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Identity and Difference*

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## A Review of *Colors of the Robe: Religion, Identity and Difference*

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*Colors of the Robe: Religion, Identity and Difference.* By Ananda Abeysekara. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002. xvi + 271 pages. ISBN: 1570034672.

Ananda Abeysekara's book *Colors of the Robe: Religion, Identity and Difference* is one anthropologist's sustained attempt to adapt the best of poststructuralist criticism to a postcolonial ethical sensibility in a study of Buddhist identity in contemporary Sri Lanka. As such, Abeysekara's book comprises two interrelated projects. The first is a critique of other scholars in the field, and the second constitutes his own attempt to demonstrate what a theoretically sound investigation should look like in the context of contemporary Sri Lanka. The result is a tightly knit argument in which theoretical critique and anthropological observation play a mutually supporting role.

The introductory chapter lays out Abeysekara's theoretical project. He begins by positioning himself against a battery of contemporary theorists and scholars working in the field of South Asian studies. He organizes these scholars into three groups. The first write about the general postmodern theories on culture that argue the favorite subjects of academic investigation, such as "culture" or "religion" are in fact "unbounded, nonunitary, fluid, changing, and so on." While Abeysekara is sympathetic to the problems with reification that these scholars attempt to address, he notes the pitfalls in running to the opposite extreme. Any theoretical position that attempts to see all constructions as somehow false and to posit as a counter-image, an unconstructed substratum, runs the risk of being unable to account for the political reality of those actually living in a specific culture. "Nations," "races," and other identities may be constructed or "imagined," but the violence and oppression that are embodied in the institutions these ideas give rise to can hardly be dismissed for that reason. Abeysekara argues that a more nuanced (and perhaps

more responsible) approach would take into account the hard political dynamics of the play of identity and difference while never losing sight of the contingency of the categories invoked by those involved.

The second group Abeysekara discusses seeks to locate the “infection” of indigenous cultures by colonial forms of knowledge. While, again, being sympathetic to the concerns of these scholars to uncover the use of forms of knowledge for domination in colonial South Asia, Abeysekara reads these theorists as themselves reifying certain aspects of native culture in order to critique colonial constructions. Abeysekara points out that in doing so, these authors have a tendency to reproduce “the very *colonial distinction* between the ‘colonial’ and the ‘native,’ the ‘oriental’ and the ‘Western.’ ... indeed [to assume] a timeless and static conception of Indian identity” (pp. 8-9).

These two groups of scholars constitute the two extremes Abeysekara attempts to steer between, and yet his work is indebted to the ideals of both types of scholarship. Even a cursory read of Abeysekara’s book shows his sensitivity to the constructed nature of forms of knowledge as well as to the dangers posed by such forms when taken to be normative.

It is a third group, however, that forms the main target of Abeysekara’s criticism throughout the book, one that consists of a number of well-known scholars of Sri Lankan Buddhism. The scholars receiving the harshest criticism are those who attempt to critique the formations of modern Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Abeysekara argues that these scholars measure the claims of contemporary practice and rhetoric against an *a priori* standard of what they take to be “authentic Buddhism.” What Abeysekara finds troubling in these claims is that, in order to question one set of reifications, the authors employ categorical standards such as “Buddhism” or “terror” uncritically, apparently unaware that the standards they employ are themselves contingently constructed within the disciplines in which these scholars work. Abeysekara contends that his contemporaries employ these categories as if they were a “readily available” (and *a priori*) constant against which to evaluate the empirical “other.” Abeysekara correctly points out that by only problematizing one pole of the debate these scholars end up merely reiterating, or worse, reinforcing a contingently constructed dichotomy that is oftentimes shot through with political implications. Scholarship that leaves the conditions of the formation of this binary unexamined is doomed to repeat it.

As an antidote to the failings of these approaches, Abeysekara positions a modified version of Foucauldian genealogy. He turns our attention to the multiplicity of conditions that allow for the specific discursive categories and their “other” to come to the fore correlatively, an approach best described as “historical nominalism” insofar as the interdependence it highlights divests both categories of any kind of *a priori* availability. The result is a history of “events” in Sri Lanka that neither

seeks an “origin” nor attempts to map out the way Buddhism changes over time. Abeysekara’s study is rather an investigation of the conditions that allow certain shifts to become visible in the first place. In placing the focus on the conditional nature that allows specific debates to arise, Abeysekara attempts to avoid the problems he highlights in the work of others.

For example, Chapter 2 addresses the question of Buddhist identity. Here, Abeysekara takes a number of scholars to task for their contention that Buddhism in modern Sri Lanka has changed in some fundamental way. He begins with Stanley Tambiah, whose book *Buddhism Betrayed?* is singled out for particular attention. Tambiah claims that Buddhism in modernity has reached a “critical turning point” in which monks have become increasingly involved in politics, “making them less distinguishable from the laity participating in politics.” Tambiah wonders what will happen to Buddhism when the “‘more orthodox’ monks pass away.” While these statements seem innocent enough, Abeysekara is quick to point out that couched behind the words “distinguishable” and “orthodox,” is an implicit, and more importantly, a *priori* standard of what “Buddhism” is and is not. Abeysekara does not claim that there is anything wrong with these judgments *per se*; indeed, he points out that these standards are used by some Sri Lankans themselves. Rather, Abeysekara’s contribution is to highlight that whenever any such standard regarding what is or is not “Buddhism” is used, the standard is always already implicated within a rather messy web of interests—what Abeysekara calls “contingent conjunctures.”

While the theoretical point Abeysekara makes is interesting enough, his ethnography, in my opinion, is the real reason to read the book. This is not to say that the ethnography can be read separately from the theory, on the contrary, the ethnography makes his theoretical point as well as his theoretical discussion. Indeed, Abeysekara’s ethnographic studies make his (somewhat complex) theoretical point so well, that one wonders whether his critique of other scholars is perhaps redundant.

Unfortunately, his ethnography is difficult to summarize since each chapter discusses a rather complicated set of causes and conditions that authorize a central binary to come to the fore of public debate. Hence, while I cannot do justice to the complexity of each case, I will discuss a few examples illustrative of Abeysekara’s method. Chapter 2 examines certain debates that arose in the 1980s and 1990s over what constitutes who is or is not a Buddhist monk. Abeysekara notes that several prominent scholars of Theravada Buddhism implicitly turn to classical Buddhist sources for the litmus test of who is “Buddhist” or who is a “monk.” They then apply this literary standard to what they find “in the field.” As an alternative, Abeysekara examines two cases in which there was a local debate over the official status of two monastic incumbents who had allegedly violated the same *vinaya*

rule of celibacy. By a canonical standard, their status as monks would be suspect to say the least, and yet Abeysekara shows that the canonical standards are just one factor brought up in the debate about these monks. And just as he shows the support of the monks to be contingent upon a host of political and material factors, Abeysekara shows that the opposition to these monks does not stem simply from a reading of the *vinaya*, but is equally contingent upon a variety of interests of those making the claims.

Similarly, Chapter 3 brings our attention to the relation between Buddhism and politics — a topic that will occupy the rest of the book in different permutations. Here the main players are United Nationalist Party (UNP) leader and ex-prime minister and president J. R. Jayawardene and the monks of Vidyalandara University. Again, while Jayawardene's claim that "monks should not engage in politics," may be common fare in Buddhism 101 (as taught in the U.S. at least), Abeysekara shows how his Herculean efforts to create an "apolitical monk" can hardly be separated from the fact that the "political monks" at the time supported his opposition to the SLFP; or from his own political interests in casting himself as a "Buddhist president" (interesting here, and throughout the book, is Abeysekara's discussion of Walpola Rahula's role in Sri Lankan politics in the 1980s and 1990s).

The following chapter discusses the construction of Theravada Buddhist identity along with and over and against Mahayana (Shingon) Buddhist identity within the years in which formal economic ties between Japan and Sri Lanka were being actively cultivated in the 1970s and 1980s. Again, in Abeysekara's discussion we see the convergence of economic factors with political and sectarian interests (from both countries) as well as with the egos and strategies of the personalities involved. After Abeysekara's treatment, any attempt to read the events as simply the clash of two different ideologies will seem woefully inadequate.

The last chapter concludes the book with a lengthy discussion of the relation between categories "Buddhism" and "terror" in the prolonged struggles between the JVP (People's Liberation Front) and government forces in the 1990s — struggles in which some 20,000 people lost their lives. Here Abeysekara shows how discourses on both sides of the conflict sought to appropriate the authority of Buddhism in their attempts to defeat the other side. True to his word, Abeysekara does not choose sides, but rather reveals how both sides of the debate were contingently constructed.

In each of the chapters of the book, Abeysekara's agenda is not a mere quest for heightened accuracy through a more thorough poststructuralism. It is also an ethical concern that any scholarship remaining blind to the causes and conditions that give rise to the binary will inadvertently replicate those conditions. Though one could hardly put Abeysekara in the camp of post-colonial critics, insofar as he questions any simple distinction between colonial and non-colonial forms of

knowledge, his work is thoroughly informed by a postcolonial critique of the violence that can be wrought by forms of knowledge.

Indeed, the only criticism of the book that comes to mind relates to this point. To the extent that Abeysekara's critique of other scholars seems to be motivated by this ethical concern, one is left wondering what kinds of interventions into current "conjunctures" are appropriate for the postmodern scholar. Clearly, there is something problematic about politically motivated scholarship (no matter how well intentioned) that reproduces the very categorical structure that fuels the conflict itself. On the other hand, does awareness of all the contingencies giving rise to a debate not leave us in a kind of political paralysis? Is the scholar relegated to merely describing what happened, unable to take a stand? Abeysekara does not answer the question in this book, although he gives us the distinct impression that the answer may lie somewhere down the path marked out by the methodology he proposes.