Buddhism in Ceylon and Studies on Religious Syncretism in Buddhist Countries

(Symposien zur Buddhismusforschung, I)

Report on a Symposium in Göttingen
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by Heinz Bechert
The Buddha's Eye, the Evil Eye, and Dr. Ruelius

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Since Dr. Ruelius has criticized both my description and my interpretation of the ritual in which Buddha images are completed and consecrated by painting in their eyes (nātāputthipatana), Professor Bechert has kindly asked me to reply.

First the description. Dr. Ruelius questions my accuracy. On pp. 35-6 of my article 1) I describe the ritual of placing pots (rāmānāthaśāleśā), in which pots are arranged on a diagram and then sacrificed to particular deities. I witnessed the ceremony myself and had the ascriptions from the officiant at the time, without even the intermediacy of an interpreter. Any reader can see that my account is coherent. Yet in his note 42 Dr. Ruelius says that my description of the pots' arrangement is inaccurate ("unge- nau") and the ascriptions (which harmonize with the arrangement) are improbable ("unwahrscheinlich"). How does he know?

In the study of myth it is now a commonplace that there is no one "correct" version of a myth; on the contrary, understanding comes from the collection of variants and the perception of what they implicitly have in common. I would have thought that the same applied to rituals. Approaching Dr. Ruelius' paper, I hoped to read descriptions of further performances of the ritual, certain to deviate in some ways from the one I saw, which would enrich our understanding, and perhaps demonstrate how some external variables, such as an urban environment, affected the ceremony.

But no. Though a few new details can be gleaned by the careful reader, Dr. Ruelius' long article adds surprisingly little to our ethnographic knowledge, and he gives little detailed description of the two rituals which he himself witnessed. His attitude towards variants is intolerant; he argues (pp. 310f.) that from what actually happens in a ritual we must reconstruct its ideal form, that by comparison of different performances we may recognize and eliminate ("auscheiden") variants.

But what are we trying to do? If to reconstruct a historically earlier stage of the ritual, as we might try to reconstruct a text, we may put aside demonstrable innovations—remembering always that the principles of textual criticism cannot be a sure guide through the complexities of social events. But historical reconstruction is not Dr. Ruelius' dominant concern; his "ideal" ritual is in the present.

Of course some parts of a ritual are more important than others. The participants can readily tell us what is essential, for they know whether

1) For this and other references see note 1 to Dr. Ruelius' article.
the ritual has been, or is likely to be, efficacious. Even if the parson was drunk, the wedding is still valid. But is the ethnographer to suppose the fact that the parson was drunk? Or is a colleague thousands of miles away to declare that the parson could not have been drunk, on no more authority than textual testimony that he ought to be sober.

In the two accounts of the ceremony, Coomaraswamy's and mine, the arrangement of the pots differs greatly. This merely tells us that their arrangement in one given way is not crucial to the efficacy of the ceremony. The fact that yet other arrangements are mentioned (or suggested) by two printed texts does not entitle Dr. Ruelius to reject our accounts. In the text (p. 319) to this note he seeks a finally valid clarification ("endgültige Klärung"). But this search is idle: there is no definitive version, no final validity. Worse, the search is misguided, for cases we know the "ideal" ritual we can have nothing more to learn; the matter is closed, and new data can be "eliminated" a priori. There can be no change, only aberration.

Looking at another way, this can be seen as a question of authority: whose view is to weigh? Are we to defer to the participants or to Dr. Ruelius? Let us illustrate this from a part of the ritual more important than the precise arrangement of the pots. In the final purification rite, or sequence of rites (dikhi karama), the craftsman gets rid of the evil (vai dos) lingering in his own gaze (bhima) by procedures involving three adjutants: a pot of milk or water, a tree with milky sap, and a bull. The painter transdues the evil from his gaze to the pot, and destroys that either by cutting it with a sword (Coomaraswamy's version), or by breaking it on the bull's horns (my version), or by spilling the milk over the bull and breaking, the pot separately (Ruelius' version); he cuts the tree with the milky sap; and he drives off the bull. All these actions occur in other Sinhalese rituals to get rid of vai dos, and as all symbolically achieve the same effect it is not surprising to find that the last can be omitted (Ruelius' version). Dr. Ruelius, however, has decided that there is just one ideal version, in which cutting the tree precedes driving off the bull, so those informants who reverse the order have "misunderstood" (p. 30). Coomaraswamy's report of the water-cutting is likewise declared wrong ("ununtreffend!"). These ex cathedra pronouncements seem just as arbitrary as his statement (p. 325) that the use of a tree with milky sap is "certainly secondary". The point would seem to me to be that a milky exudation makes the tree more like an animal victim; be that as it may, what is the evidence for the "primary" use of other trees?

On p. 313 Dr. Ruelius says that I am "obviously wrong" to say that this purification ritual is "nicht typisch" of our ceremony. What I say is that it is "not specific to" a nītra pīkyo. In his section 4.6 Dr. Ruelius says the same at some length, so is it obviously wrong? I suspect that, despite my attempt to clarify the points at the symposium, Dr. Ruelius has misunderstood: my words mean that the ritual occurs not only at a nītra pīkyo, but on other occasions too. In this respect the final purification is like beginning the ceremony at an auspicious moment, a commonplace practice which Dr. Ruelius characterizes as "nicht ... für diese Zeremonie typisch" (p. 323). His use of the word "typisch" seems to Rudnate.

We turn now to the interpretation of the core ritual, the painting of the eyes, concerning which the facts are not in dispute. The feature of the ceremony which particularly attracted my attention, and which Dr. Ruelius compares (p. 314) to a red thread leading through the action and its interpretation by the actors, is "the theme of the ‘dangerous gaze’". The participants consider that the gaze emanating from a Buddha image while the eyes are being painted is dangerous, and that this danger is to some extent transferred, despite its precautions, to the gaze of the painter. Dr. Ruelius himself dwells on this point several times. However, he severely criticizes my treatment of this matter (pp. 307f., 314), and the ostensible raison d'être of his article is to correct my interpretation.

Here I am under the grave difficulty that I cannot follow the logic of Dr. Ruelius' argument. The participants believe the Buddha's gaze to be dangerous, and act accordingly by keeping clear. The term "gaze" implies a living agent—the Sinhalese term, belena, is even a verbal noun. Of course the Sinhalese do not "really" think that the statue is alive; they behave as if it were alive. I say this in the passage of my book which Dr. Ruelius singles out for criticism; I explain this "as if" on p. 5 of that book; and on p. 307 of his article Dr. Ruelius quotes with approval Professor Schlingloff saying that the Buddha is worshipped as if ("als ob") he were present. But Dr. Ruelius continues, "And should danger threaten from the Buddha’s Image?" It is here that I lose him. He may not think it dangerous, but—as he repeatedly tells us—the participants do; so what is the point of the question? And why does he go on to call reference to their beliefs "intuitive reconstruction" of their motives?

Here may lie a source of confusion. My account does not claim to provide a causal explanation of the ritual. Providing such an explanation I myself would consider to be a historical enterprise. But Dr. Ruelius is probing for an interpretation which will explain why the ceremony is what it is, and assumes that the question must be asked and answered in functionalist terms.

What, then, is his interpretation? He calls the ceremony a rite de passage; the statue passes from being a lump of material to a cult object. To this one might object, as Dr. Schalk did at the symposium, that it widens unacceptably the use of the term rite de passage, which is used in anthropology to refer to a human transition from one status to another. By applying the term to an object, Dr. Ruelius could thus be accused of doing just what he accuses me of: attributing life to the statue! Alternatively, if we agree with him (p. 316) in using the term for such events
as unveiling monuments and housewarming parties, its application has become so broad that it is almost meaningless. If a rite de passage can centre on an animate object, it is hard to think of a public ceremony which could not be so called. The serious objection to Dr. Ruelle's interpretation, of course, is that it is banal: it is so general that it explains nothing. It tells us nothing about the ritual which we did not know before.

After this, it is comparatively trivial to object that this interpretation appears distorted in detail. Dr. Ruelle claims that the Buddha image (pp. 316, 324) and the painter (p. 237) are pretended not to be there ("wegfiigten") by the mirror and the blindfold respectively, despite the completely different explanations (dangerous gaze) given for both cases by the participants. If it were true that the painter was supposed to be entirely absent until he had purified himself (pp. 326f.), I cannot understand why he should not perform the purification, as he does the eye-painting, out of sight of the onlookers; that he comes out blindfold surely means that it is his eyes which are dangerous, not that they are pura svara. Moreover, Dr. Ruelle's argument at this point leads to an extraordinary conclusion: if the gaze of anyone undergoing a rite de passage is dangerous, why are people not blindfold at their weddings? No, it is an inadequate substitute for the particulars of this colourful ceremony to inform us (p. 323) that it "integrates the artefact into the existent cosmic order."

I am not so deduced as to think that my writings represent the last word on this subject. That would run counter to my central intellectual position. One cannot anticipate intellectual developments, but I would expect advances to come from more and better ethnography, and from intelligent historical research. I can give an example which illustrates both. In his doctoral dissertation, Dr. Peter Schalk has not only properly illustrated that odd ritual implement, the tuvrikéa, which I feebly described as "roughly umbrella-shaped"; he has also shown that it is a symbol with a long history, which in this context must signify the superior position of the Buddha, to be remembered even in a rite directed to the gods.

Finally we must pick up our mirrors and face the question: why has Dr. Ruelle strayed, following neither logic nor his informants? From p. 314f. we may guess at an answer. At his request he was allowed to disturb the normal course of a ceremony; not indeed to witness the actual painting of an image's eyes, the most dangerous moment, but alone to receive—and photographically to record—the painter's unpurified gaze as he emerged from the temple and for a moment on the threshold removed his blindfold. The transferred gaze of the Omniscient One may have given Dr. Ruelle the retrospective clairvoyance to see the pota whose arrangement I ineptly recorded; or there may have been some vasa dos left after all.

1) Peter Schalk, Der Paríta-Dienst in Ceylon, Land 1972 (Akademisk Ar- Handling for Danskvæsenden).
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