undergone change. Pondering the new trends in Buddhism he highlighted about such concepts like, Trans-yanic Buddhism, American Buddhism, and Eco Buddhism (Green Buddhism). Amunugama (2016) besides underscored the contribution of Anagarika Dharmapala, Piyadasa Sirisena, John De Silva on the new trends of Sinhala Buddhism as well as the impact of theosophical society of Olcott.

Take into consideration the main subject which emphasize in this paper, Dhamma sermons played one of the significant roles in Buddhism. “He who acts according to the Dhamma is protected by the Dhamma itself” is a popular quote found in Buddhist teachings of Buddha. Dhamma affects the transcendental (lokottara) life as well as the

secular (laukika) life of a person. According to Thalpvavila Shilavansha Thero (1946) there are seven types of Dhamma sermons such as wedding sermons (mangala deshana), funeral sermons (awamangala deshana), title sermons (mathruka deshana), custom topic sermons (abhimatha mathruka deshana), memorable sermons (mathaka deshana), demons-based sermons (bhuthanumodana deshana), nearby sermons (āsanna deshana). Other than these types he proposed more types of Dhamma sermons as, sermons to monks, personal sermons, general sermons, sermons for girls, sermons to young people, sermons for the elderly, sermons to men, sermons to women, sermons to the learned, sermons to the ignorant, sermons to the urban people, sermons to the villagers, sermons to worshipers, marriage sermons, sermons to warlords, sermons to prisoners, sermons to patients, sermons on paganism, sermons to free thinkers, sermons to separatists, and missionary sermons. He proposed several factors on becoming a popular monk in Dhamma propagation such as ignoring party affiliation, ignoring highs and lows, ignoring self-interest, ignoring provincial divisions, general knowledge, abandonment of sectarianism, abandonment of caste, compassion (Shilavansha Thero, 1946, p. 5). When asserting about the historical significance of Buddhist Dhamma sermons, Walpola Rahula Thero (1962) stated about the importance of choosing “Chullahaththipadopama Sutta” by Mihindu Thero as the first propagation of Dhamma to King Devanampiyatissa, to explain the basis of Buddhist philosophy and religious background.

In digital anthropology there are six principles which proposed by Daniel Miller and Heather Horst (2012) that underline the characteristics of the concept called digital. (1) Dialectic nature of digital culture, (2) human is not one iota, (3) commitment to holism, (4) cultural relativism and global nature, (5) authenticity of ambivalence, and (6) materiality of digital culture are the respective principles presented by them. As they stated the development of binary code radically simplified information and communication (Miller and Horst, 2012, p. 5). Considering the development of digitalization era 4.0 or fourth industrial revolution is a prominent notion which proposed by the works of German government or on the other hand it is the ongoing automation of traditional manufacturing and industrial practices, using modern smart technology (Lasi et al., 2014). There are various components comes under industry 4.0 such as: cyber security, augmented reality, big data, cloud computing, Internet of things etc. Digitalization is one of the key factors which effected the 4th industrial revolution because when it comes to modern day, innovation has come to have an impact on the way of life of individuals of all ages, from children to working individuals to more experienced individuals (Siriwattano et al., 2018). Campbell and Evolvi (2019) illustrate the theoretical background and the methodological aspect based on digital religion. They critically emphasize the how digital religion studies seek to investigate the spirituality religiosity in digital space. Sara Pink, Heather Horst and others (2016) proposing seven key concepts that can utilized to understand and conduct research on digital environment such as, (1) through experiences, (2) practices, (3) things, (4) relationships, (5) social worlds, (6) localities, and (7) events.

Considering the existing gap of this desk research, in Sri Lankan social context various studies on Buddhism were based according to vary of perspectives. Although various studies were conducted on Buddhism and digital era in various other countries, there is a huge lack in Sri Lankan academics on this field of study, especially among digital anthropology. This study attends to fulfill this gap based on digital anthropological perspective and Buddhist practice known as Dhamma sermons and focus to prepare a primary model to theoretically describe the modern evolutionary process of popular Buddhism from real world to virtual world utilizing propagation of Dhamma in fourth industrial revolution. Researcher of this study mainly focused on the changes; progression caused in traditional Dhamma sermons due to the development of digital technology in fourth industrial revolution. Results of this study could be applied for other disciplines like sociology, digital studies and media studies for their examinations on mentioned aspects. As a theoretical analysis based on existing literature the proposing model can applied for their studies too while understanding a characteristic of a particular religion in an existing culture.

Methodology

This research was based one of the key principles in digital anthropology “authenticity of ambivalence” proposed by Daniel Miller and Heather Horst in 2012 on their paper titled, “The Digital and the Human: A Prospectus for Digital Anthropology”. To examine the validity of this theoretical aspect this paper applies two cases regarding present day Dhamma sermons based on digital platforms, especially social media which underlines the characteristics of popular Buddhism. These three cases were based on the sermons of Attaragama Pragyalankara Thero, also known as “Kotuwe Podi Hamuduruwo”. Both posts were publicly uploaded by different Facebook pages, and they have been selected purposively to accomplish the objectives of the research. Main justification for applying this page was the widespread audience and the content of its posts, also they have vast number of comments and reactions. The method used in this research was descriptive qualitative and as to aligned with the research objectives, researcher did not consider about the comments of the public on these posts. Focus was regarded with the statements of the Thero and critically analyzed with the literature that were utilized for the research and compared the differentiations in these sermons and traditional Dhamma sermons. After collecting the underlined sayings of the respective monk, researcher theoretically examined the validity of previously mentioned principle of Digital anthropology and attended to highlight the evolutionary changes caused in traditional Dhamma sermons in Sri Lankan popular Buddhism context. Qualitative data that obtained by secondary sources (books and digital media) were applied for this research.

Results and Discussion

It is quite complicated to state precisely when and where the concept of popular Buddhism was established in Sri Lankan academic context. This concept can be assumed to be a residual concept that emerged from popular culture. Though, there is hardly any other religion in the Sri Lankan social structure that is as time and space shaped as Buddhism. Martin Wickramasinghe had mentioned about this cultural formation as, that the independence and spirituality of Sinhala culture was preserved due to Buddhism (Wickramasinghe, 1972, p. 74). According to Daya Amarasekara (2019) contemporary Sinhala Buddhism shows that it affects the coexistence as well as the conflict between social and worldly tendencies socially. That complex religious face can be identified only by popular Buddhism. Walpola Rahula Thero (1956) once stated, from the time Buddhism became the state religion, it began to change and his statement indicated that since of that politicization, Buddhism achieved the perfect establishment for long period in Sri Lankan social context. There is no doubt to state that digitization is affecting every aspect of the world, including the cultural factors like religion. The study of pre-literature was a confirmation of the extent to which cultural diffusion has influenced the existing Sri Lankan cultural context. This study does not examine whether that socio-cultural change is good or not, although focuses on the impact of the diffuse influence of digital culture on Buddhism in the so-called era 4.0. which known as 4th industrial revolution.

The purposively selected video has 55 minutes of duration, and more than thousands of audiences were engaged with it. In order to prove the trustworthiness of this post on existing research, the statements can be considered to the comparison of traditional Dhamma sermons and modern ones. Following table contains the statements which underlines the different aspects of modern Dhamma sermons, and the way digitalization affected. Relevant time in the video for these sayings also mentioned here. Considering his propagation of Dhamma through particular digital platform, researcher underlined the significant features (Example: language, content) which describe the current objective of the study. Popular Buddhism, Dhamma sermons, impact of digital culture can be identified considerably through the following statements which collected from the first post.

Table 1: Relevant statements selected from the post

Video time	Statement in Sinhala	Translation
2.21	ඕව්වත් සුපිරි පොරක්...	Although he was drunk, he is a super person
5.27	අර අහ ඉදං අර රත්තරං දායකයෝ පවුරු දානවා. අද මං අරං යනවා භේසමක් පුරෝදා... දන්ත කියන්න පවුරු...	From that end on, those donors make endowments. Today I am taking a basin full.. Tell them to make offerings...
6.21	මුළු පුතාලු සෙව් එක කැහිටින්න. මැද ඉන්න සෙව් එක...	Get up the set of little children. The set in the middle...
R.46	මං කාටවත් කසම් යන්නැ...	I am not steadfast to anyone...
R.56	අද්දපාලයන් කැ මගේ...	There is no politics in me...
9.18	ඊළඟ ජනාධිපතිවරණය නොවෙහි ටාර්ගට් වෙන්න ඕන. අගමැතිකම අගමැතිවී වර්ජුල් වෙන්න ඕන...	The next presidential election should not be the target, but the Prime Minister. Prime Minister should be powerful...
10.27	ප්‍රශ්නට උත්තරයක් තියෙනවා. ළමයි ඉන්සෝලේ යවන්න. ගෙදර දොර-රිකාල් සොදට වහන්න. සෙව්න කැහි වෙන්න. ගෙදර මෙව්මට ගෙනැර්දා ඉන්සෝලේවෙත් දන්න. අම්මත් මෝටක් දාලා පි මර්ට් එකක් දන්න. තාත්තත් මෝටක් දාලා පි මර්ට් එකක් දන්න. පැය දෙකක් තුනක් බසිලිව.බසිලිව.එල්. වගේ සොදට ගහන්න. එකකොට ඕන ඉවරයි. මෙවරය ඉවරයි. ප්‍රශ්න මුහුත් කැහැ...	There is an answer to the question. Send children to school. Close the door-windows of the house well. Don't be seen. Bring the mattress to the living room and put it on the veranda. Mom also put on a shorts and a T-shirt. Dad, put on a shorts and a T-shirt. Two or three hours of fight like W.W.F. Then it's over. The hatred is over. No problems
11.51	මේ පිරිමි පනිත කොටුවක් ටර්ක්කමෙත්. සේෆ්ටිවලට පනින්න. ආ කොසකම ද ඕයගෙ හිතාවි සේෆ්ටි පනින්න කීවනම...	These men should be misbehaving with a safe set. Safety must be prominent. How come that grandfather's smile when I talked about the misbehave and safety?

This video has 55 minutes of duration, and more than thousands of audiences were engaged with it. In order to prove the trustworthiness of this post on existing research, the statements can be considered to the comparison of traditional Dhamma sermons and modern ones. Following table contains the statements which underlines the different aspects of modern Dhamma sermons, and the way digitalization affected. Relevant time in the video for these sayings also mentioned here. Considering his propagation of Dhamma through particular digital platform, researcher underlined the significant features (Example: language, content) which describe the current objective of the study. Popular Buddhism, Dhamma sermons, impact of digital culture can be identified considerably through the following statements which collected from the first post.

Contemplating the selected sayings of him, researcher underline the different nature in Dhamma sermons comparing to early periods. Not only with his language, according to the content too there is a significant diversity. Comparing with the existing literature, a monk should not be considered about his self-interest. When it comes to the above-mentioned statements there is a quite different pattern in the sermon. Language is one of the prominent factors in traditional Dhamma sermons. Due to various changes in present society language also shifted to various aspects. According to Shilavansa Thero (1946), a monk must advise his people on the importance of Dhamma sermons instead of conquering his own advantages. This phenomenon can be identified in 5.27-time duration, there is a huge variation displayed comparing to early doctrines of Dhamma sermons.

When pondering the impact of digitalization to these types of Dhamma sermons, various terms and occasions can be recognized. As in 10.27 he is giving examples from popular global entertainment event called WWF (World Wrestling Federation, aka World Wrestling Entertainment), an American integrated media and entertainment company that is primarily known for professional wrestling for solve family problems, especially between husband and wife. This could be humor, although researcher highlight the influence of digital media to absorb these types of patterns into traditional Dhamma sermons. Not only that he describes various other things like SMS, teledramas, reality shows, digital medias during his sermon. As Rahula thero (1956) stated about the politicization of Sinhala Buddhism in early eras, in 2020 also there is a significant impact of political parties on Buddhism. As in 8.46, 8.56, and 9.18 researcher draw attention to the statements based on Sri Lankan political parties. This also a prominent shift compared to traditional Buddhist sermons.

From digital anthropological perspective, this event can be examined applying the 5th principle named authenticity of ambivalence or ambivalence and the principle of openness and closure. It emphasize the contradictions of openness and closure arise in digital domains. Considering Internet, there is a novel openness for the public as well as a limited freedom. This phenomenon can be identified in political as well as the reli-

gious context. Digital concept or the digital culture underlines the capacity of production through the openness and accessibility. On the other hand, there is a solid closure and restriction emerged as a tension in digital. Due to these characteristics more than idealized communities, there are cross-cutting affiliations of groups utilizing the internet to think through new opportunities.

This new openness was significantly utilized by popular Buddhism, and the falseness or the idealized thinking are not considered as important conceptions due to these new groups which highlight different perspectives and ideas or opportunities of Buddhism. As highlighted early table particular monk's novel statements/ sayings are some of the characteristics that emphasize the tension of this so-called openness of digital. These sayings can be defined as unsuitable or inappropriate statements for a Buddhist monk according to someone's point of view. Although these types of things widely spread due to the support of digitalization and the considerable influence for this trend is the openness of the Internet.

The selected video consisted with 14 minutes of duration and was found from a Facebook page which shares different types of posts and not considered as a religious page. Pondering the engagement of the audience clearly identify thousands of reactions and comments. As the first post selected earlier, following are the statements and sayings regarding this post align with the research.

Table 2: Relevant statements according to 2nd post

Video time	Statement in Sinhala	Translation
0:20	කාසම්පුම්මිවාචාරා චේරමනී ඕත්තං පදං සමාදියාමි. ආදරය සුන්දර වරදක්. සත්වය නම් මනරංජිත සචි. තන්දිත සචි. ඒ එදා. සමදා අඤ්චන් එකක් ඇවිල්ලා. ආදරේ අසාස කරමි. කැවුණ ම පොසලාසචි පත් කත කරමි...	<i>Kāsaṃpūmmīvācārā cēraṃmaṇī saṃsāpāyāmi. (I undertake the training-precept to abstain from misconduct concerning sense-pleasures). Anaraya sundara waradaki (popular Sinhala song). Premaya nam manarajitha we nanditha we (another popular Sinhala song). That was then. A new one has arrived today. Adare Alasa Tharam (another popular song). As soon as love is broken, people behave insanely...</i>
0:56	බසෙන් දී යාමේ සමකවා. සංඥා පුවත්වලින් කම්බසර් සදහන්ක...	Become friends in the Bana (Dhamma serma). Sharing the number just like the signal news.
1:10	උදේ එ.එම්. ගුච් සමාදිනින් ගැවවා එක ගි.	In the morning send the message GM, which means the short form of good morning...
1:30	දින තවමීයන් යාමේ සමක භිට්ඨයන් දින අටහිගත් මේ පොත් එකක්. මුත්ට සමක වැඩක් කැහැ. සමක. අලි මද්දවට කොටි කියලා හළු එකක් සදහන් පැහැත් එකක්ගත් දිලා. මාසට ම සදහන් ගි...	If have been friends for nine hundred days, will have eight hundred days in this phone. They have no other choice. Hinch also gave 200 packages to fulfil their desire. Only two hundred rupees for a month ...
7:11	සෙරේකම් අප්පා ඕමන් තියන්නන්. හිලන්පස තමම් අක එක. හාමුදුරුවෝ දන්නවා මෙහෙ ඒවිහන්...	I'm very greedy for Galampasa (permissible food and drinks for the Bhikkus), monk knows my life...
9:10	මං අද මේ හරි දුකක් ඉන්නෙ. අර කුරුණෑගල පැත්තෙ දුකක් අපේ එල්ලිලා මලා හන්? සත්වුන් එකක්. ඒ විදුහල්පතිනිය සම්පුර්ණ වැරදිලි. මං බය කැහැව කියනවා... මං හරි ආදරෙහි ගුරුවරුන්ට. මේ විහිසෝ එක පැහැකට යනවා. අහී දන්නව ද? ඒ ප්‍රමයා සත්වුන් එකක් කැහැ මහත්තයෝ. ඒ ප්‍රමයන් පොසට එක කොල්ලක් අරං සත්වුන් දුලා තියන්නන්...	Today I'm very sad. A girl from the Kurunegala area hanged herself. On Facebook. That principle is completely incorrect. I say without fear ... I really love teachers. This video is going to the world. Do you know why? That kid is not on Facebook, gentlemen. A boy took a photo of that child and posted it on Facebook ...

When it comes to the second case of the study, researcher underlines the repetition of the statements. The sayings in 0.20 and 13.11 of this video is similar to the statements of previous video's 11.51 and 15.19. Both stating about the misbehavior of sense-pleasures. Considering the five precepts (Pansil) third precept is *Kāmesumicchācāra veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi*, which means I undertake the training-precept to abstain from misconduct concerning sense-pleasures. During Dhamma sermons taking five precepts as example is a prominent custom. Considering the relevant monk's sayings there is a huge difference of explaining this third precept to Buddhist laymen.

One of the significant characteristics identified in his sayings are the taking digital cultural terms and concepts. As he states about the mobile package of Hutch, a Sri Lankan telecommunication service providers and the country's third largest mobile network operator during his Dhamma sermons while explaining five precepts, it clearly highlights the possible impact of digital culture. Likewise, the way he argues about a suicide case connected with Facebook, it comprehensively determines the effects of digital platforms to traditional Buddhist Dhamma sermons.

In the principle of openness and closure of digital concept, underlines the capability and the capacity of the production in digital platforms. Since digitalization effects Buddhism, changes and evolutionary features arise and there is no limitation for new ideologies. On the other hand, closure and restriction too discussed through 5th principle. When it comes to Buddhism in digital medias there is a clear negative and positive feedbacks from different audiences. This phenomenon is quite similar to the first principle of the digital anthropology, dialectic nature of digital culture. Wijayarathna, Abhayasundere and Jayaweera (2021) stated about this principle utilizing the significant characteristics of Siri Sadaham Ashramaya and its teachings. The way people reacts to those sayings, highlights the closure and restriction of digital.

Conclusion

Sri Lankan Buddhism is adapted to time and space. Various scholarly works have shown that Sri Lankan Buddhism has shifted over time. Protestant Buddhism, Sinhala Buddhism, Militant Buddhism are some of the prominent terms emerged among that research. This research is a initial step in ensuring that Sri Lanka's current popular Buddhism can be brought into the innovative conceptual framework called "Digital Buddhism".

One of the key points that can be deduced from this research is that the revolution that digitalization brought about in the global arena during the fourth industrial revolution had an impact on the religious context and can analyze from a digital anthropological point of view. Such a digital revolution had not taken place during the time of many

scholars who had conducted social and anthropological research on religion, especially Buddhism. The present Sri Lankan anthropologist should launch a study on its complementary digitization and Buddhism by identifying and utilizing the new dimensions in anthropology correctly. The modern anthropologist is recognizing that anthropology is not just a study of indigenous peoples.

The model presented by this research is that the theories of digital anthropology can be applied to religious practices to identify the digital cultural change that has taken place through them. This research confirmed the diffuse influence that digital cultural elements have had on deviating from the features of traditional Buddhist preaching. This research holds the holistic nature of traditional anthropology into the modern social context and analyzes facts deviating from ethnocentric perspective.

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