

GLOBAL NETWORKS, LOCAL ASPIRATIONS:
GENDER, LINEAGE, AND LOCALIZATION
IN SRI LANKA'S *BHIKKHUNĪ* ORDINATION DISPUTE

by

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This thesis investigates many of the figures and events that have made full ordinations of Buddhist nuns (*bhikkhunīs*) both possible and contested in contemporary Sri Lanka. I draw on interviews and materials collected during the winter of 2015–16 to show how local actors cooperate across distinctions of nationality and Buddhist practice tradition to revive a defunct lineage. I argue that some of the previous scholarship on women's renunciation in contemporary Sri Lanka conflates 'international' with 'western,' and privileges the local while forestalling a more nuanced analysis of the local-translocal exchange of speech and activism which constitutes one of the defining characteristics of the revival. I argue that these studies, while championing the voices of ten precept nuns and their everyday practices of renunciation, problematically assert that the current *bhikkhunī* ordination initiative represents the foreign incursion of western feminist speech which is at odds with the self-conception of Lankan renunciant women.

In addition, I cast light on an emerging dimension of the *bhikkhunī* ordination mobilization not yet articulated in previous studies: the interrelationship between an already-gendered Islamophobic Buddhist nationalist discourse and support for nuns' ordination as an integral step toward rescuing a Buddhist *sāsana* in decline. Although my findings here are still preliminary, I reveal a complex entanglement between geopolitical ethnic antagonism and the visibility of gender and gender roles in contemporary Sri Lanka through which the *bhikkhunī* ordination dispute is brought into visibility in a new way. Rather than as subjects to be rescued by western feminism, in this new discourse, Sri Lanka's *bhikkhunīs* become agents of social service and moral restoration in local villages.

Taken together, the central characteristics of these overlapping projects which enable and support *bhikkhunī* ordination suggest new ways of conceptualizing the enterprise with global implications and local sites of engagement, activism, and contestation. Through this, the themes of transnational cooperation, strategies of localization, and ethno-religious antagonism update our view of the contemporary revival and open up new questions for further analysis.

Dedicated to my parents, Sharon and Rich.

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Any errors and omissions are my own.

CONTENTS

Chapter I: The Race to be First:

An Introduction to Nuns' Ordination in Contemporary Sri Lanka	1
Introduction.....	1
Theoretical Approach.....	6
Source Materials	9
Structure and Guiding Questions	14
Note on Language.....	16

Chapter II: A Lineage Interrupted:

Following the Global History of Gendered Buddhist Renunciation	18
Introduction.....	18
From Vesali to Dambulla: A Global History of Buddhist Women's Renunciation in Sri Lanka.....	20
Prior Scholarship on Buddhist Women's Renunciation in Theravāda Practice	35
Conclusion	50

Chapter III: "I Am the First *Bhikkhunī*:" Kolonnawe Kusuma

and the Sakyadhītā International Association of Buddhist Women	52
Introduction.....	52
Kolonnawe Kusuma, the First <i>Bhikkhunī</i>	57
The 1996 Sarnath Ordination.....	61
Sakyadhītā and Global Feminist Discourse	67
Inamaluwe Sumangala and the Dambulla-Bodh Gaya <i>Bhikkhunīs</i>	76
Conclusion	80

Chapter IV: Purity, Politics, and the *Sāsana*:

Kirama Wimalajōthi and the Dekanduwela <i>Bhikkhunī</i> Training Center	82
Introduction.....	82
Kirama Wimalajōthi and the <i>Bodu Bala Sena</i>	87
The BCC and the Dekanduwela <i>Bhikkhunī</i> Training Center	90
Wimalajōthi, Sumangala, and Islamophobia	97
International Training for <i>Bhikkhunīs</i>	101
Conclusion	106

Chapter V: Concluding Remarks.....109

Overview	109
Limitations	111
Future Directions	113

Bibliography of Primary Sources

Bibliography of Secondary Sources	117
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FIGURES, PHOTOS, AND MAPS

1. <i>Bhikkhunīs</i> paying respect to their teacher (<i>author photo: Horana, December 2015</i>).....	9
2. Cave temple painting of Saṅghamittā giving the first nuns' ordination (<i>author photo: Thantrimale, January 2016</i>).....	26
3. Locations discussed in this chapter.....	53
4. <i>Bhikkhunī</i> Kusuma (<i>author photo: Olaboduwa, January 2016</i>).....	61
5. Ranjani de Silva at Sakyadhitha center (<i>author photo: Panadura, January 2016</i>).....	75
6. Display of Rangiri Dambulla <i>bhikkhunī</i> ordination photos (<i>author photo: Dambulla, January 2016</i>).....	78
7. Locations discussed in this chapter.....	82
8. Facebook graphic “shared” by Rangiri Dambulla	100
9. Cover of Dekanduwela brochure in English.....	102

Chapter I | The Race to be First: An Introduction to Nuns' Ordination in Contemporary Sri Lanka

Introduction

There is a race to be first when it comes to *bhikkhunī* ordination in contemporary Sri Lanka. Despite the opposition of the government and the administration of four powerful monastics fraternities (*nikāyas*), in recent years there have been a number of initiatives to reinstate a higher ordination lineage for Buddhist nuns that has been defunct since the monastic order as a whole was wiped out during the Chola invasions from Southern India during the 11th century CE. With several of these movements claiming to be the first to revive the lineage, *bhikkhunī* ordination is one of the most controversial and visible issues in contemporary Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia. In the Pāli language, the term *bhikkhunī* refers to a fully-ordained Buddhist nun, as opposed to a *samanerī*, or novice, or any number of semi-lay, or non fully-ordained nuns in South and Southeast Asia.¹

In recent years, the issue of *bhikkhunī* ordination has come to prominence in numerous Buddhist monastic communities, most notably in Theravādin and Tibetan traditions. The question of whether or not women can, and under what circumstances, take the higher ordination—with commensurate status to their male counterparts, and recognition as members of an established monastic order purportedly tracing back to the historical Buddha—has prompted vigorous debate in Sri Lanka, Thailand, as well as between other Theravādin convert communities in North America, Europe, and Australia. With the prevalent belief, cited in the

¹ Within the collection of Pāli-language texts that Theravāda Buddhists hold to be the authentic “*buddhavacana*” (words of the Buddha), the *Tipiṭaka* (“Three Baskets,” commonly referred to as the Pāli Canon), a group of texts known as the *Vinaya Piṭaka* outlines several stages of ordination for monastics in the Buddhist traditions of South and Southeast Asia. *Bhikkhunīs* and *bhikkhus*, fully ordained nuns and monks respectively, receive their higher ordination, known as an *upasampadā*, after a period of training in which they take on additional precepts and move from the stages of a lay Buddhist, *upāsikā* or *upāsaka*, to novice, *sāmaṇerī* or *samanera*, and for women, an additional two-year probationary period known as the *sikkhamānā*.

Vinaya, that an unbroken lineage of *bhikkhunīs* is required to confer ordination, because the lineage lapsed in the 11th century, its resuscitation is deemed impossible by the elders of Sri Lanka's powerful *nikāya* (monastic fraternity) administrations who influence government policy on matters related to Buddhism.² While *bhikkhunī* ordination is not officially recognized in Sri Lanka, the issue is not at all contentious in the Mahāyāna traditions of East Asia where there are large numbers of fully-ordained nuns in South Korean and Taiwanese monastic tradition that, although themselves deriving from the Lankan monastic lineage, have come to adopt a different Vinaya and practice identity.

Since the late 1980s Buddhist women have begun to organize across distinctions of national boundary and Buddhist practice tradition (e.g. Theravāda and Mahāyāna), often times working with powerful male monastic figures and international organizations—culminating in two high-profile international ordinations for Sri Lankan Buddhist women that took place in India in 1996 and 1998, granted by quorums of female and male South Korean and Taiwanese monastics, respectively. Widely regarded as the first ordinations for Theravādin *bhikkhunīs* since the lineage lapsed, these contested efforts to reinstate the ordination have significant translocal dimensions outside of Sri Lanka and have paved the way for women in other Buddhist practice contexts in Southeast Asia to take the ordination. In 1996, Dr. Kusuma Devendra, a Sri Lankan Vinaya scholar, became widely regarded as the first *bhikkhunī* in any Theravādin tradition since the lineage lapsed in the 11th century. Kusuma was one of the founders of the Sakyadhītā (“Daughters of the Buddha”) International Association of Buddhist Women and, along with another Lankan cofounder Ranjani de Silva, worked in cooperation with Sakyadhītā and the Mahābodhi Society (in India) and the Bo Miyn Sa temple (in South Korea) to confer a dual-

² Camelia Nathaniel, "Sri Lanka's Bhikkhuni Order in Deadlock," The Sunday Leader (Sri Lanka), March 03, 2013, <http://www.thesundayleader.lk/2013/03/03/sri-lankas-bhikkhuni-order-in-deadlock/>.

*sangha*³ ordination on ten Lankan renunciant women which took place in Sarnath, India. In the first case study (Chapter III), I tell the story of this ordination in detail, in addition to a second-high profile international ordination that soon followed. Just one year later, Inamaluwe Sumangala, the head monk of the Rangiri Dambulla temple in central Sri Lanka, instituted a training program for ten-precept nuns culminating in their participation in a second international ordination by a dual-*sangha* of Taiwanese and Lankan monastics, which took place in Bodh Gaya, India in 1998. Since then, Sumangala has sponsored yearly ordinations for Lankan and international nuns in Dambulla. The ordination of the Thai Buddhist studies scholar Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh (now Bhikkhunī Dhammananda) took place in Dambulla in 2003.⁴

This thesis tells the story of some of Sri Lanka's first *bhikkhunī* ordination movements, tracing the flows of translocal cooperation across difference that made these contested ordinations in the late 1990s possible. Through two interrelated case studies, I extend Susanne Mrozik's (2009) insight that the transnational features of the *bhikkhunī* ordination dispute constitute one of its defining characteristics.⁵ Updating many of the questions Mrozik prompts with recent ethnographic findings and collected texts from a period of field research in Sri Lanka from December 2015 to January 2016, I trace the flows of discourse, activism, speech, cooperation, and difference as they circulate at and between local and translocal levels of engagement, bringing into view three features of the contemporary dispute not fully articulated in prior scholarship on women's gendered renunciation in Lankan and interrelated Theravāda

³ Ordination conferred by a quorum of female and male monastics respectively, the ideal form for a *bhikkhunī* ordination according to dominant interpretations of the Vinaya.

⁴ Cathy Cantwell and Hiroko Kawanami, "Buddhism," in *Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformations*, ed. Linda Woodhead, Christopher Partridge, and Hiroko Kawanami (New York: Routledge, 2016), 100.

⁵ Susanne Mrozik, "A Robed Revolution: The Contemporary Buddhist Nun's (*Bhikṣuṇī*) Movement," *Religion Compass* 3, no. 3 (2009): 361, doi:10.1111/j.1749-8171.2009.00136.x.

practice contexts: translocal cooperation across difference, gendered strategies of localization, and ethno-religious nationalist discourse.

In the first case study (Chapter III), I tell a story about the first *bhikkhunī* ordination in 1996, organized by Bhikkhunī Kusuma and Ranjani de Silva, who worked with monastics in South Korea, India, and beyond. I recover their voices and stories in order to argue that the ordination became possible in Sri Lanka through the efforts, in large part, of these Sri Lankan Buddhist women cooperating with monastic and lay supporters across the globe. By drawing on my conversations with Kusuma and De Silva about their engagement with Sakyadhītā in sponsoring the 1996 international ordination in Sarnath, India, along with Kusuma's published scholarship and autobiography, I situate local Lankan Buddhist women at the center of my study of the global Sakyadhītā International Association of Buddhist Women, showing how their speech and aims have configured many of the contours of the present *bhikkhunī* ordination dispute.

Second, through tracing the stories of Kusuma, de Silva, and a second high-profile international ordination movement spearheaded by the high-profile monk Inamaluwe Sumangala which followed in 1998, I show how local actors cooperate across distinctions of nationality and Buddhist practice traditions to revive a defunct lineage. In doing so, I problematize previous studies on Buddhist nuns in contemporary Sri Lanka, most notably Cheng (2007) and Salgado (2013), who conflate the 'international' with 'western,' arguing that the current *bhikkhunī* ordination dispute represents the foreign incursion of western feminist speech that is at odds with the self-conception of Lankan renunciant women. I argue that Salgado and Cheng, while championing the voices of ten precept nuns and their everyday practices of renunciation, tacitly deauthorize *bhikkhunī* ordination through privileging the local and forestalling a more nuanced

analysis of the local-translocal exchange of speech and activism that makes contemporary *bhikkhunī* ordination in Sri Lanka both possible and contested. Strategies of legitimation, I argue, are crucial to the related efforts by Kusuma and Sumangala, which seek to authorize and localize *bhikkhunī* ordination in a Lankan idiom, even as they rely on the international collaboration across Buddhist practice traditions.

In the second case study (Chapter IV) I examine a third distinctive effort to revive the *bhikkhunī* ordination spearheaded by the politically-active monk Kirama Wimalajōthi, founder of the Buddhist Cultural Center (BCC) in Colombo and cofounder of the Buddhist nationalist group the *Bodu Bala Sena* (“Buddhist Power Force”). Through my conversation with Wimalajōthi and by drawing on the Center’s books, websites, and pamphlets, I cast light on an emerging dimension of the *bhikkhunī* ordination dispute not yet articulated in previous scholarship: the interrelationship between an already-gendered Islamophobic Buddhist nationalist discourse and support for nuns’ ordination as an integral step toward defending and resuscitating an ailing Buddhist identity. Although my findings are still preliminary in the present study, Wimalajōthi’s comments and the BCCs printed media reveal a complex engagement between geopolitical ethnic antagonism and the visibility of gender and gender roles in contemporary Sri Lanka through which the *bhikkhunī* ordination dispute is brought into visibility in a new way. Rather than as subjects to be rescued by western feminism, in this new discourse, *bhikkhunīs* become agents of social service and moral restoration in local villages. In this second case study I also pick up on my analysis from Chapter III of Inamaluwe Sumangala’s support for *bhikkhunī* ordination in light of his own speech and demonstrations against Muslim families and businesses near his Rangiri Dambulla temple in central Sri Lanka.

Taken together, the central characteristics of these overlapping projects which enable and

support *bhikkhunī* ordination suggest new ways of conceptualizing the dispute as one of the most visible issues in modern Buddhist practice with global implications and local sites of engagement, activism, and contestation. Through this, the themes of transnational cooperation, strategies of localization, and ethno-religious antagonism update our view of the contemporary dispute and open up new questions for further analysis.

Theoretical Approach

How can we take stock of *bhikkhunī* ordination in Sri Lanka as a translocal mobilization operating at and between local points on conjuncture in Sri Lanka and through intra-Asian monastic cooperation and difference? The contested story of *bhikkhunī* ordination is first inscribed in the Vinaya, a Pāli language collection of texts which detail the formation and growth of both the monks' and nuns' lineages and their rules for monastic conduct. These texts contain ambiguous descriptions of femininity and women's moral and religious capacities, which have prompted scholars to wrestle with the multivocality of attitudes toward women present in early Buddhist texts. A number of Pāli-language Lankan historical chronicles, primarily the Mahāvamsa and Dīpavamsa (from the 5th and 4th centuries CE, respectively) depict the spread of Buddhism to Sri Lanka, prophesied by the Buddha on his deathbed in the form of the monks' and nuns' ordination lineages. Additionally, the Mahāvamsa in particular has been looked to as a resource in which Buddhism's foremost place in Sri Lanka is inscribed and legitimized. This idea, which Tessa Bartholomeusz has called the "Mahāvamsa view of history," produces an ideological platform in which Buddhist identity, the Sinhalese race, and the modern nation state become imbricated.⁶ In this thesis, however, I go beyond these textually-based approaches to historically legitimize or delegitimize *bhikkhunī* ordination by drawing on my own field research

⁶ Tessa Bartholomeusz, *Women under the Bō Tree: Buddhist Nuns in Sri Lanka* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 14.

and recent scholarship on religiously-inflected ethnic antagonism and globalization to contextualize the projects of cooperation across difference, legitimization, localization, and ethnic tension that factor into the case studies that follow.

In her wide-ranging study of global commodity chains, resource extraction, and environmental activism in the rainforests of Kalimantan, Indonesia, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's 2005 *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* models an approach for following transnational chains of nationalist politics, social movements, and capital and resource flows as they travel great distances between local "zones of awkward engagement."⁷ This approach is fruitful in thinking through the limitations of previous case studies discussed in the next chapter which, I argue, elide Sakyadhīta's contributions in Sri Lanka's *bhikkhunī* ordination movements on the basis of being driven by a "western feminist" agenda. Where Cheng and Salgado propose circular dichotomies which reduce, rather than nuance, Tsing's metaphor of *friction* helps me to argue that the circulation of speech and activism at and between global and local levels fosters the new identity of the *bhikkhunī* as the result of translocal cooperation.

In his 2002 *Colors of the Robe: Religion, Identity, and Difference*, Ananda Abeysekara has argued that what becomes centrally visible in particular moments of Sinhalese Buddhist practice arises as the result of discursive contestation through competing fields of moral argument.⁸ In the case of the *bhikkhunī* ordination dispute, I argue that the terms through which the legitimacy of the revived orders are debated reveal projects that both configure the parameters of the dispute and evidence attempts to mark what is and is not 'authentic' Theravāda practice and identity. Drawing on Anne M. Blackburn's (2001, 2003) historical analyses of the

⁷ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 12-13.

⁸ Ananda Abeysekara, *Colors of the Robe: Religion, Identity, and Difference* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), 25.

importation and legitimation of a new male monastic order in the 1750s, and my own observations, I show how Sri Lanka's modern *bhikkhunīs* engage in projects which localize and render legitimate their imported lineage, a project and area of concern that is far from new in Lankan monastic history.⁹ There would be no fully-ordained monastic orders in Sri Lanka today—for women or for men—were it not for the assistance of quorums of ordaining monastics brought in from abroad.

In the second case study (Chapter IV), I draw on Arjun Appadurai's 2006 *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* in order to contextualize Islamophobia and Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka as continuous with the "Mahāvamsa view of history." Appadurai argues that the nation state's tenure as the primary symmetrical unit of political and cultural identification is crumbling and that this renders ethnic antagonism and violence as displaced sites of anxiety brought about by the destabilizing flows of globalization.¹⁰ This argument helps us see how *bhikkhunī* ordination as a gendered political strategy of Islamophobic nationalist sentiment fits within larger geopolitical anxieties in South and Southeast Asia.

Finally, I should note that in this thesis, I do not engage a full analysis of the circulation of 'feminism' at and between global and local horizons of influence. There are a number of reasons for this. First, my primary interests are in the ways in which local Sri Lankan Buddhist women speak and act with reference to the first *bhikkhunī* ordination movements. While my interviews with Kusuma and de Silva reveal language about equality, rights, and status, when I asked Kusuma about her opinion on 'feminism,' she retorted that feminism relied on a reification

⁹ Anne M. Blackburn, "Localizing Lineage: Importing Higher Ordination in Theravādin South and Southeast Asia," in *Constituting Communities: Theravāda Buddhism and the Religious Cultures of South and Southeast Asia*, ed. John Holt, Jacob N. Kinnard, and Jonathan S. Walters (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), 133.

¹⁰ Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 43.

of the primacy of the self, an idea fundamentally incompatible with Buddhist teachings. An equation between her language about rights, equality, and status with ‘feminism,’ then, did not seem apparent to her the way it did to me. Second, a full-throated postcolonial analysis of the global circulation and local Lankan instantiations of feminist discourse—while fascinating and timely—is largely outside the scope of the present investigation.

Source Materials

This thesis draws on field research conducted during a period of five weeks from December 2015 to January 2016. Through a combination of luck, timing, patience, and the willingness on the part of my contacts whose voices appear below to share their stories, time, and experiences with me, I am able to present this study which is both a continuation of my previous



investigations, and in so many more ways, a beginning. Both on my own and with my friend who I will call Sithumini, a lay Buddhist contact and meditation teacher I befriended several years ago while living in California, I was fortunate to make contact with and interview a number of key figures working to reinstate *bhikkhunī* ordination in Sri Lanka, and to speak with many other ten-precept nuns, monks, scholars, and interested lay people in order to gain a diversity of viewpoints on this contested issue.

Figure 1: *Bhikkhunīs* paying respect to their teacher
(author photo: Horana, December 2015)

In the first case study (Chapter III), I present transcribed English-language interviews with Bhikkhunī Kusuma and Ranjani de Silva, two Sri Lankan Buddhist women and cofounders of the Sakyadhītā International Association of Buddhist Women. I spoke with Kusuma at the Ayya Khema Meditation Center, a small nuns' hermitage in Olaboduwa which she oversees, living with three of four ten-precept nuns in training (depending on the season), and organizes meditation retreats for ordained and lay Buddhist visitors. These days, Kusuma is no longer involved in conducting ordinations for *bhikkhunīs*, telling me "I am eighty-six years old! I've bowed out of the scene!" Instead, she prefers to spend most of her time meditating on her own and leading small practice and Buddhist study retreats at the Center and in Colombo. In 1996, Kusuma became the very first Sri Lankan *bhikkhunī* since the lineage lapsed in the 11th century, taking ordination from a dual-*saṅgha* of Korean nuns in Sarnath, India. In her capacity as a Buddhist scholar, she was asked to research the South Korean ordination procedure leading up to the ordination for nine other Lankan women. At the last minute, she reluctantly agreed to lead the women in taking the ordination herself.

In 1987 Kusuma completed a sociological study of Sri Lanka's ten-precept nuns for a Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Sri Jayawardenapura near Colombo after befriending the German-born nun and meditation teacher Ayya Khema, becoming interested in a collection of texts composed by the first Buddhist nuns known as the Therīgāthā. At around the same time, she became involved with the Sakyadhītā International Association of Buddhist Women and, with Ranjani de Silva, organized its third annual conference in 1993 in Colombo that laid the groundwork for the 1996 ordination.

Ranjani de Silva, another Lankan cofounder of Sakyadhītā and lay Buddhist student of Ayya Khema, took an interest in nuns' training and education during the most intense years of

Sri Lanka's civil war during the 1980s and through her involvement in Sakyadhītā, became one of the primary voices in Sri Lanka advocating for *bhikkhunī* ordination. Although she now spends most of the year in Australia, De Silva continues to oversee Sakyadhītā's local branch monastery in Panadura, which held a large *bhikkhunī* ordination for Thai, Vietnamese, and Bangladeshi nuns shortly after my research trip ended in January 2016.¹¹

One of my hopes in traveling to Sri Lanka was to interview Inamaluwe Sumangala at the Dambulla Temple. After spending about a week nearby trying to reach him with the assistance of mutual contacts, I visited the temple two days in a row before he politely declined to speak with me for this project. As I have mentioned, Sumangala organized the second high-profile international ordination for Sri Lankan *bhikkhunīs* in 1998 and instituted a yearly training and ordination program shortly thereafter from his monastic center in Dambulla. I tell the story of this ordination, drawing on secondary literature in which his contributions are discussed at length (Abeysekara, 1999; Cheng 2007; Salgado, 2013) to trace some of the interrelationships and internal contestations between Kusuma and Sumangala's *bhikkhunī* ordination movements.

In the second case study (Chapter IV), I highlight the fact that Sumangala, like Wimalajōthi, is a highly-visible participant in the rising tide of Islamophobic nationalism in contemporary Sri Lanka. Although I was not able to learn if, or to what extent, Sumangala's support for *bhikkhunī* ordination is expressed in terms of nationalist sentiment, the fact that the two issues are interrelated at all came as big surprise during the course of my fieldwork. Within a few days of landing in Colombo, I ventured to the Dekanduwela Dhamma Training Center (*Dekanduwela Daham Puhunu Madhyastānaya*), established in 1993 by Wimalajōthi as an extension of the Buddhist Cultural Center (BCC) in Colombo. In 2000, the BCC decided to

¹¹ Songdhammakalyani Monastery, "Report on the International Theravada Bhikkhuni Ordination Feb.4, 2016," ThaiBhikkhunis.org, February 4, 2016, <http://www.thaibhikkhunis.org/eng2014/OrdinationSriLanka.html>.

house a *bhikkhunī* training monastery at Dekanduwela and as luck would have it, my friend Sithumini, just days after my arrival in the country, was scheduled to lead a meditation retreat for the 22 nuns who were residing there. Because the *bhikkhunīs* and ten-precept trainees at Dekanduwela were busy making preparations to undergo a twelve-day period of meditation, I did not ask to interview them, but was told that I could speak with the head monk and founder of the BCC, Kirama Wimalajōthi, if I wanted to. Excited to learn more about how he is able to fund and support such a large monastery for *bhikkhunīs* in the absence of state-sponsored support or the recognition and sanction of the powerful *nikāya* fraternities, right off the bat Wimalajōthi (who is perhaps best known as one of the cofounders of the controversial anti-Muslim nationalist group known as the *Bodu Bala Sena*), connected the issue of nuns' ordination to a gendered nationalist narrative about conversion, equality, and locality which he echoed throughout our English-language interview.

In addition, I draw on supporting interviews with Kamala Liyanage, Senior Professor of Political Science at the University of Peradeniya near Kandy, who agreed to speak with me in her office on campus. Liyanage has published a number of papers on women's political participation in Sri Lanka, access to education, discrimination in Sri Lankan universities, and on gender sensitivity training in local governance, amongst other topics.¹² Our conversation ranged from her stories about dealing with instances of sexual and gender-based harassment of her female students, participation in UN forums working toward ending discrimination against women (such as the 1979 CEDAW), and socioeconomic disparities in the monastic *saṅghas* of nuns and monks both.

¹² Department of Political Science, University of Peradeniya, "Prof. I M K Liyanage," Department of Political Science, University of Peradeniya, accessed February 15, 2016, <http://www.pdn.ac.lk/arts/political/staff/kamala.html>.

I draw on a number of published and unpublished primary textual sources, including Kusuma's 2012 English-language autobiography *Braving the Unknown Summit: Autobiography of Ven. Bhikkhuni Dr. Kolonnawe Kusuma*, and her published English-language studies on early Buddhist texts and ten-precept nuns in Sri Lanka based on Ph.D. work at Sri Jayawardenepura University. In addition, I draw on website and brochures published by the Buddhist Cultural Center both in Sinhala and in English, which provide details about the funding, location, activities, and educational and outreach opportunities of the BCC's numerous projects, especially its website and glossy full-color brochures about the Dekanduwela *Bhikkhunī* Training Center and the foundational mission of the BCC. To supplement these, I include a discussion of Islamophobic Facebook graphics "shared" in Sinhala by Buddhist nationalist groups (and in one instance Sumangala's Rangiri Dambulla Facebook page) to contextualize some of the gendered and digitally-mediated features of contemporary Buddhist Islamophobia in Sri Lanka.

Finally, I draw on Sinhala and English-language newspaper and magazine articles about contested *bhikkhunī* ordinations in contemporary Sri Lanka. After spending two days in the National Archives (*Jathika Lēbathāgāraya*) in Colombo and subsequently given permission by Kusuma to photocopy some of her personal files after our interview, I was able to collect a number of materials containing arguments for and against *bhikkhunī* ordination, and articles about her own ordination in 1996 and the Sakyadhītā Conference in Colombo in 1993. In the next chapter I draw on English translations of key Pāli-language Vinaya texts and Lankan historical chronicles, such as the *Mahāvamsa* and the *Dipavamsa*, in order to frame the contemporary *bhikkhunī* ordination in view of arguments made by supporters and detractors that are articulated in reference to these resources of the past operating in the present. I also review

previous scholarship on women's renunciation in Sri Lanka and interrelated Theravāda practice traditions in the next chapter.

Structure and Guiding Questions

Together, the two case studies that form the heart of this thesis show how key figures in Sri Lanka's first contemporary *bhikkhunī* movements forge global connections across nationality and practice tradition, while also in some instances marking difference through religio-political ethnic antagonism in order to revive and render legitimate (and *necessary*) a previously defunct monastic lineage. Before delving into the two main case studies of the thesis, Chapter II provides a contextualizing narrative of key moments in the history of Buddhist gendered renunciation, beginning with the contested story of the Buddha's decision to ordain the first nuns, to the lineage's lapse in the 11th century, and finally to the first ordinations in the late 1990s. I then review previous scholarship on gendered Buddhist renunciation in Sri Lanka and interrelated Theravādin practice contexts in greater detail, identifying three overlapping themes in the literature: *a.* critiques of negative depictions of women and femininity in Buddhist canonical sources by Asian and non-Asian Buddhist scholar-practitioners, *b.* ethnographic case studies of contemporary women's renunciation, and *c.* postcolonial analyses of the global circulation of language, activism, power, and representation in the *bhikkhunī* ordination dispute.

Beginning with the high-profile international ordination of Bhikkhunī Kusuma and nine other Lankan women that took place in 1996 in Sarnath, India, Chapter III complicates Nirmala S. Salgado's dichotomization of renunciant women who have and have not learned the language of western feminist discourse. Through the activism of Sakyadhītā and its local Lankan representatives Kusuma and de Silva, I demonstrate that language about status, equality, and rights are relevant to the concerns and self understanding of Sri Lankan Buddhist women, and

not always the narrative disjuncture of western feminists and scholars. Through tracing the story of Sakyadhītā's founding moments and Kusuma's ordination, I show how her and De Silva draw on local areas of concern in forging the global connections needed to bring about the goal of reinstating *bhikkhunī* ordination for Sri Lankan women.

Chapter IV introduces Kirama Wimalajōthi and presents a preliminary investigation into connections between *bhikkhunī* ordination and Islamophobic Buddhist nationalism. Wimalajōthi argues that Buddhism, uniquely amongst “competing” religious traditions (most notably Islam and Christianity), recognizes women's rights and capacities and that by training *bhikkhunīs* to be of service to Sri Lankan women in local villages and rural location, they can provide a protective or counteractive force against surreptitious conversion and the influence of foreign religious and cultural flows. I argue that Wimalajōthi strategizes on well-documented decline-and-revival narratives to position *bhikkhunīs* as moral protectors and restorers of a fragile Buddhist identity, left vulnerable by Sri Lanka's *nikāya* elders who, like Muslims, devalue women. To supplement my interviews with Wimalajōthi and materials collected at the Buddhist Cultural Center, I present a parallel example Islamophobic discourse in the form of graphics and posts “shared” on the Facebook pages of prominent nationalist groups. Here, I show how Buddhist nationalist rhetoric is already gendered and digitally mediated outside of the issue of *bhikkhunī* ordination, though with striking connections that warrant further investigation.

Along the way, I am attuned to the local-translocal interaction of speech, discourse, and activism as this nexus of overlapping concerns and intertwined initiatives comes into central possibility and tension through discourse and contestation at and between these intersecting levels. The resurgence of an otherwise defunct monastic lineage provides a unique opportunity to observe how figures associated with these imported ordination lineages seek legitimation in the

absence of support from the government and Sri Lanka's powerful monastic fraternities. While the *bhikkhu* lineage has been resuscitated through international (Thai and Burmese) monks at several points throughout Lanka's monastic history, the *bhikkhunī* ordinations of 1996 and 1998 provide a unique opportunity to witness contemporary projects of monastic legitimation and localization, with gender playing a central role.

Chapter V concludes the thesis with a summary of the findings and a brief discussion of the limitations of scope due to the short period of fieldwork and other considerations. I close with a discussion of possible future directions to advance the scope and depth of the present study.

Note on Language

Throughout this thesis I use the terms 'global' (*lōkavyāpta*) 'international' (*antharjātika*) 'translocal,' and 'foreign' (*vidēśa*) frequently. In both Sinhala and in English, the finite distinctions between the meaning of these words in the voices of many of the figures who appear in these pages is extremely important. In the case of monks and nuns who do not support *bhikkhunī* ordination, the 'foreignness' of the granting Korean and Taiwanese monastic quorums is a key point through which they argue for the burgeoning lineage's illegitimacy. In the case of Wimalajōthi speaking in English, 'foreign' Muslim and Christian religious forces represent a threat to the stability and purity of Buddhism in Sri Lanka while 'international' meditators and financial supporters of the Buddhist Cultural Center give him the material resources to position himself as a protector and reviver of that identity. In order to distinguish the contours of Theravādin practice tradition from the borders of modern nation states, where applicable I use the term 'translocal' instead of transnational, excepting of course my discussions of nationalist politics in the second case study. I refer to intra-Asian monastic cooperation as translocal and

worldwide monastic cooperation as global. Where I refer to ‘the west,’ I mean to specify Europe, North America, and Australia. In attempting to refrain from reifying ‘the west’ as a closed unit of cultural or historical identification, but also to identify these spaces as a networked collectivity, I choose not to capitalize the term.

Chapter II | A Lineage Interrupted: Following the Global History of Gendered Buddhist Renunciation

Introduction

Sri Lanka's modern *bhikkhunīs* are engaged in two important projects. On the one hand, the ordinations in 1996 and 98 reveal cooperation of Buddhist women across distinctions of nationality and Buddhist practice tradition to revive a defunct lineage through international networks. On the other, they work to show how their imported, revived lineage is the legitimate continuation of the earlier order which was brought to Sri Lanka in the 3rd century BCE, thus localizing the lineage in a Lankan idiom. Thomas Borchert has argued that "contemporary Buddhism is marked by a tension between the transnational and the national."¹³ This is true in the case of *bhikkhunī* ordinations in contemporary Sri Lanka, where organizations like the Sakyadhītā International Association of Buddhist Women work across nationality and Buddhist practice traditions toward reinstating *bhikkhunī* ordination on the global stage through the engagement of local actors in contexts where—like Sri Lanka—the lineage has lapsed. In addition, the rising tide of Islamophobic nationalism in parts of Buddhist South and Southeast Asia has become, in at least one instance in contemporary Lankan monastic practice, imbricated with the issue of *bhikkhunī* ordination. The case studies that this thesis investigates in subsequent chapters engage each of these features of the diverse mobilizations seeking to reinstate and legitimize *bhikkhunī* ordination. By following the global-local flows of speech, activism, and cooperation across difference, many of these salient features of the ordination dispute come into a more nuanced view than has been articulated in previous scholarship about *bhikkhunī* ordination and Buddhist women's renunciation in Sri Lanka.

In this chapter, I begin by telling the contested story, enshrined in Pāli-language

¹³ Thomas Borchert, "Buddhism, Politics, and Nationalism in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries," *Religion Compass* 1, no. 5 (September 2007): 529, doi:10.1111/j.1749-8171.2007.00035.x.

canonical texts and Lankan historical chronicles, of the Buddha's reluctant decision to ordain the first nuns during his career as wandering ascetic and religious teacher. Then, after providing an overview of the lineage's spread to Sri Lanka and subsequent eradication in the 11th century, I contextualize arguments for and against contemporary *bhikkhunī* ordination as they have been advanced by high-ranking male monastic elders, ten-precept nuns, and lay and monastic supporters with respect to these textual sources and contested histories. In large part because so many of the dissenting voices argue for the illegitimacy of modern *bhikkhunī* ordinations on the basis of their Mahāyāna origins, this discussion introduces the importance of strategies of localization, explored in greater detail in the case studies. I then survey previous scholarship on Buddhist women's renunciation in Sri Lanka and other Theravādin practice contexts.

This chapter engages heavily with Nirmala Salgado's 2013 monograph *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice: In Search of the Female Renunciant*. The stories I tell in the case study chapters which follow concern many of the same events and figures analyzed by Salgado in her book. However, as much as I draw on Salgado's work to help tell these stories, here I depart from her conclusions in a number of ways. First, I argue that the circulation of speech that might be recognizably 'feminist' to an American researcher, far from Salgado's assessment of having very little place in the renunciant everyday of Sri Lanka's Buddhist nuns, factored prominently in the discourses through which contested *bhikkhunī* ordinations were made contemporarily possible in the first place. Where Salgado reveals that the influence of 'globalatinized' feminist thought does not reflect the spheres of experience and thought of the renunciant everyday of most Buddhist female renunciants in Sri Lanka.¹⁴ I argue that very material and financial conditions through which some of the very first contested *bhikkhunī* ordinations in Sri Lanka

¹⁴ Nirmala S. Salgado, *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice: In Search of the Female Renunciant* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 15-16.

took place are supported by organizations, most notably Sakyadhītā, for whom these categories (gender equity, status, and Buddhism's perceived egalitarianism) matter a great deal. Second, I argue that such rigid global–local (or ‘*globalatinized*’–‘Lankan’) dichotomies reduce, rather than nuance and illuminate, the complex circulation, interrelationships, and disjunctures of these categories at and between various translocal and local levels of speech.

From Vesali to Dambulla: A Global History of Buddhist Women's Renunciation in Sri Lanka

The past persists in discursive contests of legitimacy and authority in the *bhikkhunī* ordination dispute in the present. While canonical texts like the Vinaya Piṭaka chronicle the formation and growth of the nuns' order beginning with the contested story of the Buddha's reluctant decision to ordain his stepmother Mahāpajāpatī, in recent times the issue of nuns' full ordination in Theravāda has become quite controversial. Arguments for and against the legality of modern ordinations are most often advanced with respect to the story of the first nuns' ordination and the regulations governing ordinations for monastics found in the Pāli language Culavagga section of the Vinaya. Tempering this somewhat, Mrozik (2009) argues that “opposition to *bhikkhunī* ordination has as much to do with issues of national and ethnic identity as it has to do with more obviously religious matters like *vinaya*.”¹⁵ While many of the senior male monastic figures who oppose *bhikkhunī* ordination express their opposition with respect to prevailing interpretations of the Vinaya, recently a number of powerful monks who support *bhikkhunī* ordination express their support in language of Buddhist nationalist sentiment that reveals larger geopolitical anxieties and ethnic tension. Additionally, Mrozik (2014) argues that arguments about the legality of *bhikkhunī* ordination are primarily the concerns of scholars, activists, and public officials, and not of the laity with whom individual nuns foster close

¹⁵ Mrozik, "A Robed Revolution," 365.

affective relationships.¹⁶ For them the most important concerns are whether or not local nuns are able to meet their religious needs. Despite this, in order to set arguments for and against *bhikkhunī* ordination in contemporary Sri Lanka into high relief, the best place to begin telling the contested story of women's renunciation in contemporary monastic practice is from the view of these texts and subsequently some of the flows of monastic practice that have followed leading up to the controversial 1996 and 1998 *bhikkhunī* ordinations for Sri Lankan women. Far from exhaustive, this section presents a series of key moments in the contested and still-unfolding story of gendered renunciation in Theravāda traditions.

The Culavagga section of the Vinaya relays that several years after attaining enlightenment, and having already accrued a sizable following of fully-ordained *bhikkhus*, the Buddha reluctantly agreed to ordain a large retinue of Sakyan noblewomen, including his own stepmother Mahāpājapatī.¹⁷ He returned to his hometown of Kapilavastu and there encountered his father, stepmother, (former) wife, and young son. His preaching so influenced the noblewomen of Kapilavastu that they shaved their heads, traded in their royal finery for cloth scraps, and followed the Buddha for several days as he departed the city for Vesali, a neighboring kingdom. There, they met him at the gates of the city and asked him for the “going forth into homelessness” (an epithet for ordination). Three times Mahāpājapatī begged her stepson for the ordination, and three times he refused. Finally, she asked his cousin and monastic attendant, Ānanda, by then one of the Buddha's chief disciples, to intercede on the women's

¹⁶ Susanne Mrozik, “‘We Love Our Nuns’: Affective Dimensions of the Sri Lankan Bhikkhunī Revival,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 21 (2014): 61-2,

¹⁷ I.B. Horner, Trans., *The Book of the Discipline (Vinaya-Piṭaka) Sacred Books of the Buddhists* (London: Pali Text Society, 1969), 352-57.

behalf. He agreed and twice asked the Buddha's permission for women to ordain.¹⁸ Twice he was refused. Finally, Ānanda asked the Buddha if it was true that women—as well as men—were capable of attaining *nibbāna*, the highest liberation prescribed in Theravāda Buddhist soteriology. The Buddha agreed that this was true, and upon being asked a third time, relented and allowed the women not just the higher ordination, but also established rules and provisions for the new *bhikkhunī sangha*.¹⁹

Upon agreeing to give Mahāpajāpatī and the noblewomen the ordination, the Buddha then famously declared that as a result of the decision to induct women into the order, the duration of the *sāsana*, (the existence and purity of a Buddha's path to of liberation and the virtuous community of rightly-practicing disciples), would be cut in half.²⁰ Crucially, the Buddha only agreed to ordain Mahāpajāpatī if and only if she and the subsequent *bhikkhunīs* agreed to abide by eight contested "heavy rules" (*garudhammas* in Pāli) which subjugate the status and authority of even the most senior *bhikkhunī*, for instance, to a *bhikkhu* ordained that very day. First featured in the story of Mahāpajāpatī's ordination in the Culavagga, the Buddha outlines the eight rules, these are:

‘A nun who has been ordained (even) for a century must greet respectfully, rise up from her seat, salute with joined palms, do proper homage to a monk ordained but that day. And this rule is to be honoured, respected, revered, venerated, never to be transgressed during her life.

A nun must not spend the rains in a residence where there is no monk. This rule too is to be honoured . . . during her life.

Every half month a nun should desire two things from the Order of monks: the asking (as to the date) of the Observance day, and the coming for the exhortation. This rule too is to be honoured . . . during her life.

After the rains a nun must 'invite' before both Orders in respect of three matters: what

¹⁸ Mohan Wijayaratna, *Buddhist Nuns: The Birth and Development of a Women's Monastic Order* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2010), 16.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 17, 19.

²⁰ Horner, *The Book of the Discipline*, 356.

was seen, what was heard, what was suspected. This rule too is to be honoured . . . during her life.

A nun, offending against an important rule, must undergo *miinatta* (discipline) for half a month before both Orders. This rule too must be honoured ... during her life.

When, as a probationer, she has trained in the six rules for two years, she should seek ordination from both Orders. This rule too is to be honoured ... during her life.

A monk must not be abused or reviled in any way by a nun. This rule too is to be honoured . . . during her life.

From to-day admonition of monks by nuns is forbidden, admonition of nuns by monks is not forbidden. This rule too is to be honoured, respected, revered, venerated, never to be transgressed during her life.

If, Ānanda, the Gotamid, Pajapati the Great, accepts these eight important rules, that may be ordination for her.²¹

While constituting Mahāpajāpatī's ordination as a *bhikkhunī*, for many Buddhist women, the eight *garudhammas* and the Buddha's comment that the induction of women into the order would degrade the purity of the *sāsana* remain troubling moments in the story of nuns' full ordination. Additionally, the Culavagga mentions that Mahāpajāpatī asked the Buddha to reconsider the first *garudhamma* rule shortly after her ordination (also via Ānanda as intercessor), to which the Buddha replied that "followers of other sects, although liable to poor guardianship, will not carry out greeting, standing up for, salutation and proper duties towards women, so how should the Truth-finder allow greeting... and proper duties towards women?"²² The initial community of *bhikkhunīs* is said to have thrived from that point forward. The Pāli Canon *suttas* contain numerous instances where the Buddha praised the discipline and meditative attainments of the *bhikkhunīs*.

However, Chatsumarn Kabilsingh (now Bhikkhunī Dhammananda) has argued that in addition to the Buddha's reluctance to ordain the first nuns, there was possible opposition to *bhikkhunī* ordination amongst many of his first disciples as evidenced in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*. She argues that the Buddha might have had practical reasons for denying his stepmother

²¹ *Ibid.*, 354-5.

²² *Ibid.*, 358.

and women of the court the ordination, for instance because of their comfortable royal lives, they would be unfit to endure the ascetic hardships of early monastic life.²³ At the first council after their master's death, several *bhikkhus* sought to formally censure Ānanda for convincing the Buddha to ordain women, something, she argues, they would not have dared to do while the master was still alive.²⁴ Thus, according to Kabilsingh, in addition to the eight *garudhammas* we see possible attitudes of opposition to *bhikkhunī* ordination arising from the earliest textual records of the Buddha's life and shortly after his death. Sponberg (1992) argues that the seeming ambivalence toward women evidenced in early Buddhist texts, including the Buddha's comments about the duration of the *sāsana* and the prerequisite of the *garudhammas*, is best understood as evidence of multivocal attitudes toward women which reveal the tradition's early attempts to reconcile its innovative social message with more mundane cultural norms of the time.²⁵

In her 1998 critical translation of the *Bhikkhunī Vinaya* (subsequently revised and published in 2015 with Samanerī Akincana), Kusuma argues that “today, the resurrection of the *bhikkhunī saṅgha* in the Theravāda tradition has come up against much criticism. The main objections... are the ‘important rules’ (*garudhamma*) and the remarks on the decline of the Good Law presented as the words of the Buddha... According to our study both are not tenable.”²⁶ Because the *garudhammas* do not show up in the *bhikkhunī pātimokkha* (list of rules for nuns) section of the Vinaya, Kusuma and Akincana argue that they are later interpolations evidencing

²³ Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, *Thai Women in Buddhism* (Berkeley: Parallax, 1991), 28.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁵ Alan Sponberg, "Attitudes Toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism," in *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*, ed. José Ignacio Cabezón (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992), 3-4.

²⁶ Bhikkhuni Kusuma and Samanerī Akincana, *Code of Conduct for Buddhist Nuns (Bhikkhunī Vinaya): Arising of the Buddhist Order of Nuns and Their Code of Conduct According to Pāli Sources, with Text and Translation of the Bhikkhuni Pātimokkha* (Colombo: Akna Publishers, 2015), 168.

Indian Brahmanical religion “for the purpose of subordinating the order of nuns to the order of monks much beyond the original legislation pronounced by the Buddha.”²⁷ Kabilsingh, Sponberg, and Kusuma offer different ways to historicize this crucial story of the first full ordination for nuns that legitimizes their structural subordination to monks and thereby undermine the legitimacy of that subordination.

The higher-ordination lineages of both monks and nuns spread to Sri Lanka from India due to the missionizing efforts of the Mauryan emperor Aśoka during the 3rd Century, BCE.²⁸ According to the *Mahāvamsa*, a 5th century CE Pāli-language chronicle of Buddhism’s spread to Sri Lanka, once Aśoka’s son Mahinda had become a fully-enlightened monk, the god Indra approached him and commanded him to go and convert *Laṅkā* to the Buddhist faith, as had been prophesied by the Buddha on his deathbed. Mahinda reportedly rose up into the air and landed on the highest mountain in Mihintale (just east of Anuradhapura) and encountered the Lankan king Devanampiyatissa while out hunting with his royal retinue.²⁹ Mahinda then preached the first Buddhist sermon in Sri Lanka and converted the king and his forty thousand men, who took the five Buddhist precepts. Shortly thereafter, Anula, the consort of the Prince Reagent, was summoned along with her five hundred noblewomen and received a *dharmma* sermon from the monk. The *Dīpavaṃsa*, another Pāli chronicle dating to the 3rd to 4th century CE, notes that during the course of listening to this sermon, Anula and her retinue of noblewomen attained the

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 164.

²⁸ Hermann Oldenberg, trans., *The Dīpavaṃsa: An Ancient Buddhist Historical Record* (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1982), 195.

²⁹ Mahānāma-sthavira, *The Mahāvamsa: The Great Chronicle of Sri Lanka*, trans. Douglas Bullis (Fremont, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1999), 167.

first stage of enlightenment, the *sotāpanna*,³⁰ the first occurrence of anyone, female or male, realizing any of the fruits of enlightenment in *Laṅkā*.

After achieving the first stage of realization, the *Dīpavaṃsa* relays that Anula sought to be ordained. King Devanampiyatissa asked Mahinda for the ordination on Anula's behalf. He was told that an ordination conferred on a nun by a monk was improper and that it had to be conferred by a *bhikkhunī*.³¹ Similar arguments are invoked in contemporary disputes where high-ranking monks in Sri Lanka's monastic *nikāyas* argue that ordination granted to *bhikkhunīs* by *bhikkhus* alone is "improper" or "inappropriate" (*anisi / anuchita*).³² The King subsequently sent for his sister, the enlightened nun Saṅghamittā, to come from India in order to confer the going forth, famously bringing with her a cutting of the Bodhi Tree from Bodh Gaya under which the Buddha is said to have attained enlightenment.³³ Thus the *bhikkhunī* lineage was brought to Sri Lanka from India (see **Fig. 2**).

The orders of monks and nuns thrived on the island, and enjoyed royal patronage until they were eliminated during the Chola invasions from South India around 930-1015 CE. When the Lankan king Vijayabāhu militarily



Figure 2: Cave temple painting of Saṅghamittā giving the first nuns' ordination (author photo: Thantrimale, January 2016)

³⁰ "Sōwan" in Sinhala, a being who has abandoned some (but not all) of the fetters binding them to *saṃsāra* (cyclic existence).

³¹ *Ibid.*, 191.

³² Nathaniel, "Sri Lanka's Bhikkhuni Order in Deadlock."

³³ Oldenberg, *The Dīpavaṃsa*, 195.

regained control in 1076, he sent for a quorum of fully-ordained monks from present-day Burma in order to revive the lineage for men on the island by conferring ordinations anew on suitable candidates.³⁴ The nuns' lineage was not reinstated. Bartholomeusz (1994) suggests that the nuns' lineage existed for another 200 years in Burma before lapsing, but that because the chronicles are silent on the reinstatement of order in Lanka, it might not have been a priority for the king.³⁵ There is no evidence to document the *bhikkhunī* lineage making it to Thailand.³⁶ Crucially, during the long period between the establishment of the *bhikkhunī saṅgha* in the 3rd century BCE and its demise in the 11th century CE, Buddhism spread throughout Asia and split into myriad different schools, lineages, and traditions. In 429 and 433, two ships carrying Sinhalese *bhikkhunīs* landed in Jiankang, the capitol of the Chinese Southern Song Dynasty, and established the ordination lineage there.³⁷ Bartholomeusz notes that within a decade, over 300 ordinations of women had taken place in China.³⁸ The *bhikkhunī* lineage from Sri Lanka subsequently spread to other parts of East Asia and today thriving nuns' communities exist in Taiwan and South Korea.

Although *bhikkhunī* ordination died out in Theravāda lineages, in the intervening centuries, Sri Lankan Buddhist women have created a number of non-fully ordained renunciant orders for themselves. These orders blur the rigid distinction between lay and fully-ordained and set the stage for later ordination movements in the 1990s. As early as 1891, the Anglican

³⁴ W.M. Sirisena, *Sri Lanka and South-East Asia: Political, Religious and Cultural Relations from A.D. C. 1000 to C. 1500* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 61.

³⁵ Bartholomeusz, *Women under the Bō Tree*, 15, 21.

³⁶ Martin Seeger, "The Bhikkhunī-ordination Controversy in Thailand," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 29.1 (2008): 159.

³⁷ Ann Hierman, "Vinaya: From India to China," in *The Spread of Buddhism*, ed. Ann Heirman and Stephan Peter Bumbacher (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 182-3.

³⁸ Bartholomeusz, *Women Under the Bō Tree*, 20.

missionary Bishop Reginald Stephen Copleston reported the presence of “devotees of *dasasil*” in Sri Lanka living and abiding by the 10-precepts undertaken by novice monastics. He went on to note that although they dressed in white robes and went on almsround with begging bowls, they regarded themselves as pious *upāsikās*.³⁹ The term *upāsikā* refers to non-ordained Buddhist devotees. Although it will come to be used to refer to the first semi-lay, semi-renunciant women’s monastic orders in Sri Lanka, contemporarily it most often refers to lay Buddhists who are neither novices nor fully-ordained.

The late 1800s in Sri Lanka saw a period of Buddhist revival in response to British colonialism and Christian missionization. In 1897 in San Francisco, one of the most important figures associated with this revival, Anagārika Dharmapāla (himself semi-lay, semi-monastic) met the American-born Theosophist “Countess” Miranda de Souza Canavarro, the wife of a Portuguese ambassador to the Sandwich Islands. Discussing the lack of a women’s renunciant order in Sri Lanka, together Dharmapāla and Canavarro founded the Saṅghamittā Upāsikārāmaya (Saṅghamittā School for Girls) in Sri Lanka in April 1898 after Canavarro took the refuges and five Buddhist precepts from Dharmapāla in a high-profile ceremony that made newspaper headlines.⁴⁰ The Upāsikārāmaya drew a number of women for a few months as the school grew and enacted the first movement toward institutionalization of women’s monastic practice in modern Sri Lanka, with Canavarro as its “Mother Superior.” However, by September the relationship between Canavarro and Dharmapāla had soured, with Dharmapāla questioning her “impulsiveness” and failure to lead and live in harmony with her student renunciants. By the

³⁹ Justine Semmens, “Ten-Precept Mothers in the Buddhist Revival of Sri Lanka” in *The Sri Lanka Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. John Clifford Holt (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 370. That no nuns lineage existed in Sri Lanka in the late 1800s is also corroborated by Copleston’s 1892 journals, cited in Bartholomeusz (1994, 28), who relays that “after mentioning that there were, indeed, nuns in Ceylon in former times, he categorically stated that their tradition no longer existed: ‘there are *none* in Ceylon now.’”

⁴⁰ Bartholomeusz, *Women Under the Bō Tree*, 49-62.

end of 1899, Canavarro and Dharmapāla would part ways, with the former returning to California and the latter to the recently-formed Mahābodhi Society in India. Although the school was closed within three years of opening, is important because it represents the first modern attempt at institutionalizing a renunciant order for Buddhist women in Sri Lanka.⁴¹

Bartholomeusz shows that Dharmapāla's efforts in founding Sri Lanka's first modern center for female renunciation was connected to his anti-Colonial nationalism, "his interest in the resuscitation of the tradition of female renunciation stemmed from his concern over the debased condition of the 'national religion.' After all, according to the texts themselves, nuns were one of the four communities of followers that the Buddha himself had envisaged for the world."⁴² Dharmapāla thought that by restoring women to their rightful place in Buddhism, it would be a first step toward reestablishing Buddhism in its former glory as described in the Mahāvamsa.⁴³ He argued that Buddhism had become degraded as a result of Christian influence and called on Buddhists to agitate "for the preservation of our nation, our literature, our land, and our most glorious religion at whose source our forefathers drank deeply for more than seventy generations."⁴⁴ The connection between the *state* of the Buddhist dispensation, the ordination of nuns, and Lankan nationalism is an important antecedent for the language used in my second case study (chapter IV) of Kirama Wimalajōthi and Inamaluwe Sumangala, two powerful monks and self-fashioned contemporary Buddhist revivalists who are also some of the most visible and influential male monastic supporters of *bhikkhunī* ordination in Sri Lanka.

⁴¹ Tessa Bartholomeusz, "The Female Mendicant in Buddhist Srī Lanḱā," in *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*, ed. José Ignacio Cabezón (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992), 47.

⁴² Bartholomeusz, *Women Under the Bō Tre.*, 67.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Tessa Bartholomeusz, "First Among Equals: Buddhism and the Sri Lankan State," in *Buddhism and Politics in Twentieth-century Asia*, ed. Ian Harris (London: Continuum, 1999), 175.

While Canavarro and Dharmapāla are credited with founding the first institutionalized training center for Buddhist women in modern Sri Lanka, within a few years another renunciant women's order was instituted that would come to resemble contemporary forms of monastic practice for Sri Lankan women. In 1905 Catherine de Alwis, a Sinhalese woman, established the first order of ten-precept renunciant women, *dasa-sil-mātās* (ten-precept mothers). *Dasa-sil-mātās* officially observe the same ten precepts of a novice *sāmaṇerīs*, and unlike the earlier *upāsikās* observed by Copleston, eventually came to shave their heads and wear yellow robes similar to fully-ordained monastics. Thus *dasa-sil-mātās* more closely resemble the visual ideal of an ordained nun as opposed to a lay renunciant. The order continues today, and in 1984 received formal recognition in the form of monastic ID cards from the Sri Lankan government.⁴⁵

De Alwis received a ten-precept ordination in Burma sometime between 1898 and 1905, and after assuming the monastic name Sudharmācārī, returned to Sri Lanka in the latter year and established the Sudharmā Upāsikārāmaya in Kandy. It would later be renamed the Lady Blake Ārāmaya after Lady Edith Blake, wife of Ceylon's governor from 1903-07, Sir Henry Arthur Blake). Lady Blake was present at the opening ceremony of the Upāsikārāmaya and according to Bartholomeusz, donated great amounts of time, effort, and money to the center.⁴⁶ The Lady Blake Ārāmaya is still functioning under the stewardship of an elderly *sil-mātā* who told me when I visited in December 2015 that she was the fourth student to have received the ten-precept ordination from Sudharmācārī. Since the founding of the Sudharmā Upāsikārāmaya in 1905, the *dasa-sil-māta* order has spread and according to at least one estimate, there were approximately

⁴⁵ Bartholomeusz, *Women Under the Bō Tree*, 149. It should be noted that because modern *bhikkhunīs* do not receive recognition from the government, they do not receive ID cards which allow them to enroll in universities and sit state-sponsored exams.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

three hundred *dasa-sil* Ārāmayas in 1982-83.⁴⁷ According to another, there are approximately 6,000 *dasa-sil-mātās* in Sri Lanka today.⁴⁸

Although *dasa-sil-mātās* have gained limited support from the government for their monastic institutions,⁴⁹ since the 1980s there has been a growing movement in South and Southeast Asia, and amongst Buddhist converts in non-Asian countries, to revive the *bhikkhunī* higher ordination lineage. The impetus came with efforts by international organizations like Sakyadhītā, for which global feminist discourses about gender equality and human rights factor prominently in the dispute over *bhikkhunī* ordination. Outside of Sri Lanka, other non-*bhikkhunī*, semi-lay, semi-monastic orders similar to *dasa-sil-matas* have sprung up for Theravāda women in the absence of the higher ordination, known as *maechi* in Thailand and *thilashin* in Myanmar. While these relatively new orders provide opportunities for women who wish to pursue lives as renunciants, they do not afford the same legitimacy, status, or access to economic and social benefits that fully-ordained monastics receive. In many popular understandings of Buddhism, only fully-ordained monastics are regarded as conduits of merit-making through offerings of material support, alms, and the performance of Buddhist ritual functions. This view, however, is far from universal. *Dasa-sil-mātās* and *maechis* interviewed by Lindberg Falk (2007) and Salgado (2013) reveal that many laypeople regard their favorite nuns as valuable resources for the performance of necessary religious functions like funerary rites, almsround, and transference

⁴⁷ Bhikkhuni Kusuma, *The Dasasil Nun: A Study of Women's Buddhist Religious Movement in Sri Lanka with an Outline of Its Historical Antecedents* (Dehiwala: Buddhist Cultural Center, 2010), 206.

⁴⁸ Yoshiko Ashiwa, "The Revival of Nun Ordination of the Theravada Tradition in Sri Lanka: A Landscape of the Culture in the Contemporary World," *Hitotsubashi Journal of Social Studies* 46, no. 1 (2015): 26, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43610995>.

⁴⁹ Wei-Yi Cheng, *Buddhist Nuns in Taiwan and Sri Lanka: A Critique of the Feminist Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 170.

of merit.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, insofar as the *bhikkhunī* lineage is attributed to the *Dhammic* dispensation established by the Buddha himself, these more recent renunciant roles for women do not, according to many supporters of *bhikkhunī* ordination, grant access to the complete path of training and renunciation laid down by the Buddha as it is inscribed in the Pāli Canon.

Dominant interpretations amongst Sri Lanka's four powerful *nikāyas* (institutional monastic fraternities) of canonical sources like the *Vinaya Piṭaka* hold that a quorum of fully-ordained *bhikkhunīs* is required in order to confer the ordination on suitable candidates (hence the significance of the dual-*saṅgha* ordination described in the previous chapter).⁵¹ Because the order died out in the 11th Century CE and was probably never reinstated in any Theravādin Buddhist country until recently, the *nikāya* administrations, whose members populate government bodies overseeing Buddhist affairs, do not support the legality of *bhikkhunī* ordination or the full-ordination status of any women claiming to be a *bhikkhunī* in recent times. Despite the fact that a thriving modern nuns' order exists in Taiwan and Korea, itself deriving from the Lankan nuns' ordination lineage that spread to China during the 5th century CE, most modern Theravādin monastic institutions do not recognize the validity of non-Theravādin lineages.⁵² Thus they reject movements to reinstate the *bhikkhunī* lineage with conferring nuns from South Korea and Taiwan, as happened in 1996 and 1998 respectively. These East Asian monastic lineages adopted the Dharmagupta Vinaya as the authoritative text governing monastic conduct and ordination. Although that Vinaya differs only in minute details from the Theravāda one, the fact that the tradition adopted Mahāyāna forms of practice (such as Bodhisattva vows) as

⁵⁰ Monica Lindberg Falk, *Making Fields of Merit: Buddhist Female Ascetics and Gendered Orders in Thailand* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), 142, and Salgado, *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice*, 191. Mrozić's "We Love our Nuns" presents a similar argument in the case of fully-ordained *bhikkhunīs* (not *sil-mātās*).

⁵¹ Nathaniel, "Sri Lanka's Bhikkhuni Order In Deadlock."

⁵² Salgado, *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice*, 150.

part of its ordination ritual made it unrecognizable as a common lineage, although this too is disputed.⁵³

It is not just the male monastic elders of the *nikāyas* who reject *bhikkhunī* ordination. A great number of contemporary *dasa-sil-mātās* do as well. Bartholomeusz (1994) finds that many ten-precept renunciant women are reluctant to accept contemporary *bhikkhunī* ordination as legitimate in modern times because they believe it is not possible to re-establish the *bhikkhunī sangha*.⁵⁴ Many of the *dasa-sil-mātās* in Colombo, Kandy, and Anuradhapura who I spoke with claimed that any Mahāyāna-derived ordination was “impure” (*pirisidu nemeyi*) and on that basis found the 1996 and 1998 ordinations illegitimate. This constitutes a claim to authenticity as *dasa-sil-mātās* locate themselves as distinct from *bhikkhunīs* whose ordination they do not consider authentically Theravāda, thus tacitly arguing for their worthiness of limited government and lay support.

Cheng (2007) relays that in addition to the Mahāyāna issue, there are a number of other reasons why *dasa-sil-mātās* reject *bhikkhunī* ordination, such as lack of permission from elders in their local lineages, fear of losing state-sponsored benefits, and condemnation of the *nikāyas*.⁵⁵ When I asked Ranjani de Silva, cofounder of Sakyadhītā, about why *dasa-sil-mātās* reject *bhikkhunī* ordination, she replied that the main reason is because they receive financial support from the government and are reluctant to jeopardize the little state-sponsored support (such as education) that they receive by joining an institutionally unsupported order. Salgado (2013) reveals that local concerns about monastic seniority, for instance, also raise a number of issues that influence whether *dasa-sil-mātās* choose to seek the ordination or not. She relays that in one

⁵³ Nissara Horayangura, "The Bhikkhuni Question," *The Bangkok Post* (Bangkok), April 28, 2009.

⁵⁴ Bartholomeusz, *Women Under the Bō Tree*, 189-90.

⁵⁵ Cheng, *Buddhist Nuns in Taiwan and Sri Lanka*, 170.

case, a senior *dasa-sil-mātā* had trained a number of students who went on to receive the higher ordination. One of her fully-ordained students (*golaya*) visited often to pay respects to her teacher (*guruverya*) and relayed to Salgado the awkward position the two of them found themselves in. On the one hand it would be poor monastic decorum for a *bhikkhunī* to bow to a ten-precept nun, but on the other, acknowledging that she still receives support from her non-fully-ordained teacher, the student felt a duty to give obeisance to her teacher out of respect and gratitude.⁵⁶

Since the late 1990s, the number of *bhikkhunīs* in Sri Lanka has increased rapidly. According to Mrozik (2014), estimates for the number of fully-ordained nuns range between 1000-2000 in contemporary Sri Lanka.⁵⁷ After the 1996 and 98 ordinations had taken place in India, the newly-ordained nuns returned to Sri Lanka and there (especially in the case of the nuns ordained in 1998) began regular ordinations in Dambulla in central Sri Lanka. Initially, Inamaluwe Suumangala, head of the Dambulla nuns' lineage, sponsored ordinations every three months, but in 2000 this was reduced to a yearly ceremony (in July) for female monastic candidates who had passed a program of study and exams on the Vinaya, *suttas*, and meditation.⁵⁸ Most recently, in July 2015 seven ten-precept nuns received the higher ordination in Dambulla.⁵⁹ Despite opposition to *bhikkhunī* ordination on the part of the four main *nikāyas*, the Sri Lankan government, and many *dasa-sil-mātās*, as I have noted, a number of burgeoning initiatives to revive the lineage have orchestrated two controversial international ordinations for Sri Lankan *bhikkhunīs* in the late 1990s. In recent years, there have been several studies on

⁵⁶ Salgado, *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice*, 157.

⁵⁷ Mrozik, "We Love our Nuns," 58.

⁵⁸ Cheng, *Buddhist Nuns in Taiwan and Sri Lanka*, 32-3.

⁵⁹ Kanchana Kumara Ariyadasa, "තම හත් තමක් මෙහෙව් සිසුවෝ," Lankadeepa.lk, July 26, 2015, <http://www.lankadeepa.lk/index.php/articles/335264>; my translation.

renunciant women in Sri Lanka and in other interrelated Theravāda practice contexts, many of which have focused in part on these ordinations. In the next section, I review a number of these studies in order to demonstrate how my field research in Sri Lanka brings to light features of the Sri Lankan *bhikkhunī* ordination which variously corroborate, nuance, update, or contest some of the arguments presented.

Prior Scholarship on Buddhist Women's Renunciation in Theravāda Practice

I propose that previous scholarship on Buddhist gendered renunciation in Sri Lanka can be grouped into three broad overlapping categories: feminist criticism of negative depictions of Buddhist women by Asian and non-Asian Buddhist scholar-practitioners (two of whom would go on to become some of the first *bhikkhunīs*), ethnographic studies of contemporary Sri Lankan renunciant women, and postcolonial studies on the global, gendered, and class dimensions of the *bhikkhunī* ordination dispute. Kusuma Devendra and Chatsumarn Kabilsingh have published critiques of the negative depictions of Buddhist women found in early textual sources. While Salgado argues that feminist language about Lankan women's renunciation represents the foreign incursion of “*globalatinized*” thought, Kusuma and Kabilsingh, two Asian woman Buddhist practitioners—far from evidencing a deprived subaltern in need—have shaped the *bhikkhunī* ordination movement from the ground up, from the local to the global. Thus the literature review begins with figures who are central to my first case study in the next chapter.

Kusuma Devendra (now Bhikkhunī Kusuma) has published two monograph-length studies of women's renunciation in Sri Lanka. Her 1987 doctoral dissertation at the University of Sri Jayawardenepura in Colombo, *The Dasasil Nun: A Study of Women's Buddhist Religious Movements in Sri Lanka with an Outline of its Historical Antecedents*, narrates the history of Lankan women's renunciation culminating in a detailed study of *dasa-sil-mātās*. Drawing on

fieldwork with *dasa-sil-mātās* in the 1980s, Kusuma proposes a number of sociological strategies which aim to improve the simultaneous social perception and status of rural, lower-class and marginalized ten-precept nuns. For instance, she argues that “the persistent portrayal of DSMs over mass media as an institution conforming to the traditional, cultural, and religious symbols of the ancient civilization could bring about a necessary change of attitudes of all concerned.”⁶⁰ As previously mentioned, together with Samanerī Akincana (formerly the German Pāli scholar Friedgard Lottermoser), Kusuma published a study of the *bhikkhunī* Vinaya rules in 2015, subsequent to a published 2010 adaptation of her 1987 dissertation. The study argues that the Culavagga ordination story which renders *bhikkhunīs* subservient to *bhikkhus* is a later interpolation by ‘brahmanist’ male monks, and thus the gender discriminatory attitudes are not authentic *Buddhavacana* (words of the Buddha). Through her comparison of the Pāli Culavagga with *sutta* source from the Madhyama-āgama and Sarvastivādin Vinaya, Kusuma argues that such depictions are later additions which reflect the influence of the Brahmanical culture in India and evidence gender discrimination.⁶¹

In addition to Kusuma, Chatsumarn Kabilsingh (Ordained in Dambulla in 2003 as Dhammananda Bhikkhunī) in her 1991 *Thai Women in Buddhism*, surveys the history of Thai women in both monastic and nonmonastic intersections with Buddhist practice and identity. Writing from the perspective of an Asian women and a practitioner of Thai Buddhism, she reimagines certain key Buddhist texts concerning the legality of ordinations from a critical feminist perspective, arguing in a similar fashion to Kusuma that much of the misogyny inherent in Thai religious culture derives from Brahmanical influences dating back to the Ayudhya

⁶⁰ Kusuma, *The Dasasil Nun*, 191.

⁶¹ Kusuma and Akincana, *Code of Conduct for Buddhist Nuns*, 167-169.

period.⁶² She argues that canonical depictions of women's mental and moral inferiority, as well as negative depictions of women's bodies, were both late additions to the Pāli Canon, and are best read as the product of monks composing texts for other monks, in which women, largely excluded from monastic life, represented the specter of temptation for young monks in training. She reminds the reader that the Buddha's inclusion of women into the monastic *sangha* has historically been—and remains today—a powerful motivator for women's practice of monasticism.

As previously mentioned, Sponberg (1992) argues that early Buddhist texts which contain negative portrayals of women evidence an often discordant multivocality of perspectives regarding women's moral and spiritual capacities. He identifies four trends in depictions of women and the feminine in early Buddhist literature, *soteriological inclusiveness*, *institutional androcentrism*, *ascetic misogyny*, and *soteriological androgyny*. Drawing on the story of Sōma, the daughter of the chaplain to King Bimbisara (one of the Buddha's chief patrons) from the Saṃyutta Nikāya collection of *suttas* from the Pāli Canon, Sponberg argues that the perspective of *soteriological inclusiveness* holds that the path to *nibbāna* (the highest soteriological state of enlightenment in Theravāda Buddhism) is the same for women as it is for men, a teaching in line with the Buddha's rejection of class (caste) distinctions.⁶³

Second, *institutional androcentrism* reflects the burgeoning tradition's attempt to corroborate a radically inclusive social message of liberation with the institutional and social realities of what was conventionally acceptable. He argues that this view is enshrined in Mahāpajāpati's ordinations story from the Cullavagga, maintaining that the text's placement of nuns as subservient to monks not only helped to legitimize the radical institution of the first

⁶² Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, *Thai Women in Buddhism* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1991), 7.

⁶³ Sponberg, "Attitudes Toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism," 10.

renunciant order for women, but also by placing nuns within an androcentric monastic structure, they could be protected from danger and regulated.⁶⁴ In this light, he describes the Culavagga story as a “reconciliation” of the ideal of soteriological inclusiveness with the gendered social realities at the time.

Third, *ascetic misogyny* refers to depictions of women’s moral inferiority as agents of temptation for otherwise virtuous male monastics, an attitude that according to Sponberg goes beyond the attempt to grapple with the reality of a new renunciant order for women. Citing the Buddha’s famous lines in the Aṅguttara Nikaya that “I see no other single form so enticing, so desirable, so intoxicating, so binding, so distracting, such a hindrance to winning the unsurpassed peace from effort... as a woman’s form... A woman... will stop to ensnare the heart of a man... Verily, one may say of womanhood: it is wholly a snare of [the Tempter,] Māra.”⁶⁵ The Buddha’s words here reveal a fear of the feminine as threat to male monastic celibacy projected onto their object of craving as morally deficient.

Finally, *soteriological androgyny* refers to later depictions of *nibbāna* as a state of liberation that is inherently at odds with dualistic (and thus gendered) self-conception.⁶⁶ Sponberg argues that in this view, gender is not merely something to be abandoned through pursuit of enlightenment, but is an ultimately a provisional (not ultimately “real”) salvific springboard toward *nibbāna*.

In her 1993 *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*, Rita Gross has argued that defenders of male dominance in Theravādin traditions claim that the eight *garudhammas* mandate institutional, but not spiritual,

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶⁵ Cited in *Ibid.*, 20

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 25

subordination of nuns to monks. She reminds the reader that these rules largely permitted nuns to live the same kinds of lives, receive the same spiritual instructions, and pursue religious practices in communities largely separated from the monks. Despite this, Gross argues, when combined with the misogyny inherent in the story of the Buddha's reluctance to found the order, the *garudhammas* were probably responsible for the decline of the *bhikkhunī* orders in Theravādin traditions in the first place insofar as they prevented women from becoming recognized teachers in an androcentric monastic order which placed a high valuation on the teacher-student transmission of knowledge.⁶⁷ This accords with Nancy Faulk's assessment in the "The Case of the Vanishing Nuns: The Fruits of Ambivalence in Ancient Indian Buddhism" in which she argues that the institution of the eight *garudhammas* effectively prevented women in early Indian monastic communities from becoming leaders in the *saṅgha* as a whole or from having a voice in shaping its direction.⁶⁸

It should be noted that Gross's book has come under heavy critique from subsequent waves of feminist scholarship for, according to Kwok Pui-lan, "taking a culturally and religiously pluralistic approach without seriously interrogating the power differentials undergirding the West's fascination, re-presentation, assimilation, and alienation of the religious and cultural Other since the beginning of the comparative study of religion."⁶⁹ Pui-lan and others (most notably Salgado 2013) critique Gross's propensity to view the 'west' (unlike the misogynistic 'east') as a uniquely liberative environment providing "the manifest destiny [for]

⁶⁷ Rita M. Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 37-8.

⁶⁸ Nancy Auer Falk, "The Case of the Vanishing Nuns: The Fruits of Ambivalence in Ancient Indian Buddhism," in *Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives*, ed. Nancy Auer Falk and Rita M. Gross, 3rd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2001), 201.

⁶⁹ Kwok Pui-lan, "Gender, Colonialism, and the Study of Religion," in *Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Religious Discourse*, ed. Laura E. Donaldson and Kwok Pui-lan (New York: Routledge, 2002), 25.

rejuvenating Buddhism and bringing it to its fulfillment.”⁷⁰ This, Pui-lan and Salgado argue, reifies an Orientalist east-west dichotomy that ignores the contributions of Asian Buddhist women who are involved in reshaping their own traditions.⁷¹

Turning toward the second of three trends in the scholarship to date, ethnographic case studies of women’s renunciation in Sri Lanka, Tessa Bartholomeusz’s 1994 *Women under the Bō Tree* is a wide-ranging historical, textual, and anthropological survey of Sri Lankan Buddhist women. She begins with a discussion of ambiguous depictions of women in Pāli canonical texts and draws parallels with contemporary attitudes about women’s renunciation in contemporary Sri Lanka. Detailing the establishment of the *dasa-sil-mātā* order (who she calls “lay nuns”), Bartholomeusz explores a number of dimensions of *sil-mātā* practice and identity, including tensions between a society that expects women to fulfill familial and social obligations and the proliferation of burgeoning renunciant opportunities that coincided with Sri Lanka’s Buddhist renaissance during the late 1800s to early 1900s. She finds that the identities, practices, and experiences of the modern semi-lay, semi-renunciant *dasa-sil-mātās* vary considerably, and are ultimately constituted in the religious activities, dress, perspectives, and motivations of individual nuns. She argues that:

much of what [*sil-mātās*] believe about their own vocation is in large part shaped by their readings of Pāli texts, the very texts that reinforce stereotypes [about women]. Yet the conclusions female renunciants draw from these stereotypes are not commonplace, especially as they relate to autonomy, celibacy, and power. Their activities in the public sphere, including their peace marches and their *pūjās* [rituals of veneration], are a radical break from the traditional role of the female as passive supporter of religion.”⁷²

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁷¹ Salgado, *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice*, 29.

⁷² Bartholomeusz, *Women Under the Bō Tree*, 155.

Discussing opposition to women's renunciation, Bartholomeusz argues that nuns are objects of *ascetic misogyny* today, just as they were in the Buddha's time, insofar as women prove a possible threat to male monastic celibacy. Furthermore, the opposition to the higher ordination of women reveals a concern with the health of the *sāsana* in a Buddhist country. She indicates that some monks fear that women taking the precepts would destabilize Buddhism in Sri Lanka.⁷³ This assessment has largely flipped since the publication of Bartholomeusz's book. As I will argue in the second case study (Chapter IV), a prominent counter-discourse has emerged where the ordination of nuns has been articulated as crucial to the health of the *sāsana*.

Motivated by the question of whether or not the issues that concern western Buddhist feminists matter to Asian Buddhist women, Wei-Yi Cheng's 2007 *Buddhist Nuns in Taiwan and Sri Lanka: A Critique of the Feminist Perspective* presents a quantitative analysis of field research with nuns in those countries. Cheng writes that "as an Asian Buddhist women, I sometimes feel alienated by Western feminist discourse on Buddhism, including parts of [Rita Gross's] *Buddhism after Patriarchy* and some Sakyadhita literature, even though they are still an inspiration for me."⁷⁴ Through a comparative analysis of nuns' responses to questions about depictions of women's inferiority in Buddhist texts, levels of education and training, and concern with accessing certain rights and privileges enjoyed by male monastics, Cheng's analysis in the end renders her guiding question incoherent as she discovers along the way that "Asian" nuns do not speak in a unified voice, instead they evidence a multiplicity of experiences, motivations, and approaches to monastic life. By the end of her study, Cheng acknowledges that the guiding orientation of her research elides the voices and experiences of her subjects in that she asked questions about nuns' engagement with feminist categories of analysis (such as status, rights, and

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁷⁴ Cheng, *Buddhist Nuns in Taiwan and Sri Lanka*, 7-8.

equality) rather than letting them speak in the terms that defined their lives, interests, motivations, and experiences. She sums up her findings thus:

The diversity among Buddhist nuns' religious beliefs and practices can exist down to the individual level, and various denominational, linguistic, political, cultural, geographical, historical, etc. contexts constantly transform their religious understandings and actions. Throughout the analysis of the fieldwork findings, experience constantly emerges as an influential factor. Since (Buddhist) women are not homogenous and static, factors related to their welfare would vary across different contexts. Hence, it is by bringing women's experiences and the contexts behind their experiences into the discourse [of religion], that the understanding of women in religion might be more adequately achieved.⁷⁵

In the following chapters I take Cheng's methodological advice to pay close attention to the diversity of perspectives regarding individual renunciant women's experiences and the contexts behind their experiences which localize the story of Sri Lanka's modern women's renunciant lineages. In tracing the flows of international cooperation and ethnic tension which illuminate new dimensions of the debate, paying close attention at the level of individual experience brings new features of these contested efforts into view.

Despite the transnational character of Cheng's comparative analysis of nuns in Sri Lanka and Taiwan, her discussion of *bhikkhunī* ordination deauthorizes its legitimacy on the basis of being a marginal movement spurred on by the interests of western feminists:

So far, the *bhikkhunī* movement in Sri Lanka has been a sectarian movement, for the legitimacy of the *bhikkhunī* status has not been accepted by all. The reason is that the *bhikkhunī* movement is generated not by the Sri Lankan Buddhist establishment but by feminists (e.g. Sakyadhita), Buddhists from abroad (e.g. Foguangshan) and *bhikkhus* who rebelled against traditional hierarchal confinement.⁷⁶

In the following chapter, I show how Sakyadhītā was formed through the collaboration of Asian and non-Asian Buddhist women working together to enact the goal of reviving *bhikkhunī* ordination in Sri Lanka and elsewhere, thus problematizing Cheng's association of Sakyadhītā

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 185.

with feminist (not local), and the “Buddhists from abroad.” I argue that Kusuma and De Silva, two Sri Lankan cofounders of Sakyadhītā, sought out the international connections they needed from their local vantage point in order to realize the objective of reviving the lineage.

Cheng's work nonetheless points to the potential for international cooperation to become a hegemonic ‘western’ intervention, and addresses a number of missteps in earlier conversations about to reviving *bhikkhunī* ordination in Asian Buddhist contexts outside of Sri Lanka. Before moving on to the final trend in secondary scholarship, postcolonial analyses of the global circulation of language, activism, power, and representation in the *bhikkhunī* ordination dispute, I want to pause to discuss the 1997 “International Congress on Buddhist Women’s Role in the Sangha” conference that was held in Hamburg, Germany. In many ways, these next studies critique the elision of Asian women’s voices on the part of ‘western’ Buddhist women who overwhelmingly advocate for *bhikkhunī* ordination. At the conference, many of the Indo-Tibetan nuns in attendance were omitted from the official program because they did not learn how to submit their papers to the organizers in time. While a number of Euro-American scholars and Buddhist practitioners spoke about the benefits of *bhikkhunī* ordination for Himalayan Buddhist women, many of the very same women in attendance were only given a forum to speak at the last minute when the organizers put together a panel for them in which, according to Mrozik (2009) and Janet Gyatso (2010), they were neither introduced nor was it very clear who said what. What is clear is that many of the women who spoke claimed that they were not ready for the ordination, though amongst themselves their reasons were far from univocal.⁷⁷ The missteps evident at the Hamburg conference show the importance of being finely attuned to power

⁷⁷ Mrozik, “A Robed Revolution,” 370 and Janet Gyatso, “Female Ordination in Buddhism: Looking Into a Crystal Ball, Making a Future,” in *Dignity & Discipline: Reviving Full Ordination for Buddhist Nuns*, ed. Thea Mohr and Jampa Tsedroen (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2010), 10.

imbalances in international cooperation, although I argue that it is also important not to go too far in the other direction by *à priori* delegitimizing such cooperation.

Now turning to the third trend in previous scholarship, Susanne Mrozik's 2009 journal article "A Robed Revolution: The Contemporary Buddhist Nuns's (*Bhikṣuṇī*) Movement" brings the transnational features and tensions of the ordination dispute into central focus and identifies a number of salient concerns to the burgeoning orders which I advance and particularize on the basis of my fieldwork in the following chapters. She argues that "even among supporters of nuns, there are competing visions of female renunciation. Especially important is a tension between local and international conceptions of the Buddhist monastic community."⁷⁸ Because many of Sri Lanka's monks denounce the validity of *bhikkhūṇī* ordination on the basis of its Mahāyāna origins, the question of how local or "authentic" Theravāda monasticism is constituted, and who has the authority to define it, is a central concern amongst supporters.

One of the primary strategies to render an imported lineage as authentic is to demonstrate that it represents an unbroken chain leading back to the order established by Saṅghamittā in the 3rd century. Mrozik argues that "maintaining the perception of an unbroken monastic lineage is vital to the legitimacy of present-day monks, nuns, and their institutions. Consequently, the fate of the *bhikṣuṇī* movement rests, in part, on painstaking Vinaya research to determine whether there is any way to ordain nuns without compromising the integrity of a particular lineage."⁷⁹ As I argue in the next chapters, the project of importing and legitimizing a lineage as local is not a new project for Buddhists in Sri Lanka. Where previous revivals of monastic lineages (such as the foundation of the Siyam Nikāya, imported from Thailand in the mid-1700s) relied of textual production and public erudition in *dhamma* preaching to demonstrate worthiness of lay support,

⁷⁸ Mrozik, "A Robed Revolution, 362.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 363.

Sri Lanka's modern *bhikkhunīs* strategize on decline-and-revival of the *sāsana* tropes in a gendered performance of piety which is expressed in terms of soteriological motivation.

In using "gendered performance of piety," I am drawing on Saba Mahmood's 2005 monograph *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, in which she argues that feminist scholarship has tended to presuppose a universal desire on the part of women outside the 'west' to resist patriarchal power relations as supposed evidence of the necessary connection between self-realization and liberal conceptions of positive agency. She problematizes the apparent dichotomy wherein discourses and acts of self-determination are seen as necessarily either "enacting or subverting" ethical norms.⁸⁰ Particularly important for my discussion here is Mahmood's conception of the body as a discursive site for the expression of gendered religious piety. In the case of Egyptian women's veiling practices, she argues that bodily comportment is not necessarily constituted by these simplistic binaries of enacting or subverting systems of androcentric norms. Instead, Mahmood suggests that when it comes to bodily religious comportment:

specific gestures, styles, and formal expressions that characterize one's relationship to a moral code are not contingent but a necessary means to understanding the kind of relationship that is established between the self and the structures of social authority, and between what one is, what one wants, and and what kind of work one performs on oneself in order to realize a particular modality of being and personhood.⁸¹

In referring to the gendered performance of piety, I mean to identify a similar interior-exterior interrelationship which is evidenced by the highly-visible comportment with Vinaya rules demonstrated by a number of *bhikkhunīs* I spoke with. Below, I argue that such comportment simultaneously locates them (in contrast to a rhetoric of laxity in their male counterparts) as

⁸⁰ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 29.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 120.

worthy of veneration and material support, and is expressed as a necessary condition for the full monastic path of practice laid down by the Buddha as the most efficient means of attaining complete enlightenment.

Problematizing Cheng's interest in the circulation of feminist thought amongst Asian renunciant women, Mrozik warns that both an East-West dichotomy and the conflation of terms like 'international,' western,' and 'feminist' foreclose on the possibility of a more nuanced analysis of the conjunctures and disjunctures at and between local and translocal levels speech and activism which enabled the revival movements. She argues that:

Indeed the term 'feminism' is itself contested in the debate, where it often figures as a marker of the non-local [as Cheng does above]. Nevertheless, the international *bhikṣuṇī* movement is gaining ground, due in no small part to Sakyadhita. By forming alliances with local supporters and hosting international conferences, Sakyadhita is teaching Buddhists to regard *bhikṣuṇīs* as integral to a modern Sangha.⁸²

In her more recent 2014 article "'We Love Our Nuns': Affective Dimensions of the Sri Lankan *Bhikkhūnī* Revival," Mrozik argues that the close interpersonal relationship nuns develop with Buddhist laity at local levels, more than anything else, ensure that their institutions receive material and financial support from local networks of devotees. Expressed in terms of "love" (*ādare*), she finds that the affective speech of lay supporters reflect judgments about nuns' monastic practice. Mrozik argues that scholarship on women's renunciation in Buddhist traditions has focused too little on lay responses, and finds that their primary concerns—far from the textually-inscribed status of monastics with whom they share close affective ties—are principally about whether or not they can get their religious needs met by their local nun. Keenly aware that what is meant by "love" at local levels might resist translation, Mrozik imparts an important lesson to researchers of the *bhikkhūnī* revival:

I was careful not to assume that I knew what subscribers meant by the word "love" or to

⁸² Mrozik, "A Robed Revolution, 373.

assume that I could find out what they meant just by looking up the word in a dictionary. My goal was to learn what love meant in the everyday, colloquial usage of this village. By far the most common way subscribers defined their love for the nuns was in familial terms. Several told me that since the nuns had abandoned their own families, the subscribers now constituted their families.⁸³

Instead of assuming that the definitions of categories are self-evident, or fluidly translatable between local and translocal levels of speech, here Mrozik cautions the researcher to solicit examples and clarification during fieldwork to learn how language and categories summoned by actors in the dispute affects various features of the debate at different levels.

Finally, Nirmala S. Salgado's 2013 *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice: In Search of the Female Renunciant* interrogates narratives employed by scholars and practitioners of Buddhism alike in constructing as a category of identity and knowledge production the subject of the Buddhist nun. Salgado argues that many of the dichotomies employed by scholars, some prominent monastics, and even occasionally the Sri Lankan State—such as lay/renunciant and worldly/otherworldly—presuppose liberal feminist vantage points reminiscent of the public/private distinction that elide the *renunciant everyday* of Buddhist women's motivations and experiences. By renunciant everyday, Salgado means "the daily routines and rituals that define the disciplinary practices of those who live renunciant lives."⁸⁴ These, she argues, tend to resist translation into narrative.

Contrary to the perspective that nuns' higher ordination represents a movement for women's empowerment, or even a protest against an oppressive or patriarchal Buddhism, Salgado argues throughout the book that renunciation itself, which provides opportunities for Buddhists women and men alike to practice *sīla* (ethical restraint), maintain close communal relationships with other monastics, their families, and the laity, and to practice meditation, is

⁸³ Mrozik, "We Love Our Nuns," 69.

⁸⁴ Salgado, *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice*, 126.

itself inherently fulfilling. Ultimately, the emphasis on status, identity, and the curative project of women's liberation as it is understood in the modern, liberal 'west,' fails to apprehend or account for this fact, which she argues gets elided by hegemonic narratives about Buddhist nuns that reveal more about the perspectives of the narrator than they do about the subject under examination. This insight is especially important to consider in light of the missteps at the Hamburg conference, in which the voices of western Buddhist converts and scholars overshadowed those of their Asian counterparts, about whom the conference was supposedly convened.

These vantages, Salgado argues, continue to perpetuate a colonial or orientalist discourse insofar as such a perspective casts nuns as in need of betterment. To those scholars, key monastics and government officials, the *upasampadā*, or higher-ordination, heralded as a normative aspiration to which all renunciant women ought to incline, becomes viewed as a transnational movement for women's liberation, presupposing a logic unique to modern feminist scholarship and sensibilities. From this perspective, Salgado interrogates both the production of these vantage points used to examine Buddhist nuns as objects of knowledge production, but also problematizes the ideal of the *upasampadā* as a global, transnational movement for women's liberation in Buddhism. She argues that scholarly and activist representations of Lankan *dasa-sil-mātā* nuns as a deprived subject gave rise to the possibility of *bhikkhunī* ordination on the part of international and 'foreign' hegemonic forces. Thus she argues that that the positioning of *bhikkhunī* ordination as a goal to which deprived Lankan renunciant women ought to aspire was constructed on the back of feminist discourses about their status that they themselves neither see themselves in nor reflects the terms through which the majority speak about their lives, experiences, and motivations:

the discourse of deprivation that became prominent in the representation of *sil matas* has served to focus attention on the female renunciant who was putatively deprived of basic ‘necessities,’ such as housing, food, and education... The female renunciant was someone whose situation needed to be treated and rectified, because hers was an ‘abnormal’ and ‘underdeveloped’ situation, especially from an underlying ‘first world’ perspective.⁸⁵

In her numerous conversations with renunciant women in Sri Lanka from the 1980s to the present, she relays that concepts of ‘human rights’ and ‘feminism’ are almost never summoned to account for their motivation to renounce. Furthermore, she argues that the actual material needs of *sil mātās* have been insufficiently interrogated by those who speak of nuns' deprivation. Salgado makes a crucial intervention in scholarship by challenging the *bhikkhunī* ordination as a universal goal to which all female renunciants ought to aspire. Yet, in the process, she forecloses the possibility of a more nuanced discussion of the interaction between local, translocal, and global discourses and communities.

In the next chapter, by drawing on the stories told to me by Bhikkhunī Kusuma, Ranjani de Silva, and in Kusuma’s published writings, I argue that *bhikkhunī* ordination—initially made possible through the organizing efforts of these two Lankan women along with a prominent Lankan monk and a transnational group of Asian and non-Asian monastics and lay supporters—cannot be accounted for by presupposing that it represents the foreign incursion of perspectives of *sil mātās* as a suffering subject. Rather, I argue that Kusuma and de Silva’s language about access to resources, the fulfillment of the Buddha’s dispensation, and gender inequality in monastic institutions are not always external to the local self-understanding and speech of Sri Lankan renunciant women. To maintain that such perspectives always and everywhere suggest the influence of ‘*globalatinized*’ categories that the vast majority of Sri Lankan renunciant women do not recognize, I argue, is to play into the politics of authenticity being debated at these

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 131

various intersecting translocal and local levels of speech and activism. By claiming that *bhikkhunī* ordination is only made possible through external narrative disjuncture and not through the transnational cooperation of Lankan and non-Lankan Buddhist women, I argue that Salgado privileges the local and deauthorizes the translocal through a circular dichotomization of women who have and have not learned to speak in ‘*globalatinized*’ idioms. In the next chapter, I show how the first *bhikkhunī* ordinations for Sri Lankan women in over 1000 years blurs such rigid boundary marking between local and translocal.

Conclusion

The *bhikkhunī* ordination dispute in Sri Lanka is a complex, global phenomenon revealing both international cooperation and projects of localization. Previous case studies of Buddhist women’s renunciation in Sri Lanka, most notably Cheng (2007) and Salgado (2013), perpetuate orientalist east-west dichotomies by associating ‘feminism’ and ‘international’ with ‘western,’ thus forestalling the possibility of a more nuanced analysis of translocal interaction and cooperation amongst Asian and non-Asian Buddhist women. Conversely, Mrozik defines such cooperation as one of the central characteristics of the nuns’ ordination dispute, and alerts researchers to pay close attention to global-local tensions of identification and authority as well as the circulation, meaning, and work of speech and language at these intersecting levels. In the next chapter, I tell the story of the first contemporary *bhikkhunī* ordinations in the late 1990s, articulating how global Buddhist women’s organizations like Sakyadhītā work across local and translocal levels of engagement. In doing so, I present the voices of two early figures in Sri Lanka’s first contemporary *bhikkhunī* ordination, Kusuma and Ranjani de Silva, to show how Sri Lanka’s first modern *bhikkhunī* ordination was organized from the bottom-up by local Lankan activists, and not due to the foreign incursion of feminist narratives. In addition, by paying

attention to the highly visible comportment with Vinaya rules demonstrated by many of the *bhikkhunīs* I met while doing fieldwork in Sri Lanka, I update some of the findings and questions of Mrozik's 2009 article to discuss some of the strategies Sri Lanka's burgeoning *bhikkhunī* lineages make use of in order to demonstrate their legitimacy in a uniquely Lankan idiom.

Chapter III | “I Am the First *Bhikkhunī*.” Kolonnawe Kusuma and the Sakyadhītā International Association of Buddhist Women

It has become possible for scholars to accept the idea that powerless minorities have accommodated themselves to global forces. But to turn that statement around to argue that global forces are themselves congeries of local/global interaction has been rather more challenging.
— Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction*

Introduction

It was never Kusuma Devendra’s intention to become the first *bhikkhunī*. In 1996, months before the very first *upasampadā* for nine Sri Lankan women was scheduled to take place in Sarnath, India, she received a call from Mapalagama Wipulasara, then the chief incumbent monk of the Mahābodhi Society in Bodh Gaya. Kusuma was in Korea at the time, sent by Wipulasara to the Bo Miyun Sa temple to research the Korean *Dharmagupta* ordination procedure in her capacity as a Vinaya scholar. She was asked to determine whether or not an ordination conferred by a dual-*sangha* of Korean monastics could be considered legitimate. Wipulasara— citing intense controversy about the prospect of holding a *bhikkhunī* ordination amidst the *nikāya* administrations back in Sri Lanka—was worried that the nine *sil mātā* nuns selected from the over two-hundred applicants were not up to the task. After years of discussion and months of planning (not to mention the fact that airfare to India had already been purchased for the quorums of female and male Korean monastics conferring the ordination), Wipulasara gave Kusuma an ultimatum: the ordination could not possibly go forward unless she herself agreed to lead the women and become the first Sri Lankan (and arguably Theravādin) *bhikkhunī* since the lineage died out in the 11th century.

It took a few weeks to reach Bhikkhunī Kusuma on the phone. One morning in January 2016, just days before the end of my trip to Sri Lanka, at last a call went through. I introduced myself as a student researcher of Buddhism from America, and relayed that I wanted to meet with her to learn more about *bhikkhunī* ordination in Sri Lanka. She agreed to meet and gave the

directions to my friend Sithumini. An hour later, we had finished our tea and were *en route* to Olaboduwa, where Kusuma oversees the Ayya Khema Meditation Center (see **Fig. 3**). The center was named after Ayya Khema, (1923-1997), a German-born nun and cofounder of Sakyadhīta. While living in Sri Lanka in the 1980s, Khema befriended Kusuma and de Silva and helped to organize the first Sakyadhīta conference in 1987.⁸⁶ Even now, Kusuma told me, she regards

Khema as one of her most important spiritual teachers.

When we arrived we were greeted by an Australian *sil mātā* who introduced us to Kusuma, who is now 86 years old. I could tell immediately that I was in the presence of someone with a tough personality and a keen wit. She affectionately told me that I was lucky to be from the United States, because she was “a bit of a soft corn for Americans,” having received a scholarship to study microbiology at Ball State University in Indiana a few decades prior. I took a seat on a thin cushion on the tile floor in the



Figure 3: Locations discussed in this chapter

large hall at the Ayya Khema Center and, not wanting to waste our precious time together, asked “what has your experience been like since taking ordination in 1996?”

⁸⁶ For more on Khema’s life, see her autobiography *I Give You My Life: The Autobiography of a Western Buddhist Nun* (Boston: Shambhala, 1998).

“Well” she began, “I am the first *bhikkhunī*.”

In this chapter I want to tell a remarkable story about how Kusuma became the first *bhikkhunī*: how an interrupted lineage was revived through the efforts of a transnational group of participants, and the interrelated story of how Kusuma and Ranjani de Silva, cofounder and former president of Sakyadhītā (1995-2000),⁸⁷ largely made the 1996 ordination of Kusuma and nine other Sri Lankan women possible. This story, I argue, complicates Salgado’s dichotomization of nuns who do and do not speak in ‘*globalatinized*’ terms.⁸⁸ I show how Kusuma and de Silva sought out the transnational connections they needed in order to realize the goal—shared by Sakyadhītā—of reinstating *bhikkhunī* ordination in a Buddhist tradition where it was not presently available. In doing so, I argue that Kusuma and de Silva mediate between local and translocal levels of speech and activism in their efforts. Most telling is their embrace of transnational feminist language (speaking in terms of gendered hierarchies, status, and rights), while simultaneously eschewing the term ‘feminism,’ instead locating their pro-*bhikkhunī* arguments in line with Buddhist concepts and local lineages.

I tell two stories here. The first, of the remarkable 1996 ordination of ten Sri Lankan women in Sarnath, India so far not recounted from the perspective of Kusuma and de Silva. Drawing on interviews with them from December 2015–January 2016, and on Kusuma’s published works and autobiography, I argue that the contemporary issue of *bhikkhunī* ordination came into central visibility in Sri Lanka through the cooperative effort of both Lankan and non-Lankan participants, evidencing a global effort that reveals confluences between local and translocal spheres of speech and activism that cuts across Salgado’s dichotomization of

⁸⁷ Mavis L. Fenn, *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, ed. Damien Keown and Charles S. Prebish (London: Routledge, 2007), 263, “De Silva, Ranjani.”

⁸⁸ Salgado, *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice*, 232.

‘globalatinized’—‘Lankan.’ It is true, as Salgado points out, that not all *dasa-sil-mātās* aspire to become fully ordained, and that when asked why they are motivated to take or not to take contested higher ordinations, many individual Sri Lankan *dasa sil mātās* often do not cite concerns about gender imbalance within Buddhist monastic institutions, or the socioeconomic disparities between monks’ and nuns’ living conditions and access to resources.⁸⁹ However, the very genesis of one of the most influential international organizations—and crucially, it’s Lankan representatives fighting to reinstate *bhikkhunī* ordination—was and is intimately concerned with these issues. As my interviews with Kusuma and de Silva reveal, some of the most important figures associated with the *bhikkhunī* revival in Sri Lanka *do* speak in terms that Salgado deauthorizes or deems inauthentic on the basis of their translocality.

Although Sakyadhītā’s language and founding principles evidence categories that are recognizable in a liberal western frame, I show how its founding Lankan and other Asian women members do not view nuns as deprived subjects in need of betterment, but rather articulate the profound religious and social benefits that ordaining Lankan nuns can bring to the nation. In this section, I draw on my conversation with Ranjani de Silva, who argues (like Wimalajōthi in the next chapter) that well-trained, fully-ordained nuns can provide critical religious and social services to Sri Lankan women who will have the effect of improving the *state* of Buddhist practice and identity in the nation.

Not leaving off here, next I tell the story about a second high-profile *bhikkhunī* ordination that was organized by Sri Lankan participants and conferred in India by Taiwanese and Lankan monastics in 1998. Organized by Ven. Inamaluwe Sumangala, chief incumbent of the Rangiri cluster of cave temples in Dambulla, I outline the once cooperative but now tenuous relationship between these two *bhikkhunī* ordination revival movements, termed by Salgado as the Sarnath

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 59, 131.

and Bodhgaya-Dambulla *bhikkhunīs*, respectively.⁹⁰ I draw on Salgado's argument that what is at stake in disputes between these two burgeoning lineages, each claiming (and competing) to be the "first" to revive the lineage, is precisely who has the authority to define authentic 'Theravāda' in contemporary Lankan monastic practice. The internal contestation between these groups largely has to do with which of the two ordinations can be deemed Theravādin in light of the fact that both were performed with the assistance of East-Asian Mahāyāna conferring monastics.

I expand on Salgado's analysis to show how these two contemporary *bhikkhunī* lineages become localized, that is, how they demonstrate their authenticity in a distinctly Lankan idiom. As one example of this project drawn from my observations in Sri Lanka, I cite instances of the high levels of monastic comportment with Vinaya rules demonstrated by Sri Lanka's modern *bhikkhunīs*. I show how strict comportment with the hundreds of Vinaya rules both demonstrates religious piety (as constituted through comportment with these rules) and helps to legitimize the contested nuns' ordination movement in the eyes of monastic institutions and lay patrons by virtue of that piety. Unsurprisingly, this comportment is principally expressed in terms of Buddhist soteriological motivation, and not—following Saba Mahmood's argument in *Politics of Piety*—as a gendered resistance against patriarchal subordination. Finally, I conclude with a brief discussion noting that the gendered dimensions of this performance of piety strategize on a wide-ranging belief that Sri Lanka's monks are generally lax in their monastic practice, and many of the current monastic institutions are corrupt. This discussion provides an additional point of symmetry between this case study and the next.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 150. I will draw on Salgado's useful classification throughout the rest of the chapter.

Kolonnawe Kusuma, the First *Bhikkhuni*

Kusuma Gunawardene was born in October 1929 in Kolonnawa, now part of Colombo, to a well-educated family of pious Buddhists. Her English-language autobiography *Braving the Unknown Summit: Autobiography of Ven. Bhikkhuni Dr. Kolonnawe Kusuma* describes a generally happy childhood in a large family during and after World War II.⁹¹ Her mother, Emilia Bartholomeusz Rajapakse, was the local Buddhist Sunday School (*daham pasala*) teacher at the Kolonnawa Raja Mahā Viharaya, across the street from her childhood home. She describes that her mother was a devoted reader of *Sinhala Bauddhaya* (“Sinhala Buddhist”) magazine, initially published by Anagarika Dharmapāla, then president of the Mahābodhi society, during “a time of Buddhist cultural renaissance after nearly 400 years of foreign domination.”⁹² Her father, Don Cornelis Gunawardene, was a civil engineer who oversaw a large government factory in Kolonnawa. She enrolled in Ananda Balika Vidyalaya (“Ananda Girl’s College”) in Colombo, then (under British rule) an English-medium school, where she studied chemistry, biology, and Pāli, noting that in her 6th year, her class was comprised of forty boys to three or four girls.⁹³ After eight years of study, she took and nearly passed the medical school entrance examinations for the University of Colombo. Upon graduation, she took a position teaching English at the Primary School at the Royal College of Colombo, at which point it was decided by her parents and older siblings that she would marry a teacher at the Mahinda College in Galle, Aśoka Devendra.

⁹¹ Kusuma Devendra, *Braving the Unknown Summit: Autobiography of Ven. Bhikkhuni Dr. Kolonnawe Kusuma* (Colombo: Akna Publishers, 2012), 3.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 18 & 9.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 26.

For several years, she and Aśoka managed large households in Maharagama and subsequently in Mahamegha, near present day Nugegoda, just south of Colombo. She describes that they were regular patrons of both Balangoda Ananda Maitreya and Nyanaponika Maha Thera, two famous and influential monks (one Sri Lankan and one German-born), and undertook with their children, family, and neighbors a number of Buddhist activities such as making pilgrimages, monthly observance of *aṭa sil* on *poya*⁹⁴ days, and meditation (*bhāvana*) retreats.⁹⁵ After the death of her mother and daughter, she writes, the role of Buddhist practice in her life took a more personal tenor. Kusuma describes that once her mother had become ill at 89 years of age, she expressed a desire to the family to become a *dasa-sil* nun. After much discussion, Kusuma relays that the family unanimously decided to have a bedside ceremony in which they shaved her mother's head, dressed her in a yellow blouse, and kept a yellow robe by the bed.

In 1969, Kusuma received a joint grant from the National Science Foundation and the Asia Foundation to study toward a MSc in Molecular Biology at Ball State University in Indiana. She writes that her interest in biology was motivated by more a more fundamental interest in life's 'big questions,' such as: "“why are we born? Why do we all have to die?” etc.” Her realization that this course of study was poorly equipped to generate traction on these kinds of questions, she writes, also prompted a renewed interest in Buddhism: “looking back now, I think this was the turning point in my life. I felt that I had to turn elsewhere in my quest of discovery and because my life was rooted in Buddhism from very young days, I instinctively felt that the

⁹⁴ The observance of 8 precepts on full moon days.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 56-69.

answers may lie therein. Then the thought came that it would be better for me to join a Sri Lankan university and start studying Buddhism more intensely.”⁹⁶

Returning from the U.S. after a short period in the States, she enrolled in Buddhism courses at Sri Jayawardanapura University in Nugegoda. During that time, she began investigating the Therīgāthā texts and became inspired by the enlightenment utterances of the early Buddhist nuns. In our conversation at the Ayya Khema Meditation Center in Olaboduwa, Kusuma relayed to me that she was dismayed when she realized the lineage of *bhikkhunīs* was lost:

I was crying and asking ‘where are the *bhikkhunīs*?’ Then only I became aware that there are only ten-precept nuns. They have no ordination, no access to bowl and robe, or *saṅgika dāna* [offerings made to the *saṅgha*], or *saṅgika* property, or the Vinaya rules. I became aware and I said ‘where are the *bhikkhunīs*? They’re lost.’ Then only I realized that 1000 years ago they were lost and it was never resurrected.

Around this time, she befriended the German ten-precept nun Ayya Khema, who helped spark an interest in Sri Lanka’s modern ten precept renunciant order, noting in her autobiography that:

I became convinced that the lives of these Ten Precept Nuns should be researched and documented since most of them were living in obscurity and want, not recognized as a respected part of society. This sowed the seed of a PhD research on the *Dasasil Matha* Movement in Sri Lanka, in my fertile mind. So far no one had spared any serious thought to such a research. Buddhist monks were educated and erudite and generally had a prestigious position in society, whereas the nuns certainly did not.⁹⁷

Furthermore, Kusuma notes that in her interviews with *dasa sil mātās* leading to her dissertation,⁹⁸ they reported to her significant disparities between the living conditions of monks and nuns, claiming that because they had left their lives at home for a religious vocations in

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁹⁸ Kusuma’s doctoral dissertation, “The Dasasil Nun: A Study of Women’s Buddhist Religious Movements in Sri Lanka with an Outline of its Historical Antecedents,” submitted to the University of Sri Jayawardanapura in 1987, was subsequently published under the same name in 2010 by the Buddhist Cultural Center, the subject of the next chapter.

which, according to her autobiography, “neither the monks, not the lay people and not even the Government gave them any kind of recognition or respect... and as a result they were a marginalized community in society, most of the time eking out a very poor living and existing under difficult circumstances hardly having the means even to fulfill their religious aspirations.”⁹⁹ Here already, in describing the formative conditions for her early interest in Sri Lanka’s Buddhist nuns, Kusuma reveals a concern with gender equity amongst Buddhist renunciant populations, and a keen awareness of not only the socioeconomic disparity between marginal nuns populations and that of monks, but also the lack of respect and recognition enjoyed by male-dominated monastic institutions in comparison to the monks.

In our discussion, I asked Kusuma why the Buddha initially refused to ordain Mahāpajāpati. Her reply played on the category of ‘liberation’ as a shifting signifier, mediating between gender equality and soteriology:

Men thought that women have ‘two-finger consciousness,’ that is to say they have no brains. Everyday they cook rice and they have to take a grain of rice [between their fingers] to see whether it is ready or not. That is the two-finger consciousness. So women were really uneducated, downtrodden. The mothers are still children, and they have their babies, all living in one house under this man. This is the background that the Buddha instituted the *bhikkhunī* order, making them equal to the men. So you can imagine what a major breakthrough it is. He said ‘no, these women have the brains to become *arahants*.’ And they all became *arahants*! They were the lucky ones born in that era.

Kusuma describes the first *arahat* (fully-enlightened) *bhikkhunīs*, the ‘lucky ones,’ as having achieved a major social breakthrough escaping from their ‘uneducated’ and ‘downtrodden’ situations through the liberation promised by entry into the *sangha*. Furthermore, her comment evidences an association of the Buddha’s decision to ordain nuns with Buddhism’s supposed recognition of women’s equality and rights, a theme I pick up again in next chapter’s discussion of Ven. Kirama Wimalajōthi.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 102.

Kusuma's comment here stands at odds with Salgado's assessment that language about rights, equality, or status represent the incursion of liberal feminist frameworks that stand outside the everyday experiences of Sri Lanka's Buddhist nuns. Although Kusuma's story diverges from the majority of the *sil mātā* nuns Salgado interviews who do not seek the higher ordination, nowhere do Kusuma's comments show the one-way relationship between 'globalatinized' representations of the nun as a deprived, suffering subject in need of betterment. That Kusuma's speech



Figure 4: Bhikkhunī Kusuma
(author photo: Olaboduwa, January 2016)

evidences this perspective should not be misconstrued by the research as inauthentic. Recall that in the previous chapter, she argues that the story of the eight *garudhammas* and other negative portrayals of early Buddhist women represent a later interpolation of male monastics seeking to preserve an androcentric order amidst a gender-discriminatory 'Brahmanistic' cultural milieu.

The 1996 Sarnath Ordination

In 1996 Kusuma became widely regarded as the first Sri Lankan woman on record to receive *bhikkhunī* ordination as a Theravāda nun since the lineage was eradicated in the 11th century.¹⁰⁰ As I have mentioned, her high-profile ordination took place in Sarnath, India, and was organized by Ranjani de Silva and Kusuma, working as Lankan members of the Sakyadhītā

¹⁰⁰ Shihara Maduwage, "Trendsetter: Bhikkhuni Dr. Kusuma," *Daily Mirror (Sri Lanka)*, December 8, 2014, A12.

International Association of Buddhist Women in conjunction with the Mahābodhi Society and its then chief incumbent Mapalagama Wipulasara. The ritual itself was conducted by a dual-*saṅgha* of nuns and monks from the Bo Miyun Sa Temple in South Korea after Wipulasara instructed Kusuma to travel there in order to personally examine the texts used to conduct the *upasampadā* (higher ordination ceremony). She writes in her autobiography that:

I found that the Korean *Dharmagupa Vinaya* tradition of Ordination was practically the same as the Theravada tradition and that the procedure was also the same as the one practiced during the days of the Buddha himself. As mentioned before, it became obvious that the *Bhikkhuni* Ordination which had been taken from Sri Lanka to China and from there to Korea and other countries, had not been tampered with in any way and had retained its original form and purity.¹⁰¹

Concluding that only minor differences existed between the Korean *Dharmagupa* ordination and the Theravādin one, Kusuma, then acting as a lay consultant to the ordination efforts in her capacity as a scholar of the *Bhikkhuni* Vinaya, agreed that a dual-*saṅgha* ordination would be valid. In her autobiography, she argues that because the *bhikṣuṇī* order in East Asian countries was spread from Sri Lanka, as far as ordination lineage is concerned, all *bhikkhunis* in the world can trace their lineage back to the one founded in Sri Lanka by Sanghamittā Therī, who brought the ordination lineage from India.¹⁰² I asked Kusuma about opposition to the ordination on the basis of its Mahāyāna origins. In her reply, she emphasized the continuity (recall Mrozik's emphasis on continuity as legitimation strategy) of the Korean ordination lineage with the Lankan one, citing the fact that the Dharmagupta *bhikṣuṇī* lineage came from Sri Lanka:

We lost our ordination and then we got it back from them, it is the same lineage. From India, Sanghamitta, then here. After the 6th century, after the 9th century, Devasara, a Sri Lankan *bhikkhuni*, and others, they went on wind-driven sailing ships across the sea, very difficult travel, they went and established *bhikkhuni* ordination in China. So from China it went to Korea, Taiwan, and Mahāyāna countries. Same lineage, but now they have

¹⁰¹ Devendra, *Braving the Unknown Summit*, 135-6.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 128.

become Mahāyāna, but what we got back, we got only the lineage, we didn't get Mahāyāna, we don't know Mahāyāna.

It is important to note her differentiation between lineage and practice. By highlighting both the similarity and purity of ordination procedure and the common ordination lineage, but differentiating the Theravāda and Mahāyāna identities of Lankan and Korean monastics, Kusuma is already attuned to the project of legitimizing the new *bhikkhunī* order against claims of “impurity” (*apiridisukama*) or “foreignness” (*videśakama*). This is important. I interviewed a number of *dasa-sil-mātā* nuns in Kandy, Anuradhapura, and Colombo who expressed suspicion of the nascent *bhikkhunī* lineages on the basis of their impurity. More than one *sil mātā* I spoke with expressed to me that the ordination was “impure” (“*pirididu upasampadā nemeyi!*”). I will return to a discussion of some of the strategies that contemporary *bhikkhunīs* employ to legitimize and localize their lineage against claims of impurity and foreignness in the final section of this chapter.

Kusuma, de Silva, and Wipulasara put out an advertisement in the newspapers to solicit applications for suitable candidates for the *bhikkhunī* ordination, which was to occur in Sarnath, where Wipulasara could oversee the organization of the *upasampadā*. Kusuma writes that they received over 200 applications and had to reject many senior *sil mātās* who were either unable to leave their temples for a prolonged stay of monastic training in India, or who were reluctant to be on the receiving end of anti-*bhikkhunī* sentiment back in Sri Lanka due to its rejection by monastic *nikāya* elders and government officials.¹⁰³ Finally, nine candidates were selected. While she was in Korea researching the connections between the *Dharmagupta* ordination lineage and Theravāda, Kusuma received a frantic call from Wipulasara, concerned that the nine candidates were not suitable for the ordination due to their lack of knowledge about Buddhism

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 133.

and communication skills in English (suggesting that international support was even then viewed to be a key to its success given the controversy in Sri Lanka). According to Kusuma's account of the conversation, "Ven. Vipulasara Thero, who without any preamble, told me that he was under attack from all quarters regarding the reinstatement of the *bhikkhunī* order in Sri Lanka and that no one was willing to express any support openly for fear of retaliation."¹⁰⁴ Kusuma writes that Vipulasara would only go ahead with the ordination if she agreed to lead the nine women and receive it herself. Begging him not to abandon the plans, she relays her response to him:

Please Ven. Sir, please don't think of abandoning this wonderful thing *which we have strived so hard for*. If you give up now, it will be such a shame and it will never happen again in future [sic]. Already 150 Korean *Bhikkhus* and *Bhikkhunis* have bought their air tickets and have made all the preparations to go to India for the Ordination Ceremony. So please reconsider your decision and *help the whole womanhood in Sri Lanka to achieve liberation*. [Emphasis mine]¹⁰⁵

Contrast this with Salgado's account of the very same telephone call, she writes that:

Vipulasara worried that in this pool there was no renunciant adequately equipped for the task; in fact he was concerned about the qualifications of the *sil matas* who were preparing to train at Sarnath. The idealized Theravada *bhikkhuni*, largely the creation of controversy and dissent, was not a figure that the *sil matas* themselves readily embraced.¹⁰⁶

In attempting to speak for the "renunciant everyday" of the majority of Sri Lanka's *dasa-sil-mātā* nuns who do not seek *bhikkhunī* ordination, Salgado elides the fact that language about striving, movements, and liberation, evidenced by Kusuma's quote above, *do* factor in the dispute over *bhikkhunī* ordination. Kusuma describes the ordination as a result "*which we have strived so hard for*" and as a boon to the "*whole womanhood of Sri Lanka*," connecting in simultaneously gendered and Buddhist terms liberation with activism.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹⁰⁶ Salgado, *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice*, 164.

By contrast, In her 2005 monograph *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing models an ethnographic approach for following translocal chains of commodity circulation, knowledge, and activism as they move through and intersect at and between global and local spaces of engagement and contestation. The metaphor of ‘friction,’ as the title suggests, describes these nexuses not in terms of smooth operation between global and local points of conjuncture, but as the formative conditions for the motion by which these global chains operate. Friction, she argues, permits “the rubber to meet the road,” which open up the simultaneous possibilities of long-distance movement and “historical trajectories” which “enable, exclude, and particularize.”¹⁰⁷ Where Salgado presupposes the oppositional dichotomy of Sri Lankan renunciant women who have and have not been influenced by the translocal circulation of their representation as deprived, suffering subjects, Tsing provides the researcher with a language to move the conversation beyond this dichotomy that delegitimizes foreign contact, inadvertently replicating the conditions for authenticity on the ground, and to show how the multidirectional circulation of speech and activism move between local and translocal horizons of activity.

The collaborative effort between Kusuma, de Silva, Wipulasra, and their respective organizations, the Mahābodhi Society and Sakyadhītā, evidences how the aims of actors at local and international levels, far from representing a one-way trajectory of imposition of “liberal feminist” thought onto the “renunciant everyday” of Sri Lankan Buddhist nuns, instead reveals a multidirectional circulation of thought and activism. Where Salgado forecloses on the possibility of a more nuanced analysis by not going beyond a local-global dichotomy in this classification, Tsing provides an object lesson in how to nuance translocal cooperation at and between points of friction, helping researchers of Sri Lankan *bhikkhunī* ordination move beyond Salgado’s

¹⁰⁷ Tsing, *Friction*, 5,6.

assertion that the struggle for ordination, because it is far from unified across its various levels and actors, simply does not resemble a bottom-up social movement. Salgado argues that social movements “invite thinking about a pre-defined (named) social, religious, or political group that had its genesis at one point in time and space, has specific goals, and follow a trajectory that ends at a different point. A closer look at female renunciation indicates that such terminology is moot. *Sil matas*’ lives are not imbricated in such a sense of social movement.”¹⁰⁸ Salgado draws on her interviews with *sil-mātās* from the 1980s through the 2000s, most of whom reject *bhikkhunī* ordination, and locates Kusuma’s language about *striving* and *liberation* to be the result of Sakyadhītā’s engagement with liberal feminist thought, not the legitimate concerns and lived realities of many of Sri Lanka’s ten-precept nuns. Tsing argues that following translocal collaboration across difference opens up new avenues of analysis to the researcher: “in transnational collaborations, overlapping but discrepant forms of cosmopolitanism may inform contributors, allowing them to converse—but across difference. Attention to collaboration moves beyond the eternal standoff between opposing interest groups... but not because it assumes that compromise is always imminent. Collaborations create *new* interests and identities.”¹⁰⁹ In the next section, I show how the translocal collaboration between Kusuma, de Silva, and the other participants who made the 1996 ordination possible, reveals more than just a group of activist nuns who have learned to speak in a language at odds with the ‘renunciant everyday’ of the majority of Sri Lanka’s *dasa-sil* nuns, but rather how Sakyadhītā—formed through the collaboration of Lankan and non-Lankan participants alike—evidences translocal cooperation that made possible the new (and old) identity of the Sri Lankan *bhikkhunī*.

¹⁰⁸ Salgado, *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice*, 126.

¹⁰⁹ Tsing, *Friction*, 13.

Sakyadhītā and Global Feminist Discourse

Rather than portray the activism of Sakyadhītā as a ‘*globalatinizing*’ influence in the lives of Sri Lanka’s nuns, it is my intent to show how Kusuma and de Silva’s speech on the one hand, and Sakyadhītā’s support for *bhikkhunī* ordination on the other, are intertwined.

Sakyadhītā was formed in February 1987 during the first International Conference on Buddhist Nuns, which convened in Bodhgaya, India.¹¹⁰ The idea to organize a conference that led to the formation of Sakyadhītā came about as a collaborative effort between Karma Lekshe Tsomo, who led the organization of the conference, Chatsumarn Kabilsingh (now Bhikkhunī Dhammānanda), the German-born nuns Ayya Khema and Jampa Tsoedron, Kusuma Devendra, Ranjani de Silva, Friedgard Lottermoser (now Samanerī Akincana), and others, eleven in total. In describing her reasons for founding Sakyadhītā, Karma Lekshe Tsomo, an American-born Buddhist studies scholar and Tibetan nun, speaks in terms that reflect an ethos of gender equality between female and male monastic lineages:

There is a point where Buddhism can legitimately be called into question on the gender issue, however, and that is the disparity that exists between the theoretical spiritual equality of men and women presented in the Buddhist texts and the institutionalized inequalities existing within certain Buddhist societies... Once inequalities are identified, they can be rectified quite rapidly through the implementation of constructive, well-considered changes. Now is the perfect time to gain support for such changes.¹¹¹

While on the surface, Tsomo’s reasoning could be called into question as a western feminist scholar’s attempt to impose her values on deprived, third-world Buddhist women, it is also true that an awareness of these inequalities circulates amongst Sri Lankan women themselves. Far from the unique insight of ‘first world’ scholarship, engagement with the subject of inequality between women and men in Sri Lanka is an area of concern for local scholars and activists, too.

¹¹⁰ Karma Lekshe Tsomo, "The First International Conference on Buddhist Nuns," in *Sakyadhītā: Daughters of the Buddha*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1988), 36.

¹¹¹ Tsomo, "Introduction," in *Sakyadhītā: Daughters of the Buddha*, 25.

In addition to Kusuma's PhD work which proposes strategies to improve the living conditions and reduce the social marginalization of *dasa-sil-mātā* nuns described above, Kamala Liyanage, Senior Professor of Political Science at the University of Peradeniya near Kandy, spoke with me about disparities of socioeconomic status and prestige that pervade the modern *saṅgha*:

I have seen very few Buddhist nuns who belong to the elite or upper-middle classes. Therefore, when it comes to the low-caste, impoverished rural, those kinds of hierarchies, even in the *Buddhasāsana*, can be identified. Therefore, when it comes to Buddhist nuns, they don't have that much social power, political power, economic power. When it comes to Buddhist monks, they have... Whether it is a lay or a *bhikkhunī sāsana*, or a Buddhist monk or whatever, there are differences when it comes to class, ethnicity, family level, the way we were born, all these differences are there. We don't see a kind of homogenous group as women.

Liyanage's comment reveals that a concern with gender equality, the language of access, rights, status, and power, can also be terms that are emic to a Sri Lankan feminist discourse. Her comments stand with Kusuma's assertion that the ordination would benefit the "whole womanhood" of Sri Lanka and her previous academic engagement with marginal communities of *dasa-sil-mātās*, suggesting strategies to improve their access to education, financial and material resources, and to uplift their status in Lankan society through connecting their institutions with longstanding Buddhist monastic paradigms.

Tsomo recalls that even at the first Sakyadhītā conference, two of the primary goals of the new organization were creating linkages between Buddhist nuns across distance, and working toward full ordination:

One goal that emerged vividly at the conference was the ideal of fostering an international Buddhist sisterhood which would unite women of the various Buddhist traditions. This ideal took shape with the formation of Sakyadhītā, the International Association of Buddhist Women, on February 17, the final day of the conference... The association will link the nuns of various Buddhist countries who have been separated by long distances and have lacked contact with one another until now. It will assist women who wish to obtain ordination and will work toward establishing full ordination for Buddhist women in countries where it is not currently available.¹¹²

¹¹² Tsomo, "The First International Conference on Buddhist Nuns," 36.

Far from the foreign incursion of ‘*globalatinized*’ thought which conflates global with ‘*latinized*,’ the founding moments of Sakyadhītā reveal the cooperation of Asian Buddhist women like Kusuma, de Silva, and Chatsumarn Kabilsingh alongside their non-Asian counterparts. Since its founding in 1987, Sakyadhītā continues to hold near-yearly international conferences. The 2015 conference, held in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, listed almost sixty papers in the English-language program.¹¹³ In telling the rest of this story about Sakyadhītā, I will draw on my conversation with Ranjani de Silva, who describes her motivations for supporting nuns ordination in terms of providing proper (*sudusu*) training and resources for nuns to be of service for rural Buddhist women.

De Silva’s interest in Buddhist nuns arose after doing a meditation retreat with the German nun Ayya Khema in Sri Lanka in 1984. Shortly thereafter, she started a *dasa-sil-mātā* training center for nuns. Three years later, she attended the inaugural 1987 Sakyadhītā conference in Bodhgaya, and was struck by the large gathering of Buddhist women from numerous different countries, noting the disparities between Lankan nuns and those from elsewhere whose living conditions and education were better. In 1993 both her and Kusuma organized the 3rd annual Sakyadhītā conference which took place in Colombo. In my conversations with de Silva and Kusuma, both separately recalled that in 1993 the Sri Lankan Supreme *Saṅgha* Council only agreed to permit the conference if the organizers agreed not to present on or discuss *bhikkhunī* ordination. Regardless, according to de Silva, the issue was broached anyways, and the conversations about ordination that started in 1993 began a chain

¹¹³ Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women, "Program: Sakyadhita 14th International Conference on Buddhist Women Yogyakarta, Indonesia," Sakyadhita, June 2, 2015, http://www.sakyadhita.org/docs/resources/conferences/14-Program_SI2015Conference_06022015.pdf.

reaction of events eventually leading to *bhikkhunī* ordinations of Lankan Theravādin nuns in India in 1996 and again in 1998.

In our conversation, de Silva told me that her support for nuns in the early 1990s had nothing to do with *bhikkhunī* ordination at first. Rather, she was concerned about the welfare of Buddhism during a period of intense civil war between the Sinhalese-led government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), separatist forces in the Northern and Eastern parts of the island. She related to me that:

Our country in '89, '90 was very bad with all the terrorism, so something was telling me our country was going like this and our younger generation, we have to do something for them... As women we have to do something for the future. This community of *sil matas* [was] a good block of women, I thought. Here we empower them and make use of them, [to] take the dhamma to the family. That was my motive, not the *bhikkhunīs*. My first motive was to make use of them, empower them, and support them, give them the four requisites, and they can take the dhamma to the family, society, and teach the children and women. So this is 100% happening here. So when you start there, then the *bhikkhunī* thing came. Then the monks themselves came and offered. We didn't go after the monks asking to please give us *bhikkhunī* ordination, no, the monks invited me to find some nuns.

De Silva argues that Buddhist women are a resource to serve the nation rather than deprived subjects in need of betterment, and that by empowering them and providing them with the requisites of monastic life, they can be of service to families and society. In addition, the claim that the idea to give controversial *bhikkhunī* ordination to nuns was not the idea of Sakyadhītā, de Silva, or the nuns themselves, but of monks, serves to render the ordination more legitimate in a way that reveals an additional gendered dimension to the debate. Monks are traditionally looked to as the repositories of tradition and continuity, and thus the responsibility for variously legitimating or denouncing the legality of contemporary ordinations for *bhikkhunīs* is often either delegated or diverted to them. That monks such as Wipulasara, Sumangala, and Wimalajōthi (the subject of the next chapter) are the ones looked to in order to spearhead *bhikkhunī* ordination

efforts is a revealing indication of a gendered authority hierarchy that persists in Lankan monastic practice. De Silva reiterates that her goal was not to reinstate a defunct monastic lineage, but to improve the quality of training, education, and support for already-existing ten-precept nuns during a period of violence and political instability so that they could be of service. Her language here is neither explicitly feminist (though concerned with the resources available to women renunciants) nor Buddhist (given her concern with rural uplift). This is an interesting parallel in language to Wimalajōthi's framing of *bhikkhunīs* as protectors of rural morality against Muslim influence that I describe in the next chapter.

During this early period, de Silva also notes that her efforts to train nuns who could be of service were largely successful. In doing so, she argues that well-trained, virtuous (*silvat*) renunciant women are needed at local and village levels where there is a lack of rightly-practicing monks to perform necessary religious services. She told me that:

I went into the field, all ten districts, at that time we couldn't cover all of them because of war. After training, we spoke to the villages and told them that the nuns had received this kind of training and that they are your leaders and they will be helping you, so they were very happy. Everywhere we got a very good response, and sometimes we invite the head village member, the school principal, and people like that, *they always say that these sil māātās are good. In some places they say they need the monks, but there are some places there are no monks who can serve the community. It's sad to say that sometimes they don't keep to the precepts... So this is why nuns are doing a great job.* We have more than 1000 *bhikkhuīs*, and more *samanerīs* than that. [transcribed emphasis mine]

De Silva compares the nuns she has helped to train to monks whose standards of monastic practice are lax, opening up a space for virtuous nuns to be of service to rural lay populations.

In contradistinction to the monks, nuns' higher standards of monastic practice and comportment with Vinaya rules positions them as "better" monastics. During my research period in Sri Lanka, the observation that few monks these days adhere to Vinaya rules was explained to me time and again by many lay people, *sil-mātās*, *bhikkhunīs*, and even monks I talked to at a

number of temples in Kandy, Anuradhapura, and Dambulla. One lay Buddhist in Anuradhapura reported to me that “when we bow to the monks, we bow to the robes only, because these days they handle money, drink alcohol, even some have wives.” While I analyze the idea that Sri Lanka’s monastic orders are in decline more fully in the next chapter, I could not help but notice that the nuns display a visibly high degree of comportment with Vinaya rules. This demonstration of piety, *à propos* of de Silva’s observation about lax monks, is a strategy for gaining legitimation in contradistinction to corrupt monks who are unable to be of service to the Buddhist community as a result of their failure to adhere to even the most basic monastic training standards. As Mrozik (2014) argues:

Monks, nuns, and laity have, for instance, informed me that nuns are more virtuous (*silvat*) than monks because women have more shame and fear (*lājjāva/lājja, baya*) than men. One laywoman explained: If a man and woman have an affair, the man’s reputation survives intact, but not the woman’s. It is this double standard that inculcates in women—and thus also in nuns—high degrees of shame and fear. Thus some believe that nuns are better at keeping their monastic precepts than monks.¹¹⁴

More than just shame and fear, the high degree of comportment with Vinaya rules, in addition to demonstrating virtuosity, may also help to secure material support from lay Buddhists. Several *bhikkhunīs* I spoke with articulated their willingness to accept the hundreds of precepts of a fully-ordained nun because it was the most conducive path for the attainment of *nibbana*. One of the challenges that emergent *bhikkhunī* lineages will face is how to generate acceptance and material support for themselves, especially due to the lack of state-sponsored support from the government and recognition by Sri Lanka’s powerful *nikāya* administrations.

This problem is not new. Anne M. Blackburn, in her chapter “Localizing Lineage: Importing Higher Ordination in Theravādin South and Southeast Asia,” from the 2003 edited volume *Constituting Communities: Theravāda Buddhism and the Religious Cultures of South*

¹¹⁴ Mrozik, “We Love Our Nuns,” 81.

and Southeast Asia, traces the history of the formation of the Siyam Nikāya which was imported from Thailand in 1753 to revive a then defunct *bhikkhu* ordination lineage. There would be no higher ordination whatsoever in modern Sri Lanka, for nuns or for monks, were it not for international assistance. Blackburn's chapter interrogates the strategies through which the early Siyam Nikāya positioned itself as the legitimate and authoritative bearers of the Buddhist lineage:

That the Siyam Nikāya came to dominate the monastic culture of eighteenth-century Sri Lanka owes much to the ability of its early monks and supporters to connect the new order to the island's earlier prestigious monastic traditions and to an encompassing local understanding of the *sāsana*'s history... New historical models and methods are required to accommodate an imported lineage within a locally intelligible teleology, representing the imported lineage as an agent of reform or revival, rather than a harbinger of change. At the same time, a locally acceptable history must be created for the imported lineage, linking it to monastic traditions already accorded prestige within the local Buddhist culture. The development of such a local history is likely to occur through a variety of Buddhist practices operating simultaneously.¹¹⁵

While the early Siyam Nikāya linked itself to previous models of prestige largely through textual production and demonstrations of erudition in Pāli and literary Sinhala, Sri Lanka's modern *bhikkhunīs* draw on a gendered strategy to position themselves as more pious than the monks. For example, one *bhikkhunī* I spoke with near Dambulla told me that she has lay attendants cut her fruit for her, and that she and her nuns do not garden on the property, both in accordance with minor Vinaya rules.¹¹⁶ When I asked what her motivations were for taking the higher ordination, she replied "*nibbana*" and explained that the 311 rules for *bhikkhunīs* which are codified in the Vinaya are there to ensure the most efficient lifestyle possible for the attainment of enlightenment in this life. Explained in terms of soteriological concern, strict and highly-

¹¹⁵ Blackburn, "Localizing Lineage: Importing Higher Ordination in Theravādin South and Southeast Asia," 139.

¹¹⁶ Sutta Central, "English Translation of Pi Tv Bi Pm," Sutta Central, accessed February 18, 2016, <http://suttacentral.net/en/pi-tv-bi-pm#pc106>.

visible adherence to Vinaya rules participates in a discourse which locates the nuns' standards of practice and purity of *sīla* (ethical restraint) as superior to the monks, thus ensuring their worthiness of veneration and as repositories of merit-making, important functions for lay Buddhists.

When the possibility of ordaining *sil-mātās* as *bhikkhunīs* came into focus through the organizing efforts of Sakyadhītā, Ranjani de Silva told me that she knew it was the right thing to do, arguing that despite vocal opposition, her ability to fight for the ordination and to speak eloquently about the Vinaya and articulate reasons why attempts at ordination were legitimate came from her experiences in meditation. She relayed to me that her meditation practice revealed to her that there was no karmic demerit whatsoever in pursuing the higher ordination for Lankan nuns:

There are so many people who have studied [*bhikkhunī* ordination] but didn't do it. I didn't do any study, I just did my meditation, that's all, and it came up. I was no scholar, but the facts came and I could speak at any stage. When I was doing this, the facts came out as if I knew everything. I didn't know anything before, but when I was talking about the subject with others, I had all the facts coming up. Even the Vinaya, why the Buddha gave, why the Buddha didn't refuse, everything I will reply. How he gave, how the ordination was valid.

De Silva legitimizes a controversial move to reinstate *bhikkhunī* ordination as a result of knowledge gained through meditation, a strategy of legitimation salient in Lankan Buddhist practice. By framing the legitimacy of ordination in such terms, de Silva does not even mention Sakyadhītā, but instead her individual, interior, experience *as* a Lankan Buddhist woman.

In 2000, de Silva purchased a few acres of land near Panadura and established a local branch of Sakyadhītā, called the Sakyadhitha Training and Meditation Center (*Sakyadhitha Puhunu hā Bhāvanā Madhyastanāya*), a *bhikkhunī* training monastery (see **Fig. 5**). There were about 4 nuns (two *bhikkhunīs* and two novices), when I visited. The head *bhikkhunī*,



Figure 5: Ranjani de Silva at Sakyadhitha center
(author photo: Panadura, January 2016)

Vijithananda, had a very busy teaching schedule, and was frequently invited to give *dhamma* talks at nearby monasteries. About two weeks after my trip (Jan 30th, 2016), Sakyadhitha held a dual-*saṅgha bhikkhunī* ordination using Sri Lankan monastics for three women from Thailand, three from Vietnam and five from Bangladesh in the *sīma*¹¹⁷ house in Panadura, further evidencing the intra-Asian dimensions of Sakyadhitha's *bhikkhunī* ordination activism today.¹¹⁸ In addition, Sakyadhītā continues to sponsor

international ordinations worldwide. Most recently two simultaneous ordinations took place in the Summer of 2015 in Germany and Indonesia in conjunction with the 14th Conference on Buddhist Women held in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.¹¹⁹

This is not the end of our story. In order to develop a more nuanced understanding of the frames through which Kusuma and de Silva legitimize their ordination as authentically Theravāda, we need to look at one more translocal group vying to reinstate *bhikkhunī* ordination.

¹¹⁷ A ritually defined boundary within which official acts of monastic business (such as ordinations and Vinaya recitations), take place. In Sri Lanka, *sīmas* are visually defined by the presence of 8 stones; one at each corner and stones in the middle of each side.

¹¹⁸ Songdhammakalyani Monastery, "Report on the International Theravada Bhikkhuni Ordination Feb. 4, 2016," ThaiBhikkhunis.org, February 4, 2016, <http://www.thaibhikkhunis.org/eng2014/OrdinationSriLanka.html>.

¹¹⁹ Alliance for Bhikkhunis, "Two Historic Bhikkhuni Ordinations on June 21, 2015," Alliance for Bhikkhunis, June 21, 2015, http://www.bhikkhuni.net/ordinations_62115/.

An analysis of the internal contestation between the *bhikkhunīs* ordained in Sarnath in 1996 and those in Bodh Gaya in 1998 will bring additional key features of the contemporary *bhikkhunī* ordination dispute into focus.

Inamaluwe Sumangala and the Bodh Gaya-Dambulla *Bhikkhunīs*

Within a few months of the Sarnath ordination of Kusuma and nine other Sri Lankan women, already another international ordination was in the works, this time spearheaded by Ven. Inamaluwe Sumangala, head of the influential Rangiri cave temples (*Rangiri Dambulu Uyanwattha Rajamahā Vihāraya*) and the Rangiri Sri Lanka Media Network (*Rangiri Sri Lanka Mādhyā Jālaya*) in Dambulla, Sri Lanka. In 1997, Sumangala convened the Sri Lanka *Bhikkhunī* Reawakening Organization (*Śri Lanka Bhikkhunī Sāsana Bhividdhi Samvidanaya*, or SLBRO), to prepare a number of *sil mātās* for the higher ordination. Eventually twenty-six nuns were selected and enrolled in a training program in Buddhist *suttas*, meditation, Vinaya, and monastic conduct.¹²⁰ At about the same time, the Foguanshan monastery in Taiwan began organizing an international *bhikkhunī* ordination to take place in 1998 in Bodh Gaya. After exploring the possibility of ordaining several of the nuns-in-training in Dambulla, Sumangala eventually decided to send ten *sil-mātās*, who had by then received the *sāmaṇerī* ordination, to Bodh Gaya.¹²¹

At first, Kusuma was involved in the SLBRO ordination of the first Bodhgaya-Dambulla nuns. In our conversation, she relayed that many of the Sri Lankan monks in attendance at Bodh Gaya were reluctant to participate in the actual *upasampadā*, and thus deferred the responsibility to her:

¹²⁰ Nirmala S. Salgado, "Unity and Diversity Among Buddhist Nuns in Sri Lanka," in *Innovative Buddhist Women: Swimming against the Stream*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2000), 34-5.

¹²¹ Salgado, *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice*, 166.

In the second ordination at Bodhgaya, there were monks who were only observers. They didn't want to take part in the second ordination. They conferred on me to give ordination on their behalf. So I am the one who gave ordination to the Dambulla nuns. They all are witness to this, but they didn't want to recognize that. So I just kept my mouth shut. That is how the thing happened, I am still living to tell you that... They were observers, all the Rangiri Dambulla and all the big monks who were assigned to give the second ordination, they were only observers and they asked me to conduct the procedure. I gave the ordination to the Dambulla nuns. The Dambulla nuns came back to Sri Lanka and started giving ordination.

Despite the initial cooperation between the progenitors of the Sarnath and the Bodh Gaya-Dambulla *bhikkhunī* lineages, the relationship would soon sour as internal contestation about recognition as the “first” *bhikkhunī* ordination for Theravādin women would come to dominate the discourse between these two groups. As Salgado argues, precisely what is at stake in the contestation between the groups is the authority to define an authentic Theravāda lineage. Before turning to and advancing this discussion, it is important to understand Sumangala's support of *bhikkhunī* ordination in terms of a prior cleavage of monastic authority from the previous decade.

Since the 1980s, Sumangala has overseen the wealthy and influential Rangiri Dambulla network of temples and monasteries in central Sri Lanka. The site was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site because of the ancient cave temples and frescoes contained within many of them, some of which date back to the 5th Century BCE.¹²² Under his tenure, the Rangiri Dambulla organization has instituted a nationwide TV channel and radio station that broadcasts Buddhist sermons, news, and cultural programming twenty-four hours a day, billing itself as Sri Lanka's first Buddhist radio channel.¹²³

¹²² Anuradha Seneviratna, *Golden Rock Temple of Dambulla: Caves of Infinite Buddhas* (Colombo: UNESCO-Sri Lanka Cultural Triangle Project, 1983) 11.

¹²³ Rangiri Sri Lanka News Paper, "Rangiri Sri Lanka Media Network," The Golden Temple, accessed February 18, 2016, <http://goldentemple.lk/site/rslnm>.

Salgado and Cheng's fieldwork with Sumangala indicate that his decision to confer the higher ordination on *sil-mātās*, despite a lack of government recognition and the denouncement of all three major Lankan *nikāyas*, is that he believes despite international attempts, *bhikkhunī* ordination will only gain legitimacy in Sri Lanka if a local lineage can be brought up.¹²⁴ He argues that the ordination benefits Sri Lankan renunciant women because it gives them a "proper status" in society that will eventually grant them access to resources such as education and state funding for their religious institutions.¹²⁵

However, Sumangala was already in 1997 in a good position to break with dominant opinion in Sri Lanka about *bhikkhunī* ordination. Ananda Abeysekara, who did extensive fieldwork with him, relays that in 1985 he split from the Asgiri Siyam Nikāya and began conferring *bhikkhu* ordination on men irrespective of caste, causing an uproar in the Nikāya



Figure 6: Display of Rangiri Dambulla *bhikkhunī* ordination photos (author photo: Dambulla, January 2016)

administration, leading Sumangala to develop his own sub-order of the Siyam Nikāya, the Dambulla Siyam Nikāya.¹²⁶ The majority of Siyam Nikāya *upasampadās* occur at either the Asgiri or Mawatta Maha Vihārayas in Kandy. Abeysekera relays that Sumangala found the

increasing centralization of monastic

¹²⁴ Salgado, "Unity and Diversity Among Buddhist Nuns in Sri Lanka," 38.

¹²⁵ Cheng, *Buddhist Nuns in Taiwan and Sri Lanka*, 32.

¹²⁶ Ananda Abeysekera, "Politics of Higher Ordination, Buddhist Monastic Identity, and Leadership at the Dambulla Temple in Sri Lanka," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 22.2 (1999): 261.

authority to conduct higher ordinations, and the interrelated fact that only high-caste (*govigama*) men were eligible for it, to be fundamentally at odds with one of the purposes of ordination: the wide dispersion of monastics to carry the message of Buddhism.¹²⁷

Because Sumangala was already overseeing a prominent cultural and tourist site, his financial position was secure. Hence, by the time he began giving *bhikkhunī* ordination in 1998 he was already a well-funded monastic elder overseeing a large complex of temples with archeological and cultural significance (therefore a constant supply of donations and tourist revenue) who had already-broken with tradition once, and was thus in a good position to do so again. Salgado argues that his support for *bhikkhunī* ordination must be viewed within the frame of his contestation of the Siyam Nikāya's centralization of authority.¹²⁸ Thus, ordaining *bhikkhunīs* becomes another avenue to assert a more *authentic* Theravāda Buddhist identity through positioning himself as a monastic reformer. I discuss this historically-constructed role in greater detail in the next chapter.

After the 1998 ordination, Sumangala and the Bodh Gaya-Dambulla *bhikkhunīs* began to assert the uniquely Theravāda character of their ordination in contradistinction to the earlier Sarnath ordination on the basis that the latter was conducted “in the presence of Sri Lankan *Bhikkhus*.”¹²⁹ Thus, Sumangala not only undermines the “purity” (*pirisidu bhāvaya*) of the Sarnath lineage, but also, following Abeysekara's *Colors of the Robe: Religion, Identity, and Difference*, reveals an instance where what gets defined as Theravāda—and more importantly who has the authority to define—comes into central visibility through discursive contestation.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 261-2.

¹²⁸ Salgado, *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice*, 167.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 171.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 152.

This is also evidenced by the terms through which so many of the monastics who reject *bhikkhunī* ordination do so. As I have discussed in the previous chapter, both Sri Lanka's powerful *nikāya* administrations and many *sil-mātās* express their disapproval of reviving *bhikkhunī* ordination on the basis of its Mahāyāna origins. Sumangala and several of the *bhikkhunīs* claim that because their ordination was conducted in the presence of Sri Lankan monks, it (and not Kusuma's earlier ordination conducted only by Korean monastics) could be considered Theravāda. I asked Kusuma if she encountered any opposition to the ordination because the Korean conferring monastics were Mahāyāna, she replied that:

The monks here, they said 'this is Mahāyāna.' That's one reason why they are putting forward. Mahāyāna has no ordination apart from the Theravāda ordination that went from Sri Lanka... Starting from Buddha days it came through Saṅghamittā, from here into China. The ordination procedure is the same, dual ordination, so what we got is only that. We have the Pāli tradition but we dropped our ordination. So we took only the ordination, and now we continue on the Pāli tradition."

Kusuma emphasizes continuity with Sri Lanka's original *bhikkhunī* lineage established by Saṅghamittā, separating the lineage of ordination from the identity of Mahāyāna practice as a strategy of constituting the lineage as locally legitimate. In doing so, she argues for its validity within the terms established by dissenting voices.

Conclusion

Salgado argues of the 1996 and 1998 ordinations that "the (predominantly) Sinhalese-speaking *bhikkhunīs* who were ordained in the late 1990s... did not for the most part see themselves as achieving a specific goal and as participants in an unfolding history."¹³¹ As I have noted, she shows how the representation of the *sil-mātā* nun as a deprived, suffering subject arose as the product of liberal feminist academic frameworks which reveal more about 'our' own categories of analyses than they do about 'their' everyday experiences, motivations, and spheres

¹³¹ Salgado, *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice*, 44

of concern and activity. In contrast, Tsing argues that “we must move beyond the common-sense assumption that solidarity means homogeneity. Differences invigorate social mobilizations. Differences engage political abstractions, making them applicable to local situations.”¹³² This echoes Mrozik’s insight that the meanings of colloquial speech (at local levels) might not be self-evident to the researcher, or even carry the same connotations.

In this section I have shown how Sakyadhītā’s founding members and motivations do align with feminist discourse as it circulates globally, yet Kusuma and de Silva use strategies of localization to ground the language of equality and status in a Sri Lankan idiom. Through the translocal cooperation of Sri Lankan, Asian, and non-Asian Buddhist women, Sakyadhītā, in both its international and local centers, works toward reinstating *bhikkhunī* ordination through the global networks and local aspirations of Sri Lankan Buddhist women.

In the next chapter, I advance Mrozik’s (2014) insight that to everyday Lankan Buddhists, concerns about the Vinaya have less to do with the issue of nuns’ ordination than issues of national and ethnic identity. In my second case study, I introduce another powerful and highly-visible male monastic supporters of *bhikkhunī* ordination and show how ethnic antagonism in Sri Lankan political discourse intersects with the issue of *bhikkhunī* ordination as yet a different strategy of localization.

¹³² Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*, 245.

Chapter IV | Purity, Politics, and the *Sāsana*:
Ven. Kirama Wimalajōthi and the Dekanduwela *Bhikkhunī* Training Center

Introduction

It is hot in Colombo, even in late December. I dab the sweat from my forehead as the air conditioning runs full-blast in the passenger seat of a large Econoline van bearing the logo of the Buddhist Cultural Center (*Bauddha Sanskrutika Madhyastānaya*, henceforth BCC) on the side. In the driver's seat is Dinesh,¹³³ the BCC's driver and a cousin of the head *bhikkhunī* residing at the BCC-run Dekanduwela *Bhikkhunī* Training Center. In the back seat are three nuns in training. I hitched a ride with them back to the BCC headquarters on Anderson Rd. in Colombo. We begin chatting as the car fights its way through the afternoon traffic from the Dekanduwela center in Horana (see **Fig. 7**), along verdant, tree-lined roads through residential neighborhoods and the occasional rice paddy. In a mix of Sinhala and English, the nuns, Dinesh, and I talk about what their lives are like at Dekanduwela, their daily schedule and upcoming construction projects on the property. Invariably—as often happens during casual conversation in Sri Lanka—our discussion turned to politics. The three nuns affirmed their support for Mahinda Rajapaksa, the previous president (*hitapu janādhipathi*) who



Figure 7: Locations discussed in this chapter

¹³³ The names of lay Buddhist supporters, contacts, and friends of mine have been changed.

in 2009 led Sri Lanka's military to defeat the last stronghold of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The nuns described him as a strong leader (unlike the current president Maithripala Sirisena), who had done great things for the security and prosperity of the nation, namely ending the nearly 26-year civil war and significantly updating the country's infrastructure through massive transportation and building projects.

I was fortunate enough to visit Dekanduwela for the day with my friend Sithumini, a devout lay Buddhist and meditation teacher who was making preparations (along with the head *bhikkhuni*) to stay at the center and conduct a long meditation retreat for the nuns in residence. I spent the day at Dekanduwela with Sithumini and lent a hand cleaning, sweeping the grounds, and helping to make the large hall (*śālāwa*) ready for the long hours of meditation (*bhāvana*) that lie ahead for Dekanduwela's 22 nuns. Upon returning to Colombo, I said goodbye to the nuns and Dinesh and spent a few hours perusing the BCC's large Buddhist bookstore and, after chatting with the manager for several minutes, was informed that it would be possible for me to speak with Ven. Kirama Wimalajōthi Thero, the founder and chief incumbent of the BCC and a well-known, influential, and politically divisive monk in his own right.

Wimalajōthi is a highly visible and politically influential monk with a great deal of financial and material resources at his disposal. He founded the BCC in 1992 under the patronage of his teacher, K. Sri Dhammananda.¹³⁴ It now comprises the Dekanduwela *bhikkhuni* training monastery in Horana, south of Colombo, two large Buddhist bookstores in the city (and one in the Colombo International Airport), and a large monastery. He developed these centers with donations from networks of supporters in Malaysia, Singapore, and the U.S. after living abroad in those countries for approximately 20 years. Returning to Sri Lanka after this long

¹³⁴ Sinhalese Buddhist monk and scholar, and the head of the Lankan *sangha* in Malaysia from 1952 until his death in 2006.

period abroad, Wimalajōthi felt that the state of the Buddhist dispensation and standards of practice (*sāsana*) in Sri Lanka were in decline, and through the formation of the BCC, took it upon himself to improve access to proper monastic education and training in order to fortify these. In addition, along with Ven. Galagodāththe Gnānasāra, Wimalajōthi is perhaps most well-known as one of the cofounders of the *Bodu Bala Sena* (Buddhist Power Force, henceforth referred to as BBS). The BBS is a monastic-led Buddhist nationalist organization that splintered away from the all-monk *Jathika Hela Urumaya* (National Heritage / National Sinhala Heritage) political party in 2012.

Drawing on personal interviews conducted with Wimalajōthi, and pamphlets, books, and brochures published by the Buddhist Cultural Center that I collected from Dekanduwela and its bookstores, I argue that support for *bhikkhunī* ordination forms an integral part of his discourse about a weak *sāsana*, a long standing trope in the legitimization of Buddhist monastic reform which has been utilized at several key points throughout Lanka's history. Wimalajōthi compares the powerful but corrupt caretakers of Sri Lanka's modern monastic institutions who have, in his eyes, failed in their duties to protect Buddhism, with the perceived gender discriminatory attitudes of foreign cultural and religious forces, particularly Islam and Christianity, which he believes to be threatening to the safety and stability of that *sāsana*. Well-trained, virtuous *bhikkhunīs*, he argues, can strengthen the *sāsana* in villages and rural settings where monks have become lax, and can simultaneously prevent village women from being converted to other religions, especially Islam. Additionally, he argues that *bhikkhunī* ordination exemplifies Buddhism's unique recognition (amongst other, competing religious traditions) of women's capacities and rights. Thus his support of *bhikkhunī* ordination, I argue, participates in an interconnected discourse of Buddhist nationalist Islamophobia and gender equality. Finally,

Wimalajōthi and the BCC—through websites, brochures, and print media—advance pro-*bhikkhunī* arguments that do not principally draw on Buddhist canonical texts to argue for legitimacy, but rather present a gendered nationalist narrative about conversion, equality, and locality.

I selected Wimalajōthi and the Dekanduwela Center as a case study to learn more about how a large *bhikkhunī* training monastery was able to thrive in the absence of government support enjoyed by centers for *dasa-sil-mātā* nuns and *bhikkhus*. My conversation with him, however, revealed surprising confluences of nationalist rhetoric about the threat of Muslim and Christian religious conversions of Buddhist women in connection with the work that well-trained *bhikkhunīs* can do for women in rural settings. Wimalajōthi framed the Buddha’s decision to ordain Mahāpajāpatī Gomatī as indicative of Buddhism’s unique recognition of women’s spiritual capacities capacities and rights amongst these other traditions. In order to bring these claims into focus, this chapter is divided into three sections.

I begin with Wimalajōthi’s involvement with the BBS in order to contextualize his claims within the broader phenomenon of Islamophobic Buddhist nationalism in post civil-war Sri Lanka. Then, turning to the BCC and Dekanduwela, I show how the issue of *bhikkhunī* ordination fits into Wimalajōthi’s claims to rescue the *sāsana* from its current state of degeneration. I argue that his support for *bhikkhunī* ordination is framed in simultaneously local and global terms: criticizing the *nikāya* administrations for simultaneously denouncing *bhikkhunī* ordination and failing to protect Buddhism from foreign influence, while claiming that the ordination can protect local women from conversions to Christianity and Islam instigated by foreign religious flows. Much of Wimalajōthi’s logic, I argue, draws on concepts of decline-and-revival of the *sāsana*, again here working as a strategy of local legitimation. Taking Ananda

Abeyssekara's insight that in Sinhalese Buddhist practice, what counts as legitimate, important, or centrally visible in a particular moment arises as a result of discursive contestation, I connect this idea in Wimalajōthi's speech to key moments in the history of Lankan monasticism to show how decline-and-revival narratives have functioned to legitimize changes or innovations in monastic practice, most notably, as discussed in the previous chapter, as a strategy for importing and localizing a lineage.

Next, in order to further contextualize the gendered dimensions of Islamophobic nationalist speech, I draw on anti-Muslim Facebook graphics that have been posted or "shared" by Buddhist nationalist groups in order to present a parallel example of how Islamophobic nationalism in Sri Lanka is already gendered and digitally mediated. One example in particular, "shared" by the Facebook page of Inamaluwe Sumangala's Rangiri Dambulla temple, shows how women visually come to represent anxieties about foreign penetration of Muslim religious and cultural forces into the nation. Sumangala, who we met last chapter, has been in the Lankan news at several points throughout the early 2010s for his attempts to force out Muslim settlements near the Dambulla temple.¹³⁵ Although I was not able to determine if Sumangala, like Wimalajōthi, expressed his support for *bhikkhunī* ordination through a nationalist inflection, Sumangala's simultaneous anti-Muslim agitation and his support for *bhikkhunī* ordination are an interesting parallel to Wimalajōthi and the BCC.

Finally, drawing on my conversation with Wimalajōthi and collected BCC pamphlets, books, and brochures, I show how the issue of *bhikkhunī* ordination functions as a gendered strategy within a larger discourse about lax and corrupt monastic institutions who are failing to protect a vulnerable *sāsana* from foreign influence. Noting that "foreign" represents a shifting

¹³⁵ BBC Sinhala, "Dambulla Attack Videos Fake Says Inamaluwe Sumangala Thero," Colombo Telegraph, April 24, 2012, <http://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/dambulla-attack-videos-fake-says-inamaluwe-sumangala-thero/>.

signifier in Buddhist nationalist rhetoric (from colonial to Tamil and now Muslim forces), I argue that when viewed within a larger geopolitical frame, support of *bhikkhunī* ordination in the case of Wimalajōthi and the BCC functions as a political tool in a larger project of Islamophobic nationalist sentiment directed toward a small minority with connections to a much larger ‘global Islam.’

Kirama Wimalajōthi and the *Bodu Bala Sena*

The *Bodu Bala Sena* is one of the most visible and controversial Buddhist nationalist organizations in Sri Lanka today. According to James John Stewart, the BBS operates by staging anti-Muslim rallies and press conferences, often around the issue of Halal butchers and Muslim-owned businesses, often protesting these and calling for boycotts.¹³⁶ The same strategy is adopted by the 969 movement in Burma, another monastic-led Buddhist nationalist organization that calls on Burmese Buddhists to boycott Muslim business and communities, and which has similarly been implicated in stirring up violence against Muslim communities in Burma.¹³⁷ Indeed the leaders of the two groups—Gnānasāra in Sri Lanka and Wirathu in Burma—signed a joint-agreement in 2014 which begins: “the Buddhist Society of the world has awoken to the ground realities of subtle incursions taking place under the guise of secular, multicultural and other liberal notions that are directly impacting on the Buddhist ethos and space. These

¹³⁶ James John Stewart, "Muslim-Buddhist Conflict in Contemporary Sri Lanka," *South Asia Research* 34, no. 3 (November 2014): 245-6, doi:10.1177/0262728014549134.

¹³⁷ The Irrawaddy, "Nationalist Monk U Wirathu Denies Role in Anti-Muslim Unrest," The Irrawaddy, April 02, 2013, <http://www.irrawaddy.com/interview/nationalist-monk-u-wirathu-denies-role-in-anti-muslim-unrest.html>.

incursions are being funded from overseas and have made its impact globally and are subtly spreading into the local situations.”¹³⁸

Following the end of the 26-year civil war in 2009 between the Sinhalese-led government and LTTE separatists in the north and east of the island, Buddhist nationalist rhetoric has increasingly centered on Muslims, who are believed by the BBS to be a threat to Buddhist institutions. Frequently in the news, though less so after the election of Maithripala Sirisena as president in February 2015, the BBS has been one of the loudest mouthpieces for anti-Muslim and anti-Christian sentiment, which are intimately connected to concerns about the preservation of the Sinhalese Buddhist-majority from the perceived threat of these foreign influences, such as conversions. According to the most recent census, Sinhalese Buddhists comprise approximately 74.9% of the population, Muslims 9.7% and combined Catholic and “other” Christians 12.6%.¹³⁹ The BBS lists twelve main directives or goals (*pradhāna diśānatīn doḷasak*) on its website, many of which reflect this ethos. These are:

1. A Buddhist society; 2. A generation of fearless *bhikkhus*; 3. Modernization and reform of education for *bhikkhus*; 4. A regional development center for Buddhist temples
5. Development of the *bhikkhunī saṅgha*; 6. Conducting Buddhist work and development, even under difficult conditions; 7. To promote the *dharma* and build Sri Lanka’s reputation; 8. Building and networking organizations that support the development of Buddhism; 9. Establishment of funds for the support of Buddhism; 10. The building and protection of Buddhist businesses; 11. Protecting Buddhist archeological sites; 12. Taking measures to protect against anti-Buddhist challenges.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ Colombo Telegraph, "Full Text: Wirathu And Gnanasara Sign Agreement," Colombo Telegraph, October 1, 2014, <http://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/full-text-wirathu-and-gnanasara-sign-agreement/>.

¹³⁹ Department of Census and Statistics - Sri Lanka, "Quick Stats," Census of Population and Housing - 2012, accessed February 15, 2016, <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/PopHouSat/CPH2012Visualization/htdocs/index.php?usecase=indicator&action=Map&indId=10>.

¹⁴⁰ Bodu Bala Sena, “බුදුදහම පරපුරින් පරපුරට සුරකින බෞද්ධ සමාජයක් උදෙසා,” බොදු බල සේනා, accessed July 18, 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140718163727/http://bodubalasena.com/index.php>; my translation.

Number 5 is particularly interesting as most of the mainline monastic institutions that support the BBS oppose *bhikkhunī* ordination (most notably the Asgiri and Malwatta Siyam Nikāyas). In Sinhala, the fifth goal's usage of the term *meheṇi* specifically denotes *bhikkhunī* rather than *dasa-sil* nuns. The possible connection between the BBS's Islamophobic rhetoric and potential support for *bhikkhunī* ordination is a subject well worth exploring in future research. Numbers 7, 10 and 12, in particular, reveal a concern with the protection of both the Sri Lankan state and its Buddhist identity and institutions. These objectives present a Buddhist political platform that excludes Sri Lanka's Hindu, Christian, and Muslim minorities, echoing the "foremost position of Buddhism" inscribed in the 1978 constitution.¹⁴¹ While these objectives may not strike the reader as anti-Muslim on the surface, the actions of the BBS in leading rallies that generate riots against Muslim families and business owners, such as a 2014 riot in Aluthgama in which three Muslims were killed and several homes and businesses burned, indicate that these Buddhist-nationalist objectives have been mobilized to condone actions against Muslim families and communities.¹⁴²

Wimalajōthi resigned from the BBS in the summer of 2014, citing Aluthgama and several other incidences of increased violence against Muslims.¹⁴³ Gnānasāra, who remains the BBS's sole figurehead, frequently connects a discourse about the decline of the *sāsana* to the need for a Sinhala Buddhist majority government to protect its interests. Speaking on the steps of a Colombo courthouse where he was recently being remanded in February and March 2016, Gnānasāra is reported to have said that: "We have leaders in our two Nikayas. As every other

¹⁴¹ Chandra R. De Silva, "The Plurality of Buddhist Fundamentalism: An Inquiry into Views among Buddhist Monks in Sri Lanka," in *Buddhist Fundamentalism and Minority Identities in Sri Lanka*, ed. Tessa J. Bartholomeusz and Chandra R. De Silva (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), 60.

¹⁴² BBC News, "Sri Lanka Muslims Killed in Aluthgama Clashes with Buddhists," June 16, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-27864716>.

¹⁴³ Asian Mirror, "BBS Leader Kirama Wimalajothi Thera Resigns From Organization!," Asian Mirror, June 17, 2014, <http://www.asianmirror.lk/news/item/1590-bbs-leader-kirama-wimalajothi-resigns-from-organization>.

religion has its own leader, Buddha Sasana also needs to have a leader to represent all the Buddhist monks... The president we have is a Sri Lankan Buddhist but he is presented as a nominal figure... this has caused the decline in Sinhala Buddhists.”¹⁴⁴ Despite his separation from the BBS in 2014, Wimalajōthi, too, in outlining the need for *bhikkhunī* ordination in contemporary Sri Lanka, speaks in terms of the decline of the *sāsana* in connection with the ineffectuality of its leadership.

The BCC and the Dekanduwela *Bhikkhunī* Training Center

After returning to Sri Lanka after a long period abroad, Wimalajōthi told me that he could not even find basic books about Buddhism in any of Sri Lanka’s bookstores. This led him, along with his teacher K. Sri Dhammananda, to establish the Buddhist Cultural Center bookstore in Dehiwala, part of Colombo, in January 1992.¹⁴⁵ In our conversation, he related the fact that Buddhist instructional materials were hard to come by to the state of the Buddhist *sāsana* more generally, and the capacity of its caretakers to look after it in particular:

They [the *saṅgha* council] have never done anything for the *sāsana*. I was in Malaysia and other countries and I came to Sri Lanka after 25 years, and no single book, even the Tipiṭaka or commentaries were available in Sri Lanka. I had to start from the beginning, and now this is the world’s biggest Buddhist book center. So they haven’t done anything, they just hold a lot of property, look after that tooth relic temple, and make a lot of income there. They are like like the Hindus in India who think women should not have equal rights and this type of mentality. They [the nuns] come and do a lot of things [in a] nice way, then people start to criticize the monks. This kind of jealousy is there.

Here Wimalajōthi not only claims that the *nikāya* administrations have failed in their duties to uphold and propagate Buddhism, but also “like the Hindus in India,” they do not value women’s

¹⁴⁴ Daily Mirror (Sri Lanka), "Need a Leader to Represent Buddhist Monks: Gnanasara Thera," [Dailymirror.lk: Breaking News, March 1, 2016, http://www.dailymirror.lk/106241/Need-a-leader-to-represent-Buddhist-monks-Gnanasara-Thera](http://www.dailymirror.lk/106241/Need-a-leader-to-represent-Buddhist-monks-Gnanasara-Thera).

¹⁴⁵ Buddhist Cultural Centre, "About Us," Buddhist Cultural Centre, accessed February 12, 2016, http://www.onlinebookshop.buddhistcc.com/index.php?id_cms=4&controller=cms.

equality. On that basis, he argues, the corruption of the *sāsana* administration which has allowed the foreignizing influence of (variously Muslim, Christian, and Hindu) groups to enter the country, is connected to their gender discriminatory attitudes which explain their opposition to *bhikkhunī* ordination and are fundamentally at odds with Buddhism's gender egalitarian message. Additionally, by arguing that the monks are jealous of the nuns' good conduct, he evidences the gendered Buddhist performance of comportment with the Vinaya rules (discussed in the previous chapter) that the nuns express in contradistinction to the perception that Sri Lanka's monks are lazy in their monastic practice, an observation supported by Wimalajōthi's claims that the *nikāya* administrations are corrupt.

In 1993 Wimalajōthi and the BCC established the Dekanduwela Dhamma Training Center (*Dekanduwela Daham Puhuṇu Madhyastānaya*), a large meditation center on 20 acres of jungled land near Horana. For several years Dekanduwela hosted Lankan and international meditators on retreat and a temporary ordination program for monks.¹⁴⁶ A BCC brochure describes that in 2000, it was decided that the Dekanduwela site would house a *bhikkhunī* training center. For the first several years, *bhikkhunīs* would receive higher ordination at the Rangiri Dambulla Rajamahā Vihara established by Inamaluwe Sumangala in 1998 near Dambulla. When I visited Dekanduwela, construction had recently finished on a *sīma*¹⁴⁷ house a few hundred meters from the meditation hall, which, according to the head nun, is scheduled to host a *bhikkhunī* ordination later in 2016. There were 22 nuns present during my visit, including 7 *bhikkhunīs* and 15 *sāmaṇerīs* training to take the higher ordination. All but one of the nuns are

¹⁴⁶ Buddhist Cultural Center, *Dekanduwela Dhamma Training & Meditation Centre* (Dehiwala: Buddhist Cultural Centre, 2015).

¹⁴⁷ A ritually defined boundary within which official acts of monastic business (such as ordinations and Vinaya recitations), take place. In Sri Lanka, *sīmas* are visually defined by the presence of 8 stones; one at each corner and stones in the middle of each side.

Sinhalese, one nun, a *bhikkhunī* ordained the previous year, came from Indonesia to receive training before returning to her monastery in Java.

In my interview with him, Wimalajōthi related the need to reinstate and look after the *bhikkhunī saṅgha* to a discourse about the preservation of the Buddhist *sāsana* in Sri Lanka. According to Richard Gombrich, in Lankan Buddhism, the *sāsana* refers not just to the body of teachings, but is connected to a historical narrative about the welfare of a Buddhist identity more generally: “If Theravāda Buddhists want to refer to Buddhism not just as a doctrine but as a phenomenon in history, a whole religion, they usually call it the Sāsana, the Teaching. For example, where English speakers might talk of the welfare of Buddhism, they would talk of the welfare of the Sāsana.”¹⁴⁸

Wimalajōthi lamented the current state of the *sāsana* and the capacity of its caretakers (the elders of these Nikāyas) to look after it, arguing that they turn a blind eye to corruption in Lankan monastic institutions while simultaneously preventing sincere, educated, and virtuous *bhikkhunīs* from realizing their renunciant aspirations, and providing necessary religious services to Buddhist women in rural locations. During our conversation, when I asked about opposition to *bhikkhunī* ordination in Sri Lanka, Wimalajōthi told me that

There are worse monks in Sri Lanka than these nuns. They are involved with the politics and the riots as student monks, they go and work and all kinds of things which are against Buddhism. All these political activities, *yantra* [protective spells], all these things. They [the *saṅgha* councils] don’t say a word. They have passed three things in the last 15 years. The first thing is ‘don’t register *bhikkhunī āramas*,’ the second is ‘don’t give them identity cards,’ and ‘don’t stand for the national anthem.’ They come into these chief monk posts and look after the tooth relic temple, these roles and regulations were introduced by the British during colonial times, which are not applicable to Buddhism...

I know that in the future the training for the monks is going down. They train to pass exams and either disrobe and get a job or as a monk they work and school as a teacher and get a salary. Monks are going in that way, not to look after the temple and devotees, and doing social welfare work and counseling. Some monks are involved with

¹⁴⁸ Richard Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988), 3.

politics and so there is no leader. There are so many leaders but they are not proper leaders, actually. That's why I have to make the bookstore after coming back, to protect the *dhmma*.

His comments reveal a discourse where the institutional protectors of the *sāsana*, appointed high-ranking monks (*mahānāyakas*, and at the regional level *saṅghanāyakas*, literally “great protector” and “protector of the *saṅgha*,” respectively) who oversee large monastic fraternities (*nikāyas*) have simultaneously failed in their duties to lead the Buddhist community as a result of their political activity and have become corrupt and lax, actively engaging in activities that are “against Buddhism.”

The argument that the *sāsana* is in decay and in need of purification has historically been an effective strategy for would-be reformers of monastic Buddhism. For example, in her 2001 monograph on the formation of the Siyam Nikāya, Anne M. Blackburn notes that “the decline-and-revival narratives found in the texts of the Lankan Theravāda reflect the fact that the problems of the *sāsana*'s decline provided a key organizing trope for reflections on the relationship between the life of the *sāsana* and events in monastic communities.”¹⁴⁹ Reformers of Buddhist institutions in Sri Lanka have made use of this rhetorical strategy to legitimize innovations in monastic practice at several points in Lankan history, most notably in the introduction or renewal of monastic lineages. In the case of the formation of the Siyam Nikāya in the 1750s, Blackburn argues that monks connected to the burgeoning monastic order strove to compose texts which would locate them as erudite bearers of the *dhmma* at the nexus of local power relations. Through the formation of “textual communities,” Blackburn argues that Siyam Nikaya monks were able to dismiss the standards and authority of their predecessors as part of a strategy to naturalize and secure their position as “participants in the heroic master narrative of

¹⁴⁹ Anne M. Blackburn, *Buddhist Learning and Textual Practice in Eighteenth-century Lankan Monastic Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 82.

religious revival, and thus making patronage of the Siyam Nikāya's new institutions appear inviting.¹⁵⁰

In the case of Wimalajōthi's support of *bhikkhunī* ordination, the decline-and-revival narrative became clear when I asked why *bhikkhunī* ordination is controversial in Sri Lanka today. He replied that:

They call it brahmin's idea, Brahmins also don't like women. Buddha went against that. Buddha went against the caste system, and he has given the equal rights to the ladies. But unfortunately like Muslims they [the *Saṅgha* elders] don't give credit to the women, and the Christians, they are also doing that. Hindus also don't have. But now Buddhists, we have. We have a lot of *bhikkhunīs* in Mahāyāna countries but unfortunately Theravāda countries they don't do anything to protect *sāsana*, all those high-ranking so-called *Saṅghanāyakas*, they don't do anything to protect *sāsana*.

What is particularly fascinating here is that Wimalajōthi compares the stereotyped Muslim discrimination against women to that of the monks tasked with protecting the Buddhist dispensation in Sri Lanka, who have effectively blocked the government from recognizing contemporary *bhikkhunī* ordinations as legitimate and giving financial support to *bhikkhunī* training institutions. As a result, centers like Dekanduwela operate entirely with funds raised from supporters, both local and predominantly, as Wimalajōthi told me in conversation, from his supporters in Malaysia and Singapore. Locating the *saṅghanāyakas* as corrupt—that is, failing to do their duty in protecting the purity and duration of the *sāsana*—moves to legitimize *bhikkhunī* ordination in a localizing discourse that simultaneously participates in nationalist sentiment and a concern for gender equality through a decline-and-revival narrative. In this way, Wimalajōthi locates his pro-*bhikkhunī* support in line with a concern for women's rights and a concern for the preservation of the country and the *sāsana*, in contradistinction to those corrupt monks who fail to do their duty in protecting it.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 88.

In addition, Wimalajōthi compares these monks to Hindu and Muslim groups which he argues do not value women. By associating the *saṅghanāyakas* who reject *bhikkhunī* ordination with Muslims in particular, but also to a lesser extent Christian and ‘Brahministic’ cultural influences, Wimalajōthi makes use of *bhikkhunī* ordination as a gendered strategy to advance a nationalist discourse about the need to purify Buddhism from foreign influence. Note also his comparison of the current state of the *sāsana* in Sri Lanka with that in Mahāyana countries. Here Wimalajōthi makes a causal connection between the presence of large *bhikkhunī saṅghas* and strong protection of the *sāsana* in the Mahāyana traditions that were looked to by the organizers of Sri Lanka’s first *bhikkhunī* ordination revival attempts in 1996 and 1998 to provide the initial ordination ceremonies used to revive the lineage.

Contrary to the perspectives of monks who claim that contemporary *bhikkhunī* ordination is illegitimate because of prevailing interpretations of the Vinaya,¹⁵¹ in this same discourse Wimalajōthi argues that *bhikkhunī* ordination is valid because the Buddha himself chose to ordain women, and not just to ordain them, but to give them ‘due credit as women.’ He told me that “Some of the monks in the higher authorities don’t like to have *bhikkhunī* ordination, because they say it is against Vinaya. But some of the very learned, educated monks say there is nothing wrong. They say, ‘why not?’ There is nothing wrong and we have been given this opportunity for them also. Because the Buddha himself was the one who gave the due credit to the women.” It is particularly telling that Wimalajōthi describes the monastics who happen to support *bhikkhunī* ordination as ‘learned’ or ‘educated.’ This perspective that education or a ‘proper’ understanding of the relevant Vinaya texts fashions subjects who naturally come to support *bhikkhunī* ordination cropped up in some of my other conversations amongst various

¹⁵¹ Nathaniel, "Sri Lanka's Bhikkhuni Order in Deadlock."

supporters as well. Here, ‘educated’ here means educated in Buddhist history and Vinaya, whereas ‘educated’ in the last chapter connotes ‘western’ influence.

It is important to pause here for a moment to note a few interesting points about Wimalajōthi’s perspective. First, like Rita Gross, he presents an essentialized picture of Buddhism as superior to Abrahamic religious traditions in its regard and treatment for women. Second, his support for *bhikkhunī* ordination, largely expressed in nationalist terms, uses women as *symbols* of purity and moral restoration, a project that is contradictory to the aims of postcolonial feminist activism and scholarship. Indeed, the gendered comportment with Vinaya rules discussed earlier evidences a double standard wherein male monastics are no longer largely expected to adhere to the list of rules that their female counterparts must cling to in order to articulate legitimacy for themselves. Furthermore, that male monastics who do not support *bhikkhunī* ordination often times cite interpretations of Vinaya texts as reasons for their denouncement while simultaneously themselves not closely attending to its hundreds of rules was noted to me time and time again by lay and ordained supporters of *bhikkhunī* ordination.

Outside of the issue of *bhikkhunī* ordination, women’s reproduction has come to represent a site of displaced anxiety in the nationalist Islamophobic discourse. Facebook groups like the *Bodu Bala Sena*, *Sinhalé*, Sinhala Buddhist, and *Sinhalaya* circulate cartoon images, “infographics,” and warnings about various incidents of increased Muslim encroachment in Sri Lanka. In the next section, I examine a few of these examples (one connected to the Dambulla Rangiri Temple) in order to further contextualize the gendered dimensions of Islamophobic nationalism in Sri Lanka.

Wimalajōthi, Sumangala, and Islamophobia

In the conclusion to our conversation, Wimalajōthi made explicit the need to uplift the *sāsana* and install nuns in rural locations through the ordination of women in connection with the need to protect it against Muslim influences in those same rural locations where women are most vulnerable to conversion. In Sri Lankan Buddhist discourse, rurality and ‘the jungle’ (*kēlē*) in particular represent sites of authentic religious and cultural purity. Tucked away from the cosmopolitanism of urban areas and the flows of different ethnic and religious groups that coexist there, villages and forests (especially the latter in the case of monastic practice) are places where a pure or more authentic Sinhalese Buddhistness is thought to persist. For example, in the summer of 2014, prior to his separation from the BBS, Wimalajōthi issued a statement to the press about a BBS-supported parliamentary agenda, saying that “a BBS policy statement will be presented to the Government detailing the concerns of Buddhists in Sri Lanka and if the Government fails to address the issue then the BBS and Buddhists in Sri Lanka will ‘bring a man from the village’ to lead the country and make the change.”¹⁵² This phrase, to “bring a man from the village” (*gamen minihek genna*), is a common Sinhalese colloquialism that carries connotations of authentic or pure Buddhist sentiment, unsullied by the specter of multiculturalism that many nationalists find threatening, recalling the the taint of ‘foreign’ influence. In the case of *bhikkhunī* ordination, Wimalajōthi argues that training up *bhikkhunīs* would allow Sinhalese Buddhists to look after and protect women at this crucial village level from Muslim and Christian attempts to convert them through close proximity and even deception. He told me that:

There is no single place to train [*bhikkhunīs*]. Yet they [*Saṅghanāyakas*] criticize. They don’t do anything to protect the *sāsana*, the Buddhists. Somehow or other the Muslims

¹⁵² Easwaran Rutnam, "Government Plays Down Views of BBS," The Sunday Leader, October 5, 2014, <http://www.thesundayleader.lk/2014/10/05/government-plays-down-views-of-bbs/>.

are marrying young girls, when they work in their shops, they don't say anything. The Christians also, there are so many extreme groups from Australia and America and South Korea working here. They are converting in the villages in the crooked way, in the cunning way, the innocent Sinhalese Buddhists. They keep quiet. These *bhikkhunīs*, if they are in the village, they can do a lot of service.

Here we see a connection between the need to protect innocent Sinhalese Buddhist women and the capacity of Buddhist monastics to protect the *sāsana*. Wimalajōthi makes this connection by claiming that installing *bhikkhunīs* who have been trained “not to pass exams, not to go for jobs, but to have good dhamma knowledge, theory and practice both, meditation, counselling, and social welfare work,” in these crucially important rural and village sites, would provide a protective or counteractive force in the preservation of a fragile Buddhist identity in Sri Lanka. This protective force is most needed at the village level, where Buddhists, especially Buddhist women, are regarded to be most at risk of conversion from foreign Christian and Muslim groups. This bears a resemblance to 969 rhetoric. In her 2015 master's thesis “Shadow Masculinities: Nationalist Burmese Monastics and The Savage Muslim Male,” Nevada Skye Drollinger-Smith relays the comments of one Buddhist blogger who “argues for a seemingly-global Muslim conspiracy to take over Burma, but emphasizes more heavily the trope of the Muslim man who lures away Buddhist women... [who] are particularly at risk because they lack proper religious education and because their parents often abandon them when they marry Muslim men.”¹⁵³

Wimalajōthi equated the anti-*bhikkhunī* ordination position of the two most powerful Lankan monastic fraternities (*Nikāyas*), the *Malwatta* and *Asgiri Siyam Nikāyas*, to gender discrimination amongst Muslims, ‘Brahmanistic,’ and Christian groups who oppose women's rights. His comments about Muslim-owned shops is particularly telling. Many of the large clothing chain stores in Sri Lanka, such as *No Limit* and *Fashion Bug*, are owned by Muslim

¹⁵³ Nevada Skye Drollinger-Smith, *Shadow Masculinities: Nationalist Burmese Monastics and The Savage Muslim Male*, Master's thesis, University of Colorado Boulder, 2015, 73.

families and employ Muslim and Tamil workers. These stores have become a site of Islamophobic attention, particularly on Facebook groups (including official and unofficial BBS groups) who espouse anti-Muslim nationalist rhetoric. For example, in his thesis examining the gendered dimensions of BBS anti-Muslim rhetoric, Robin Jones analyzes Facebook graphics warning Sinhalese women about abortifacient compounds in women's clothing and candies distributed at the cash register.¹⁵⁴ Jones argues that these communications are a "metaphor for the existential threat which the Sinhala Buddhist nation is said to face by the BBS. Candy, a seemingly benign temptation for consumers, is given to women by modern, Muslim-owned stores; its entry into the female body is synonymous with the quiet infiltration of outside Muslim forces into the body politic."¹⁵⁵ This perspective helps us to understand how anti-Muslim rhetoric amongst Sri Lankan Buddhist political organizations is gendered beyond the *bhikkhuni* ordination issue. With this in view, Wimalajōthi's claim that Buddhist women need to be protected from "foreign" religious influence and conversion is congruent with a great deal of anti-Muslim speech on Facebook. In 2014, the Sri Lankan Center for Policy Alternatives published a report "Liking violence: A study of hate speech on Facebook in Sri Lanka," which documented twenty of the producers, along with the targets, demographics, and themes of these posts.¹⁵⁶ In addition to Muslim communities, many of the posts also target politicians, police, and religious leaders who advocate tolerance, interreligious harmony, reconciliation, or multiculturalism.

¹⁵⁴ Robin Noel Badone Jones, "Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism and Islamophobia in Contemporary Sri Lanka" (Honor's thesis, Bates College, 2015), 86.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ Shilpa Samaratunge and Sanjana Hattotuwa, *Liking Violence: A Study of Hate Speech on Facebook in Sri Lanka*, report, September 2014, <http://www.cpalanka.org/liking-violence-a-study-of-hate-speech-on-facebook-in-sri-lanka/>.



Figure 8: Facebook graphic “shared” by Rangiri Dambulla

Another example popped up on my Facebook feed while I was in Sri Lanka. The post (see **Fig. 8**) is a cartoon caption of a white woman being sexually assaulted by visually stereotyped Muslim males on a platform that literally reads, in English, “multiculturalism.” The caption at the top translates as “Unable to do anything about it, look, this is indeed the reality!” The graphic was “shared” by the official page of Rangiri Sri Lanka, an

influential cluster of temples in Dambulla run by Ven. Inamaluwe Sumangala Thero.

Sumangala, as I detailed in the previous chapter, was one of the first monks to openly support *bhikkhunī* ordination in Sri Lanka. A casual “share” of this kind of cartoon or graphic by the administrator of the Rangiri Facebook page provides a useful point of comparison between the BCC and another prominent center that supports *bhikkhunī* ordination. Although I was unable to speak with Sumangala about his support for *bhikkhunī* ordination, the fact that the administrator for his temple’s Facebook page “shared” an Islamophobic graphic depicting the sexual assault of a woman by Muslims is troubling, but signals that, like Wimalajōthi, there may be a deeper connection between these issues than has been previously explored. Finally, in the last section, I return to Wimalajōthi and Dekanduwela to explore how “foreignness” invokes the anxieties of

Muslim encroachment and provides a basis for Wimalajothi's support of *bhikkhunī* ordination in gendered nationalist terms.

International Training for *Bhikkhunīs*

Materials published by the BCC that are available in the bookstore and at Dekanduwela reveal the use of print media to participate in a pro-*bhikkhunī* discourse that draws on nationalist sentiment and tropes about the preservation of the *sāsana* through uplifting women as *bhikkhunīs*. The Center's Buddhist bookstores contain a number of books authored by contemporary Lankan *bhikkhunīs*, such as Bhikkhunī Kusuma's published Ph.D. thesis. In addition, the bookstores also carry Pāli editions of the Bhikkhunī Vinaya and commentaries, including I.B. Horner's English translation of the Bhikkhunī Vinaya and copies of her *Women under Primitive Buddhism*. Wimalajōthi himself has authored and published commentaries on the Therīgāthā and on the story of the ordination of Mahāpajāpatī (*Mahā Prajāpathī Gautamīn Wahansē*, 2011, Buddhist Cultural Center), which are also for sale in the bookstore.

In addition to books by and about *bhikkhunīs* published by the BCC, the Dekanduwela *Bhikkhunī* Training Center has stacks of brochures, both in Sinhala and in English, which detail the purpose and origins of the center, providing details about its sources of funding, the type and scope of training provided, contact information, and a map with directions for visiting the monastery. These brochures can also be found in the Center's bookstores. On the cover of the main English-language brochure advertising the Dekanduwela Training Center (see **Fig. 9**), the connection between raising up a generation of well-trained and rightly-practicing *bhikkhunīs* and protection of the *sāsana* is apparent. The cover contains lines of text reading "Let us protect the Buddha's dispensation," and "In order to safeguard Buddhism / A generation of bhikkhunis rooted in faith and discipline / Sri Lanka's First Bhikkhuni Training Centre..." Immediately

apparent is a visual reminder of the connection between *bhikkhunī* ordination and the protection of Buddhism. Sub-headlines invite participants to participate in the support of this burgeoning *bhikkhunī* training center as a “historic and noble deed of merit.” This language is meant to arouse the support and faith of Buddhist devotees through opportunities to accrue merit and help support Sri Lanka’s lost lineage of *bhikkhunīs*.

Inside the brochure, the main copy describes the rationale for establishing a center to train *bhikkhunīs*. The language

reflects many of the same themes that Wimalajōthi described to me in our conversation. The first few paragraphs are worth quoting in full:

In accordance with Buddhist Culture, a society consists of Bhikkhus (monks), Bhikkhunis (nuns), Upasakas (lay brothers) and Upasikas (lay sisters) and it is based on their inter-relationships. It is so constituted that it would, in the end - may be after many births - facilitate and culminate in the attainment of Nirvana, the Summum Bonum, for all who thus form a part of society.

This basic structure of society of which we talk so much as the foundation of the Buddhist society has, by now, come to a terrible impasse, is rapidly degenerating and besides, is impaired in many ways. The family, the basic unit of society, itself is faced with the threat of being shattered. In consequence, we live in a society that is mostly warped and perverted.¹⁵⁷

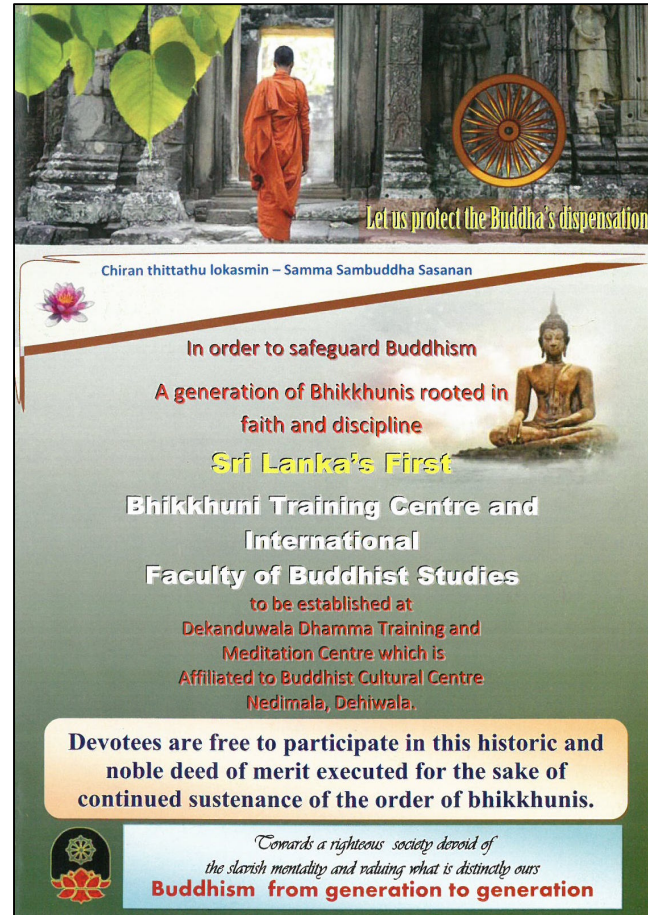


Figure 9: Cover of Dekanduwela brochure in English

¹⁵⁷ Dekanduwala Dhamma Training and Meditation Centre, *Sri Lanka's First Bhikkhuni Training Centre and International Faculty of Buddhist Studies* (Colombo: Buddhist Cultural Center), 2, accessed December 2015.

Thus, in a brochure detailing the rationale for establishing a training center for *bhikkhunīs*, the language describes a *sāsana* in decline, positioning the need for well-trained *bhikkhunīs* as a corrective to an ailing Buddhist tradition. The language invokes the Buddhist concept of the fourfold community (*catasso parisā* in Pāli), comprising female and male monks and virtuous laypeople as the Buddhist cultural form most complete and conducive to the attainment of *nibbana*. This concept draws on a textually-sourced organizational schema of Buddhist persons. In the Sanskrit *Catuṣparisat Sūtra* (*Sūtra on the Establishment of the Fourfold Assembly*), the Buddha says to Māra just prior to attaining enlightenment that “I will not attain final Nirvāṇa until I have disciples who are clever, skilled, wise, competent to refute with Dharma the doctrines of others that arise from time to time, competent and accomplished to teach with their own words *the monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen* so that my spiritual path will be extensive, for the many-folk, widespread, rightly elucidated for gods and men. [emphasis mine]”¹⁵⁸ Thus the presence of such competent female and male ordained and lay Buddhist practitioners is a local appropriation of a textually-inspired example of a healthy, thriving *sāsana* comprised of these four categories of persons, advanced in realization and competent to spread and look after the *dhamma*.

By working to reinstate the defunct *bhikkhunī* lineage in Sri Lanka, Wimalajōthi attempts to constitute a complete, or whole fourfold assembly that is ready to engage and emerge superior over the doctrines of others. The concept of the fourfold assembly was explained to me by a lay devotee at a temple I visited near the BCC in Colombo. Comparing the fourfold assembly to a table with four legs, he claimed that without the *bhikkhunī saṅgha*, the table has become less sturdy than it was in the past, and that by reviving the *bhikkhunī saṅgha*, the table could be

¹⁵⁸ "English Translation of Catuṣparisat Sūtra," *Sutta Central*, Accessed February 18, 2016, <https://suttacentral.net/en/sf259>.

repaired, restoring it to its once-stable state. The Dekanduwela website elaborates on this point, claiming that:

In the Buddha's dispensation there are four categories of people: they are *Bhikkhus* (Brethren), *Bhikkhunis* (Nuns), *Upasakas* (lay brothers) and *Upasikas* (lay sisters). Mention has been made about this in the *Sutta pitaka*, *Vinaya pitaka* and in numerous other places wherein the history of the dispensation is elaborated. Ven. Dr. Kirinde [K. Sri] Dhammananda had said that if the order of the Bhikkhunis were to go out of existence, the *Buddha Sasana* would be like a table with only three legs.¹⁵⁹

In addition to language about the fourfold assembly, the brochure's paragraph closes by noting that the family too, here understood as the most fundamental building block of a Buddhist society, is constantly under threat and in need of uplifting through the efforts of well-trained and virtuous monastics, recalling de Silva's claim in the previous chapter that nuns can provide necessary religious services for rural families.

The brochure continues by connecting the failure of Sri Lankan Buddhist institutions to reinstate the *bhikkhunī* order to colonial (foreign) inattention:

The development and welfare of the bhikkhunis has remained a neglected facet ever since the colonial times up to the present time. Monastic Educational Centres (Pirivenas) for Bhikkhus and schools and universities for lay brothers and lay sisters galore. Nevertheless, sadly a training centre or some such place of schooling for nuns is not to be found and hitherto not even contemplated of being built by the responsible citizenry.

Bhikkhunis can do yeoman service to the society in which they live provided that they are given the requisite training in Buddhist lore (Dhamma), discipline and psychological counseling. In Sri Lanka today a bhikkhuni hardly enjoys the privileges affordable even to a lay woman. They are barred from getting a reasonable and sufficient education that befits their status. Like bhikkhus, they can be made useful to the society by imparting to them the same skills that are imparted to the bhikkhus in monastic educational centres. It is a dire need of our time to enable them to do so.¹⁶⁰

Depicting the restoration of the *bhikkhunī* order as a neglected project due to colonization, the brochure's author locates a pro-*bhikkhunī* stance as part of reclaiming Lanka's Buddhist heritage

¹⁵⁹ Bhikkuni Training Centre Dekanduwela, "The Order of Bhikkhunis," Bhikkuni Training Centre Dekanduwela, accessed February 8, 2016, <http://www.dekanduwala.org/about/>.

¹⁶⁰ Dekanduwala Dhamma Training and Meditation Centre, *Sri Lanka's First Bhikkhuni Training Centre*, 2.

in contradistinction to foreign (here colonial) derived inattention. It also notes that *bhikkhunīs* lack the privileges befitting their status, privileges that lay women (presumably ‘lower’ than *bhikkhunīs*), receive. By claiming that Lanka’s “responsible citizenry” have hitherto neglected to correct this, the Dekanduwela brochure’s author positions the Center at the forefront of restoring Lanka’s long lost *bhikkhunī* order, simultaneously perpetuating the discourse that a thriving, well-educated *bhikkhunī saṅgha* is a necessary and integral part of a thriving *sāsana*. This, I think, is further accentuated by noting that preexisting educational and training opportunities for renunciant women (*sil-mātās*, most likely) are not befitting the “status” of a *bhikkhunī*. Thus the brochure’s author tacitly argues that the prestige and status of *bhikkhus*—as generated by their capacity for Buddhist and social welfare service in contemporary Sri Lanka—are also deserved by Sri Lanka’s *bhikkhunīs*. This further evidences a localization argument insofar as well-trained “yeoman” *bhikkhunīs* can provide necessary and lacking social and religious services for society, if only their status would be recognized and their opportunities for education and training improved.

Finally, the next paragraph of the brochure introduces Wimalajōthi as the first figure to come along and redress this issue, recalling the “race to be first” and tacitly ignoring the efforts of Kusuma, Sakyadhītā, and Sumangala as detailed previously:

It is under this backdrop that the proposition for a bhikkhuni training centre was mooted [*sic*] by Ven. Kirama Wimalajhoti therā, a bhikkhu famed both locally and internationally for having redressed many a lacuna and grievance of Buddhists in the past. Thus such a bhikkhuni training centre is being established in Dekanduwala to foster the dispensation of the bhikkhunis; it was inaugurated on March 8, 2015, the international women's day under the auspices of Ven. Kirama Wimalajhoti therā.¹⁶¹

Like the many weaknesses in the *sāsana* addressed by Wimalajōthi upon his return to Sri Lanka after a long period abroad, support for a *bhikkhunī* training center fits into a narrative of restoring

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

a more complete vision of a thriving Buddhist society while simultaneously helping it to protect itself from threatening foreign influences. Thus Wimalajōthi and the Buddhist Cultural Center make use of the *bhikkhunī* ordination issue in their attempts to reconstitute a thriving, secure Buddhist *sāsana* that is able to cater to the needs of lay Buddhists which have been neglected under the stewardship of corrupt monastics. The choice to inaugurate Dekanduwela on International Women's Day is also worth noting as it represents another instance of localizing a global discourse.

Conclusion

Arjun Appadurai's 2006 *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* argues that the nation state's tenure as the primary unit of political, social, and cultural identification is becoming destabilized by globalization. Where nation states are no longer the symmetrical arbiters of international diplomacy and warfare, and even the myth of the national bank has been upset by imbricated flows of global finance, culture has emerged as the last battle ground on which the fantasies of nationhood play out.¹⁶² Accordingly, Appadurai argues, that anxieties related to these destabilizations are often times expressed in tension and violence between ethnic majorities and minorities. In Sri Lanka, Sinhalese Buddhists comprise 74.9% of the population.¹⁶³ When viewed on a larger geopolitical scale, as Stanley Tambiah has famously quipped, they are a "majority with a minority complex" insofar as:

the Dīpavaṃsa and Mahāvaṃsa chronicles... formulated the founding myth and an ideological charter that conflated the unity of the Buddhist religion, the entirety of the island of Sri Lanka, and the totality of the Sinhala people... Once the politico-religious

¹⁶² Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers*, 22-3.

¹⁶³ Department of Census and Statistics - Sri Lanka, *Census of Population and Housing of Sri Lanka, 2012 Table A3: Population by District, Ethnic Group and Sex*, accessed February 24, 2016, <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/PopHouSat/CPH2011/Pages/Activities/Reports/FinalReport/Population/Table%20A3.pdf>.

charter of Buddhism and the Sinhala “nation” had crystallized, it was periodically invoked and recapitulated many times... here then we have the transmission over time of an *ideology* that was enshrined and objectified as a historical memory in the monkish chronicles, and which periodically, from the first centuries A.D. right up to our own time, was available for invocation, resurrection, and manipulation by zealots and political activists of different centuries ”¹⁶⁴

While Tambiah was writing about Sinhalese-Tamil ethnic tensions during the civil war, the point is applicable more broadly to Appadurai’s insights in general and contemporary Islamophobia in Sri Lanka in particular. With a population of just over fifteen million, many Sri Lankan Buddhists regard themselves as charged by the Buddha (in the *Mahāvamsa*) to secure and maintain Buddhist institutions, practice, and identity, locating Sri Lanka as the *dhammadīpa*, or “island of *dhamma*.”¹⁶⁵ In the scant few post-war years in Sri Lanka, ethnic antagonism on the part of Sinhalese Buddhists has largely shifted from Tamil to Muslim populations. While an examination of this phenomenon is outside the scope of this project, during my research in Sri Lanka, several lay Buddhists and monks expressed to me the fear that immigration of Muslims from insular Southeast Asia and the Arab peninsula was increasing, threatening to usurp the Buddhist religious and cultural values given foremost place in Sri Lanka by the Buddha. When situated in a global and regional South Asian scale, Sri Lanka’s Buddhists fear their relative marginality amongst Indian ocean flows of “global Islam.” This marginality evokes Appadurai’s argument that minorities represent a metaphor for the failure of nationalist fantasies of the state as preserver of a “pure” national ethos. The smaller the minority, he argues, the greater the

¹⁶⁴ Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 93-4.

¹⁶⁵ Bartholomeusz, “First Among Equals: Buddhism and the Sri Lankan State,” 176.

potential for intra-ethnic strife because the majority is that much closer to the fantasy of purity or ethnic closure.¹⁶⁶

To Sri Lanka's ethnic and religious majority, the Sinhalese Buddhists, their small island represents the domain of "pure" (*pirisidu*) Buddhist identity amidst the transnational flows of 'global Islam.' In the case of Wimalajōthi and the Buddhist Cultural Center, *bhikkhunīs* are a necessary counteractive force against the threat of these foreign cultural and religious forces that are constantly threatening to destabilize the purity and prominence of an already fragile *sāsana*. As we have seen in the case of Wimalajōthi's support for *bhikkhunī* ordination, the issue can fit within a larger issue of Buddhist nationalist politics as a strategy for enacting a gendered vision of a complete Buddhist *sāsana*, well-able to protect itself from foreign religious and cultural influences. The contested issue of *bhikkhunī* ordination, condemned by the appointed high-ranking monks who oversee monastic policy and business, fits into a larger geopolitical discourse of nationalist sentiment where the perceived gender-discriminatory attitudes of those same monks are compared to the foreign cultural and religious forces deemed most threatening to the safety and stability of an ailing Buddhist *sāsana*.

¹⁶⁶ Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers*, 8 & 43.

Chapter V | Concluding Remarks

Overview

Beginning with the high-profile international ordination of Bhikkhunī Kusuma and nine other Lankan women that took place in 1996 in Sarnath, India, I have complicated Salgado and Cheng’s dichotomization of renunciant women who have and have not learned the language of western feminism through the activism of Sakyadhītā and its local Lankan representatives Kusuma and de Silva. I have argued that their language about status, equality, and rights are relevant to the concerns and self understanding of Sri Lankan Buddhist women, and not always and everywhere the narrative incursion of western feminists and scholars by showing how Kusuma and de Silva sought the transnational connections they needed in order to realize the goal—shared by Sakyadhītā—of reinstating *bhikkhunī* ordination in a Buddhist tradition where it was not presently available. In doing so, I have argued that they mediate between local and translocal levels of speech and activism in their efforts. Most telling is their ‘feminist’ language (speaking in terms of gendered hierarchies, status, and rights), while simultaneously eschewing the term ‘feminism,’ instead locating their pro-*bhikkhunī* arguments in line with locally-salient Buddhist concepts and bodily religious comportment which function as strategies to localize and render legitimate an imported monastic lineage. I have show that this pattern of monastic revival is prefigured by similar projects of localization at key points throughout Lanka’s monastic history. However, unlike earlier models from the 1700s and 1800s, the 1996 and 1998 ordinations reveal the central importance of gender in these ongoing disputes.

I have argued that the first *bhikkhunī* ordination for Sri Lankan women in 1996 problematizes Salgado’s authorization of the local precisely because its genesis and organization reflect a translocal effort that cuts through her association of global with ‘*globalatinized*.’

Although Sakyadhītā's language and founding principles evidence categories that are recognizable in a liberal western frame, I show how its founding Lankan women members articulate the profound religious and social benefits that ordaining, training, and supporting nuns can bring to the nation. In particular, Ranjani de Silva, like Wimalajōthi, argues that virtuous and well-trained nuns can provide crucial religious and social services to Sri Lankan women which will have the effect of improving the *state* of Buddhist practice and identity.

Next, by telling a story of a subsequent *bhikkhunī* ordination movement that followed shortly after 1996, I have shown that what is at stake in disputes between these two burgeoning lineages, each claiming (and competing) to be the "first" to revive the lineage, is precisely who has the authority to define authentic 'Theravāda' in contemporary Lankan monastic practice. The internal contestation between these groups largely has to do with which of the two ordinations can be deemed Theravādin in light of the fact that both were performed with the assistance of East-Asian Mahāyāna conferring monastics. I expand on Salgado's analysis to show how these two contemporary *bhikkhunī* lineages become localized, that is, how they demonstrate their authenticity in a distinctly Lankan idiom. As one example of this project drawn from my observations in Sri Lanka, I highlight high levels of monastic comportment demonstrated by Sri Lanka's modern *bhikkhunīs* as a gendered strategy that both performs religious piety (helping to legitimize the contested nuns' ordination movement in the eyes of monastic institutions and lay patrons), and which is principally expressed in terms of Buddhist soteriological motivation. I have argued that the gendered dimensions of this performance of piety strategize on a wide-ranging belief that Sri Lanka's monks are generally lax in their monastic practice, and that many of the current monastic institutions are corrupt.

Chapter IV introduced Kirama Wimalajōthi and presented a preliminary investigation

into connections between *bhikkhunī* ordination and Islamophobic Buddhist nationalism. I have argued that Wimalajōthi's support for *bhikkhunī* ordination is framed in simultaneously local and global terms: criticizing the *nikāya* administrations for simultaneously denouncing *bhikkhunī* ordination and failing to protect Buddhism from foreign influence, while claiming that the ordination can protect local women from conversions to Islam and Christianity instigated by foreign religious flows. Much of Wimalajōthi's logic, I have argued, draws on concepts of decline-and-revival of the *sāsana*, which also open up the space for nuns to visibly display a high degree of comportment with monastic rules in contradistinction to lax monks, a key strategy of localization.

Along the way, I have tried to be attuned to the local-translocal interaction of speech, discourse, and activism as this nexus of overlapping concerns and intertwined initiatives comes into central possibility and tension through discourse and debate at and between these intersecting levels. The resurgence of an otherwise defunct monastic lineage provides a unique opportunity to observe how an imported ordination lineage legitimizes itself and seeks to thrive in the absence of support from the government and Sri Lanka's powerful monastic fraternities.

Limitations

No study of such a complex and globally-rooted phenomenon can be adequately investigated on the back of one month of field research. While my time in Sri Lanka was enormously productive due to a number of contacts I had already established in the field and the willingness on the part of my subjects to share their stories, time, and experiences with me, the present thesis is in many ways still preliminary and limited in scope.

One limitation stems from the fact that I was not able to conduct interviews with either Inamaluwe Sumangala or with any of the government or *nikāya* representatives who condemn

bhikkhunī ordinations. Relying on secondary literature and news reports about their respective support (and lack thereof) for *bhikkhunī* ordination has allowed me to make some sense of how their arguments feature in the larger dispute. Despite this, whether or not Sumangala's support for *bhikkhunī* ordination overlaps with his anti-Muslim speech and activism remains an unsolved mystery to me, as do the specific terms by which the Saṅghanāyakas and Mahānāyakas individually express their condemnation of *bhikkhunī* ordination, and to what extent these condemnations reveal expectations and roles for women in contemporary Sri Lankan social life.

Another limitation has to do with my facility in the Sinhala language. Although the majority of interviews presented here were mostly conducted in English, and while this has revealed a number of dimensions and issues in the *bhikkhunī* ordination dispute not yet articulated in previous scholarship, a more robust engagement with these figures in Sinhala would, I suspect, reveal additional nuance. While I have managed to translate some of the Bodu Bala Sena content and Facebook graphics from Sinhala to English, and while I am attuned throughout (as much as possible) to the local connotations of terms like 'international,' 'foreign,' and 'global,' with a few more years of Sinhala study I think this approach to analysis, advocated by Mrozik (2014) and Tsing (2005), could be significantly expanded. This will be a priority for me as I continue to expand my investigations into gendered Buddhist monastic practice and history.

Finally, my discussion of an indigenous Lankan 'feminism' could be significantly advanced through a more robust engagement with both the literature on South Asian women's resistance movements and global feminism through incorporating more voices about whether or not—and to what extent—women in Sri Lanka voice these issues and concerns, and in what language they do so both individually and as part of collective social movements. This would be

especially fruitful in conversation with a fuller reading of postcolonial feminist and subaltern studies literature.

Future Directions

There are a number of places to go from here. While my engagement with Wimalajōthi revealed surprising confluences between Islamophobia, nationalism, gender roles, and the issue of *bhikkhunī* ordination, my analysis here is largely constrained to just him. That the Bodu Bala Sena lists *bhikkhunī* ordination as one of its twelve primary goals remains, as yet, an unstudied aspect of their rhetoric and activities. In subsequent research, this seems like a natural place to continue my investigation of interrelationships between these issues. Another place to expand the scope of the present investigation has to do with the Taiwanese and Korean monastics who agreed to participate in international ordinations. How were they contacted? What were their motivations? To what extent do they—like Kusuma, Sumangala, and Wimalajōthi—see themselves as instrumental in reviving a defunct lineage and making history?

Finally, it is by now well documented that both Islamophobic Buddhist nationalism and *bhikkhunī* ordination disputes rage on throughout other spaces in South and Southeast Asia, most notably in Thailand and Burma. While in the previous chapter I have drawn out a few connections between Wimalajōthi's comments and 969 rhetoric in Burma, this discussion could be significantly expanded transregionally between Sri Lanka and these other places in order to trace the confluences and disjunctures between Lankan and Southeast Asian Buddhist nationalist rhetoric and the ways that *bhikkhunī* ordination is debated in those spaces.

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