

**A study on commodification of religious rituals and  
social reproduction in contemporary Sri Lanka.**

A Great Transformation ?- Global Perspectives on  
Contemporary Capitalisms  
International Conference  
Johannes Kepler University  
Linz, Austria  
January 10-13, 2017

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# Introduction

This research study is concerned with the commodification of religious rituals and consequent reproduction of social inequality in contemporary Sri Lankan society. Seen from Karl Polanyi's conceptual and theoretical perspectives developed in the "Great Transformation" a research problem was articulated to understand the institutionalization of disembeddedness while transforming the religious institutions and practices of embeddedness into a process of commodification geared by the neoliberal economic policies of modern capitalism, and the reproduction of social inequality, not in terms of traditional stratifications of gender and caste but in terms of their position in the market economy.

# Characteristics of traditional systems of beliefs and their operation

- Beliefs in gods and goddess have been surrounded by variety of religious rituals, customs, values, norms, and sacred practices.
- Those rituals were predominantly performed with utmost religiosity on the both parties, the service providers and the recipients.
- Their main role was to offer offerings to the god and pray for an end to sufferings of devotees or divine blessings for the successful accomplishment of secular goals, safety, protection of life and properties and well-being of individuals and communities. In certain cases justice for criminal victimization and all types of other social injustices is also sought from the gods or demons they believe in.
- Both parties were living in the same area, stratified and organized in terms of caste system, gender, beliefs and habits, and rituals have been adopted in response to the culture behind them.

- Religious rituals were performed out of the sacred devotion to the beliefs (god and goddess) without serious consciousness of economic gains from the offerings and performance of them on behalf of the devotees. Accordingly, the religious services and offerings had been de-commoditized with a divine value which cannot be measured as the things of profane world. And they cannot be reversed back to the condition of profane and commoditized within the domain of religion. As for the traditional social values any consciousness of economic gain from the performance of religious rituals, folk medicine and healing practices, and exorcism is not going to bring about the anticipated benefits including the blessings. Only voluntary gifts are acceptable as symbols of gratitude and appreciation which was important for the reinforcement of social relations.

- Accordingly, the religious rituals are effective as long as they have the invaluable sacred identity reinforced by de-commodification of offerings and service provision.
- Attempts of commodification of rituals were prevented by the strong beliefs in retribution in this world and the other after death.
- The traditional social stratification with little avenues of social mobility was also supportive as it produced little opportunities for social competition. Service providers were performing those religious rituals on selected days and times of the day as a religious service while engaging in their main secular economic activities, predominantly agriculture.

# Commodification of religious rituals in the contemporary society

- . As was observed and evident from the interviews with devotees, the above mentioned main characteristics of religious practices have undergone a dramatic change in response to the social change accompanied by the processes of modernization, urbanization, globalization and the expansion of market economy under modern capitalism and the repercussions of the war Sri Lanka had for nearly three decades.
- The social change and repercussions of the war seemed to have increased the number of devotees seeking the divine protection, blessings and refuge for their well-being. In particular the following four social phenomena have been conducive to the increase in number of devotees and the frequency of visiting the shrines of gods and goddess.

- The insecurity of life and property and other issues caused by the repercussion of the war 1980-2009
- Increasing risk of economic activities under neoliberal economic policies introduced in 1978.
- Social competition for upward social mobility in the class stratification which is a transition from traditional caste system. Competition for the educational achievements, migration, foreign employment as avenues of social mobility.
- Increasing consciousness of physical well-being among people. This health and medication consciousness seemed to have increased the fear of being ill and premature death which consequently motivate people to seek refuge of religion.

- Increasing demand for religious rituals has caused a competition among devotees to win the will of god by appeasing the Kapumahaththaya who pray to the god for them.
- This endeavor has transformed the simple offerings and service of praying into very complex with a considerable financial cost. The convention was to keep a purified coin in the tray of fruit and other offerings offered to the god before paying. Those coins were collected and used for the renovation of shrines and annual festivities of the temple. Today a considerable sum of money in Notes of Rs. 1000 and 5000 are kept over the trays of offerings so that it may clearly visible to the Kapumahaththaya who seemed directly eyeing on the visible amount decide on the quality and duration of praying in return to the offerings.

- Apart from money, jewelries and other valuable things are also offered at the first visit to get the attention as desired and make a promise of offerings of valuable things in return to the divine attention. After the completion of the tasks or recovery from the suffering they make the second visit to the temple and offer the things promised as it is.
- Even after such a divine transaction they tend to renew it with new promises of offerings for another future period of time. Consequently, those who seek the refuge of god through offerings and praying become entangled in the rituals finding no way out of it. For example almost all the Buddhist vehicle owners and drivers annually visit at least one selected famous shrine of god make valuable offerings and pray for the protection of the vehicle and the lives of passengers which is similar to the renewal of insurance policies annually.

- Increase in the number of devotees, their regular and frequent visits seemed to have transformed the position of Kapumahaththaya into a professional shaman dedicated to the performance of rituals for the benefit of devotees and survive making an income from the religious service they provide.
- This particular social change has given rise to the commodification of religious rituals as the increasing accumulation of offerings in things and money carried a higher economic value in the market economy. On the other hand as members aspiring to enjoy the benefits of modern economy and life styles, the religious service providers are also interested in making money from the rituals.

# Reproduction of social inequalities of modern society

- The commodification of religious rituals has transform them into business like activities providing the service providers with a lucrative avenue of social mobility in the class structure by the possession and accumulation wealth and symbols of social status in the modern society.
- Economic consciousness of the service providers has undermined the religiosity and confidence towards their religious beliefs. They seemed to have taken the performance of rituals for granted for poor people as they are not in a position to offer money in thousands of Rupees. Those who keep less amount of money depending on their economic capacity have to wait until the service is delivered to the rich devotees who keep an attractive sum of money over their trays of offerings.

- They are satisfied with the service as the kapumahaththaya (the service provider) takes his own time and pray for the clients in clearly uttered religious versions of praying and invoke blessings. But in the case of others offering less amount of money the service is finished within a few seconds or a minute without properly and clearly uttering the versions of praying. They utter some half-pronounced words for praying and finish the service without due regards.

. . In some cases, they had indirectly indicated their dissatisfaction about the offerings impelling the devotees to offer more relative to the value of the objective of seeking the blessings of the god. Being aware of this behavior of shamans even poor people also do their best to offer the highest sum of money at the cost of their other expenses to get the rituals carried out properly.

# Conclusion

The process of globalization proceed with expanding the scope of commodification to aspects of social life of people so far functioned without economic consciousness but religious and cultural meanings. The indispensable need for money in the modern capitalist society has compelled people to produce wealth by means of modern economic activities or transforming religious and cultural beliefs and practice into means of income through commodification of them. The commodification of religious rituals in Sri Lanka provides a contemporary case for understanding a global social phenomenon.

- Thank you

- **Abstract**
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This research study is concerned with the commodification of religious rituals and consequent reproduction of social inequality in contemporary Sri Lankan society. Seen from Karl Polanyi's conceptual and theoretical perspectives developed in the "Great Transformation" a research problem was articulated to understand the institutionalization of disembeddedness while transforming the religious institutions and practices of embeddedness into a process of commodification geared by the neoliberal economic policies of modern capitalism, and the reproduction of social inequality, not in terms of traditional stratifications of gender and caste but in terms of their position in the market economy.

- Accordingly, two research questions; whether the financial value of the religious offerings has a decisive impact on the provision of religious services and whether positive reaction to such an economic concern is reflected in the behavior of devotees, were raised in the research. Data for the study were collected by means of observation and interviews conducted with reference to five shrines of gods and goddess where people offer monetary and materials offerings and seek the blessings of gods and goddess to realize secular goals. All the shrines of gods and goddess are located in the Southern and Western provinces in the country and popular among people who strongly believe in their divine power. Each shrine had two or more special service providers known as Kapumahaththaya (in Sinhalese language) who play a shamanic role and pray for the good of devotees. Their performance of rituals at those shrines was closely observed.

. A random sample of hundred devotees were interviewed to learn about factors that had been conducive to the decision on the economic value of religious offerings. The findings show an interesting transformation in religious rituals which remained with a less-economic value in the traditional societies, into commodification in the contemporary society. Fear, risk, uncertainty, frustration, lack of resources, illness and tension had increased the number of religious devotees seeking divine support creating a demand for religious services which was met by service providers at different undeclared prices. The money offered with the material offerings has been transformed into a price for the service.

- The Kapumahaththaya had changed the quality of service depending on the sum of money offered with the material offerings. Those who offered higher amount of money were provided with prolonged period of well-versed praying whereas the poor people were provided with a taken for granted service. Being aware of this even the poor people had attempted to offer higher amount of money with the intention of motivating the Kapumahaththayas to provide satisfactory service. It was concluded that religious rituals performed at those shrines had become economic exchanges between the service providers and religious devotees while reproducing the social inequality in terms of changing financial capital of people

- **Keywords. Commodification, Religious Rituals, Financial Offerings, Social Reproduction**



Thank you