

# The Religious World of Kīrti Śrī



*Buddhism, Art, and Politics  
in Late Medieval  
Sri Lanka*

John Clifford Holt

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*John Clifford Holt*

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# Preface

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*The Religious World of Kīrti Śrī* has been written primarily for undergraduate and graduate students of religion, particularly those who have found Buddhism to be a fascinating subject. My colleagues in the disciplines of the history of religions, social history, and art history, as well as those in the fields of Buddhist studies, South Asian studies, and Sri Lankan studies, may also find some novel interest in this book.

Unlike many previous and more conventional approaches that Western religion scholars have taken in the study of Buddhism, this book is not concerned primarily with philosophical ideas or philological issues germane to a specific school or authoritative text of South or East Asian Buddhism, though some interesting philosophical notions from literary and artistic sources will be considered throughout this book. Nor is this book solely a social history of the political dynamics that affect cultural transformations within the context of Buddhism's oldest continuing historical tradition, though social history and cultural renaissance are the fundamental venues and significant consequences of the events that will be considered. Rather, this work is primarily an interdisciplinary examination of what it meant for various people, lay and monastic, to be Buddhists during the advent of European colonialism and before indigenous Sinhalese reactions to Western intellectual and political hegemony began to foster the contours of what has become a "modern" Buddhist (yet sometimes reactionary) religious perspective. It is an exploration of "classical" Buddhist world views, especially the one revived and represented by a harried and insecure king, Kīrti Śrī Rājasinha, during the middle of the eighteenth century in Kandy, an up-country

kingdom in what is now known as the island country of Sri Lanka, located off the southern tip of India.

In this study I have sometimes used the term *classical* with much trepidation, and only after considering a number of other terms that, in the end, produced their own sets of grave heuristic difficulties. By deploying the category of “classical,” I am attempting to draw attention to several features of Sinhala society and thought that were prevalent in the late medieval Buddhist kingdom of Kandy. In particular, my aim is to highlight the fact that, socially, Kandyan society was feudal and hierarchical; that wealth and social prestige were closely correlated; that Kandy had a completely preindustrial and largely subsistence economy with few opportunities for trade; that education was limited to those with leisure (either upper-class or monastic incumbents); that political power was legitimated by appeals to divine authority; and that this power and its legitimation were articulated publicly through mythic models of an idealized past, which, in turn, were dramatized by conscious orchestrations of rituals and symbols. In the first chapter of this book, it becomes evident that this classical world was under a concerted siege by colonial powers whose presence and assertions tried to undermine the ontology of ideological certainty upon which the classical Buddhist culture had been traditionally based. In Sri Lankan history, Kīrti Śrī’s eighteenth-century reign marks the last time that indigenous structures of society, religion, and culture were successfully revived. The renaissance of art, literature, and monastic institutions that he fostered marked the beginning of the end of the classical era. Some three decades following his reign, the British disestablished Kīrti Śrī’s dynasty and indigenous social, political, and religious institutions never fully recovered, at least not in a coordinated way. When Buddhism was reasserted in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, during British colonialism in Ceylon, it was politically populist and Protestant in character, a religion of the oppressed.

In further terms of religion, in this case Sinhala Theravada Buddhism, “classical” here also refers to the unquestioned authority invested in sacred texts, myths, rituals, and symbols to articulate normatively the essentials of an orthodox world view. That is, “classical” refers specifically to those institutions that had been established as the “second order” foundation of the religion—those conceptual and social structures, instituted by the Buddhist community following the demise of Gotama the Buddha in ancient India, which, from an indigenous perspective, had continued unbroken throughout history by virtue of material and moral sup-

port from a long line of patronizing Buddhist kings.<sup>1</sup> In the history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and in Southeast Asian countries such as Burma and Thailand, the king's fundamental responsibility was to ensure the health and strength of these foundations. The era with which this book is concerned included a final royal attempt in Sri Lanka to kindle a renaissance of these foundations. Kīrti 4rī revived the Buddhist *sangha* (monastic community) through institutional reforms, supported the proclamation of the *dharma* [*dhmma* in Pali] (teachings or truths of the Buddha) by promoting the public preaching and learned study of Pali Buddhist texts, and glorified the Buddha (the founder of the tradition) by lavishly refurbishing the art of Kandyan Buddhist temples.

Thus, the focus of this work is concerned with the underlying question of what it meant, during this time of revival, for various individuals to be Buddhists in the classic sense. By describing the context as classic, I do not wish to convey that religious meaning was static, an ancient fossil given but a final rebirth. A plethora of contemporary issues specifically conditioned King Kīrti Śrī's late medieval answer, his brilliant attempt to take refuge in the Buddha, *dharma*, and *sangha*. Kīrti Śrī was, of course, very much a product of his own milieu, and his initiatives in the field of religion (aimed at reviving Buddhism) were, in part, motivated by the compelling and complicated social and political circumstances he inherited and then contrived to cope with effectively during his long eighteenth-century reign (1751–1782 C.E.). The expediency demanded by the pressures of these social and political exigencies stimulated what apparently became one of his most vital concerns: to demonstrate to the people within his realm of power that he was genuinely a Buddhist and, in particular, a quintessential Theravāda Buddhist king.

Chapter 1 explains why Kīrti Śrī was so concerned about articulating his religious identity as a Buddhist. Chapters 2–4, which form the heart of the book, explain how Kīrti Śrī articulated his understanding of Buddhist religious thought and identity through the expression of his religious works, especially the temple wall paintings that have become such a remarkable icon and legacy of his reign; my aim is to show clearly the substance and patterns of “classical” Buddhism in its late medieval Sinhalese cultural guise. Chapters 5 and 6 cover two issues that transcend the specific historical context of the book. Chapter 5 is concerned with the necessity for students of religion to focus on materials other than literary texts, especially if they hope to gain a more thorough understanding of what it has meant to be religious in cultures for which the written word is less definitive. Chapter 6 reveals how an understanding of



the dynamics of Kīrti Śrī's predicament in the eighteenth century might help put into perspective some of the vexing issues that contribute to the current conflict between the Sinhalese and Tamils in contemporary Sri Lanka.

Citations throughout the text to the following epic chronicles, popular literature, and doctrinal discourses are as follows.

*Cūlavamsa* (13th–18th century) from Wilhelm Geiger, trans. and ed. (1953), *Cūlavamsa: Being the More Recent Part of the Mahāvamsa*, 2 vols. (Colombo: Ceylon Government Information Department).

*Mahāvamsa* (5th cent. C.E.) from Wilhelm Geiger, trans. and ed. (1964), *The Mahāvamsa or The Great Chronical of Ceylon* (London: Luzac and Co. for Pali Text Society).

*Dīpavamsa* (4th century C.E.) from Hermann Oldenberg, trans. and ed. (1982), *The Dīpavamsa: An Ancient Buddhist Historical Record* (reprint) (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services).

The *jātakas* from E. B. Cowell (1895–1913), *The Jātaka; or, Stories of the Buddha's Former Births*, 6 vols. (London: Luzac and Co. for Pali Text Society), and from John Garrett Jones (1979), *Tales and Teachings of the Buddha: The Jātaka Stories in Relation to the Pali Canon* (London: George Allen and Unwin).

The *Dīgha Nikāya* from I. B. Horner, trans. and ed. (1954–1959), *The Middle Length Sayings (Majjhima Nikāya)*, 3 vols. *Sacred Books of the Buddhists*, vols. 29–31 (London: Luzac and Co. for Pali Text Society) and from T. W. Rhys Davids and C. A. Folsy, trans. and eds. (1899–1921), *Dialogues of the Buddha (Dīgha Nikāya)*, 3 vols. *Sacred Books of the Buddhists*, vols. 2–4 (London: Luzac and Co. for Pali Text Society).

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Brunswick, Maine  
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J.C.H.

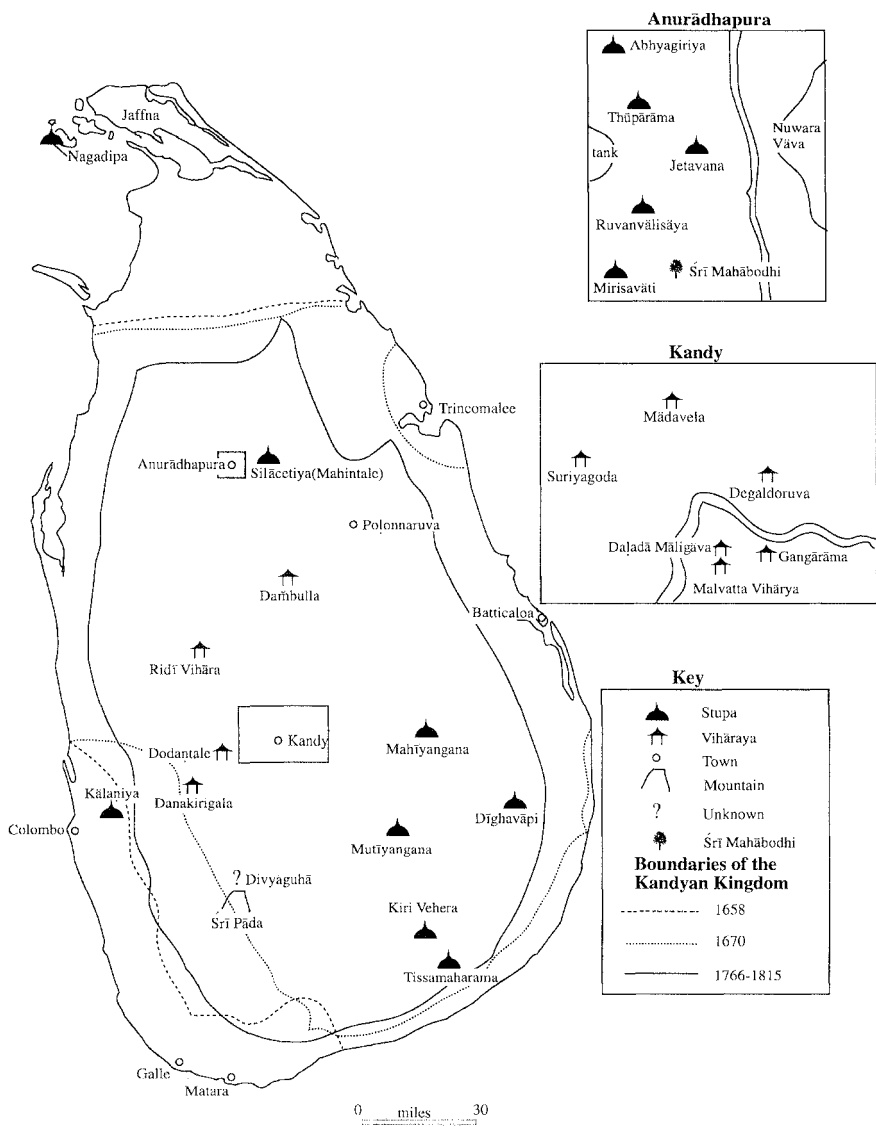
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# The Religious World of Kīrti Śrī



# Sri Lanka

# 1

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## Kīrti Śrī's Predicament

This book is primarily about how Kīrti Śrī Rājasinha expressed a classical understanding of Buddhism and appealed to various paradigmatic discourses of kingship through the religious works he sponsored. As I detail his enterprising program of reform, reestablishment, and renewal in chapters 2–4, the specific parameters of his classical Buddhist perspective will become quite apparent. Initially, it would be helpful to know why he expended such great effort and wealth to revive what had become essentially an institutionally moribund religious tradition.

In short, the answer lies in two related factors. First, Kīrti Śrī faced very serious outside threats to his reign by an imposing European Christian colonial power, the Dutch East India Company. Because the overwhelming majority of his countrymen were Buddhists by birth, his public proclamations in support of Buddhism were therefore expedient, a religio-political rallying cry in the face of a grave external danger to tradition. Second, from the inside, he faced a serious challenge to his authority by an elitist section of the aristocratic Sinhalese nobles of his court, a faction of this medieval society whose families also dominated the Buddhist religious establishment of his time. For various reasons that will be explored, some in this privileged group were cynical regarding the king's public proclamations in support of Buddhism, called into question his fitness to rule a nation primarily composed of traditionally Buddhist people, and unsuccessfully attempted to assassinate him.

Therefore, Kīrti Śrī's religious statements, literally and symbolically, had to be taken as genuine, convincing to the masses of Sinhalese Buddhists who were his subjects. He walked a tightrope between two powerful political forces and needed a broadly based supportive constituency to be successful in continuing his reign.

### **The External Threat**

In the middle of the eighteenth century, Dutch colonial power, then anchored in Batavia (a city in Java, Indonesia), several thousand miles to the east, had also become firmly ensconced in the coastal regions of Sri Lanka. In collusion with an earlier Sinhalese Buddhist king of Kandy, Rājāsinha II (1635–1687 C.E.), and a century before the period on which this work focuses, the Dutch had succeeded in wresting economic and political control over most of the island's low-country regions from the Portuguese, who had been the first European colonists to come to Sri Lanka, early in the sixteenth century, and had, despite considerable resistance by the Sinhalese, succeeded in establishing themselves as landlords of the littorals by the sea.<sup>1</sup> Though the Portuguese sought to garner a share of Asia's material riches by monopolizing trade, they were also driven by a counter-Reformation, missionary zeal to convert, either by persuasive proselytizing or by brute military force, the local South Asian inhabitants to Christianity. The later entrepreneurs from Holland (with whom I am more specifically concerned in this context) not only were supported by expert European military detachments and hordes of well-trained South Asian mercenaries but also brought with them bands of crusading Protestant Christian missionary zealots. However, the Dutch were much more preoccupied with controlling and profiting from any trade, chiefly for export, but including whatever goods might flow into and out of the largely landlocked Kandyan kingdom (see map). As the driving Dutch motives were preponderantly economic in nature, political (or, more accurately, military) authority, whether formally or legally constituted or not, was a necessary condition—from their point of view—for conducting business successfully from their strategic low-country port bases. So secure did they feel in exercising their power in Sri Lanka that one of the Dutch governors noted in 1762 (during Kīrti Śrī's reign), that, within all of the Dutch colonial dominions, there was “not place [other than Sri Lanka] where the Dutch have so much land as sole min-

isters" (Reimers, 1946: 9) and that Sri Lanka should become a "capital station" for Dutch interests in South and Southeast Asia.

For most of their history on the island, Dutch strategy was consistent: (1) to maintain tight political and social discipline over the coastal areas that they had captured from the Portuguese; (2) to accomplish this discipline not only through established military hegemony but also through the conversion of low-country inhabitants to the Protestant Christianity of the Dutch Reformed Church; and (3) to keep the power of the Kandyan kingdom at bay, in a perpetual state of economic and political atrophy. Largely, they succeeded in preventing the Kandyans from interfering with their trading pursuits and in pauperizing the Kandyans by means of their shrewd and often unfair trade practices. In addition to the cultivation and collection of their own goods for trade in the low-country regions that they controlled, all goods entering or leaving the Kandyan kingdom were heavily taxed in the form of a severe transportation surcharge if the goods were headed for or received from foreign destinations. The Dutch policy regarding political economy, which was designed to confine Kandyan political power and to weaken the Kandyans economically, served their principal aim and ultimate pursuit of exploiting opportunities in trade, chiefly the cultivation and export of cinnamon (some of which took place within the Kandyan kingdom *per se*) and other spices for sale in Asian or distant European markets, as well as the capture and sale of elephants to markets in India, a supremely profitable activity that the kings of Kandy looked upon with a deep degree of envy.<sup>2</sup> In this part of the Asian world in the eighteenth century, the Dutch had succeeded in becoming international middlemen *par excellence*.

Throughout their century-and-a-half occupation of coastal Sri Lanka, the Dutch, in spite of their obvious military superiority, continually feared, and on several occasions took military action to stifle, the ability of the Kandyan Buddhist kingship to incite rebellion among the low-country Sinhalese living in their midst. The official memoirs of eighteenth-century Dutch governors indicate that the Dutch often attempted to intimidate the low-country Sinhalese by expressing their own perceptions of social, economic, and spiritual superiority.<sup>3</sup> For the Dutch, at least according to their colonial governors, spiritual and material well-being were intrinsically related.<sup>4</sup> They sought to make clear to the indigenous inhabitants that it was completely in their own best interests to adopt a



new way of life. At the same time that they were intimidating or enticing low-country Sinhalese with the Protestant ethic and spirit of capitalism, they contrived a coy political dance with the kings of Kandy, through imaginative and clever legal fictions, in order to preserve peace with the Kandyan highlanders for the purpose of ensuring continued economic exploitation. Despite their public posturing with low-country and Kandyan Sinhalese, the Dutch remained wary, as did the Sinhalese on their part, of the alien in their midst.

While the Dutch were spirited Calvinists, they were even more spirited as capitalists. They were anxious, in particular, about Kīrti Śrī's potential to forge his own profitable trade directly with South Indian ports, which would thereby short-circuit their monopolies. For example, in 1762, Governor Schreuder revealed in his departing memoir to his successor, Governor Van Eck, how the Dutch perceived the significance of South Indian contacts with the Kandyans:

How harmful their intrusions and frequent comings and goings to and from Kandy of Nayakkars, Moors, Chetties and other such folk have been and still are to the [Dutch East India] Company; for in addition to eating up as it were our inhabitants and raising the price of our commodities they corrupt the Kandyans by their conversations. (Reimers, 1946: 24)

In that connection, the Dutch came to resent especially the king's cultivated ties not only with South Indian Nāyakkars but also with Muslims in Sri Lanka, not primarily because of centuries-old European xenophobic inclinations toward the presence of an expanding Islamic influence, but because the Muslim community constituted a conduit for trade and communication with South India (a linkage of great importance) and hence an economic threat to the vitality of their own interests. Again, it is notable that the same Dutch governor said that the Moors were "a people so cunning in trade that they cannot exist without it [smuggling]," and that "the Moors in particular will not give up smuggling although it is done at the risk of life and goods" (Reimers, 1946: 17–18). Such Dutch disdain was clearly derived from the contemplation of economic rivalry.

While the Dutch were successful in terms of their economic goals, their religious predicans who sought to convert low-country Sinhalese and Tamils met with only lackluster results. Indeed, the legacy of the Dutch Reformed Church in Sri Lanka today is more of an architectural than a social one, in striking contrast to the staying power of the Roman

Catholicism introduced by the Portuguese.<sup>5</sup> As Reformed Christian Calvinists, the Dutch insisted upon proselytizing their Protestant faith, sometimes with a fair measure of vigor, among the low-country Sinhalese and Tamils, many of whom had previously converted to the Roman Catholicism of the colonial Portuguese predecessors. But the intensity of these attempts was sporadic and inconsistent. At times, Dutch governors complained about the lack of enthusiasm displayed and of results obtained by church predicants who often seemed to see their mission as being aimed chiefly at maintaining the faith among representatives of the European community.<sup>6</sup> At other times in the low country, the pressure to convert Sinhalese became severe since conversion to Christianity was regarded by the Dutch administrators as a way to short-circuit Sinhalese loyalty to the Kandyan Buddhist king. Thus, religious conversion was one of the strategies tried to isolate low-country Sinhalese from their highland Buddhist king.<sup>7</sup>

As for some of the loyal South Asian, Sri Lankan Catholics of these times who resisted conversion to Protestantism, the enmities experienced in the battles of the Reformation a century or two earlier on the European continent were re-created for them in situ by many of the policies and practices put into effect by the Dutch Protestants in Sri Lanka. Ironically, many Sinhalese Catholic Christians in coastal areas were forced to flee oppression on numerous occasions to highland regions of the Kandyan kingdom where usually a Buddhist king might afford them protection from the fanaticism of rival Christians. Nevertheless, Kīrti Śrī's intermittent policy of providing Sinhalese Catholics a refuge from Dutch oppression, a policy first put in place by many of his royal Sinhalese predecessors, became one of the irritations that created a degree of alienation from an increasingly militant section of his own Buddhist community early in his reign, as it had for Kīrti Śrī's immediate predecessor, the first Nāyakkar, king, Śrī Vijaya Rājasinha.<sup>8</sup> On the whole, the Kandyan kings, especially the earlier Sinhalese kings, were far more tolerant in their religious dispositions toward religions other than their own than either the Portuguese or the Dutch colonial administrations.<sup>9</sup>

Here, then, it can be observed that although religion is frequently a powerful constituent of ethnic identity and a principal means of exclusion or definition, there are moments when its definitive importance can be transcended in the interest of wider appeals. At times in late medieval Sri Lanka, religion did not bar ethnic inclusion; yet at other times, it did—that is, religion is a variable, and not a constant factor, in what

can constitute ethnicity. Chapter 6 will discuss this matter again, in relation to the current ethnic conflict on the island between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority.

In the coastal regions, under the Dutch the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism were presented not simply with great confidence and conviction but as a unified package, as a serious and complete challenge to the Sinhalese Buddhist and Sinhalese Catholic ways of comprehending the meaning of existence in the pursuit of living a religiously virtuous and economically prosperous life. To the low-country Sinhalese, the Dutch colonial administration also represented an alternative structure of power that demanded total practical submission. For instance, in order to legally own land within the Dutch domain of power, to be legally married, and to obtain a formal education, low-country Sinhalese were required to renounce their ties to the Buddha *śāsana* (tradition) and their allegiance to the king in Kandy, by becoming members of the Dutch Reformed Church. Under the Dutch, religious affiliation determined the legal statuses that in any material and social way were advantageous for local inhabitants to hold. Among the low-country Sinhalese, consequently, there emerged a community of “government Christians,” some perhaps sincere in their religious preference, but many choosing to be dubbed Christian as a matter of legal convenience for economic advantage. Out of this social environment there eventually evolved, in especially accelerated fashion later under nineteenth-century British colonial rule, a privileged class of Western-educated Sinhalese and Tamil entrepreneurs, professionals, and government servants who came to rival, in economic power and social prestige, the traditional class of aristocratic Kandyans of the highlands who, nonetheless, for their part, continued to envisage themselves as the inheritors and sustainers of the ages-old Sinhala Buddhist tradition.

In eighteenth-century Sri Lanka, then, there were two political economies at work, two competing systems of social values, and more than two religious orientations in the two increasingly distinct regions of the country. Sri Lanka, in general, and Sinhalese society, in particular, were severely bifurcated by concerted pressures exerted by a European, Christian-legitimated political economy on the one hand and a traditional Sinhala Buddhist way of life struggling to survive on the other.

For the Kandyans, the Dutch represented a genuine political and economic threat that could potentially dislodge their own tenuous holds