

Forging bonds, dispelling evil. The Sinhalese Tummase Dane ritual.¹

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ABSTRACT

A typical Tummase Dane funerary ritual of a middle class woman is described and investigated in the light of a first-hand fieldwork experience. Buddhist beliefs that form the basics of this ritual are mentioned and connected to the actual events that took place during the ceremony, along with the agency and roles of the individuals that animated it. Dana (almsgiving), sumptuous offering of food and gift-giving, self-abnegation and unconditional help given by the deceased's relatives to the monks and community are signs of an aspiration to correct and formal religious conduct, but also evidences of an underlying assertiveness and manifestation of public wealth and recognition within the community, seen as a microcosm in which social status is evaluated thanks to moral but also material acts. Personal, subjective agency then participates in the long-standing of traditional processes, as it is explained by Marx in *The Theses on Feuerbach* (1888). Finally, a tentative explanation of the accordance of social and economic (political) tendencies in this festive ritual is given through a comparison with the Potlatch of North-West American populations.

Keywords: *Theravada Buddhist rituals; Sri Lanka; traditional heritage; total social facts; Potlatch; morality.*

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Premise

Since social dramas suspend normal everyday roleplaying, they interrupt the flow of social life and force a group to take cognizance of its own behavior in relation to its own values, even to question at times the value of those values. In other words, dramas induce and contain reflexive processes and generate cultural frames in which reflexivity can find a legitimate place (Turner 1979: 83).

In December 2021, I had the opportunity to attend the funerary ritual that is observed 3 months after death in a Sri Lanka's middle class household. The ritual is relevant for the ethnographic or folklore literature for its uniqueness in the panorama of Buddhist rituals, and even more about the social and economic reverberations for the whole community involved in its preparation.

The family of the deceased person, an old woman of about 86 years of age who passed away in September 2021, is a classic example of modern Sinhalese diaspora. Four adult daughters now live semi-permanently in Italy, and specifically in Milan, although they visit their native home and neighborhood almost every year for a short time. They are all married with children, and work as maids or cleaning ladies for bourgeois² families in the city, a job that they are particularly adept at, given the

¹ The photos included in this article belong to the author. The authors report there are no competing interests to declare. I am grateful to Professor Augustin Holl for his advices on how to improve this article.

² By bourgeois I mean middle class families with an average income of around 1500 to 2500 euros per month (of at least two members of the household), an owned or rented or loaned apartment in central or semi-central city area and

relatively good income that that can generate, notwithstanding the relatively hard work that they have to sustain. A positive financial rationale, in the example of these Sinhalese migrant workers and their families, is not so much derived from the salaries *per se*, which are understandably of middle to low scale in Italy, but depends first on willingness to work for long shifts, and second from the community welfare, family mutual support and wise use of money that the Sinhalese exercise in their everyday life, all factors that allow a positive economic ratio.

Within the Sinhalese community, as I could experience it in Milan during fieldwork in the year span 2015-2018³ sharing of goods and meals also during weekly religious gatherings at the local pagoda, redistribution of goods, mutual help and the exercise of good deeds for the community are widely accepted values and lines of conduct, so much as this sort of situation makes me think of a circular or horizontal rather than a vertical, linear or individualistic economy⁴. Religious values and rituals are conceived and experienced as moments and occasions of reunion, sharing, exchange, even pleasant interaction and building. During ritual gatherings, for example the one that I witnessed in April 2018 in a small monastery at Cascina Gobba, on the outskirts of Milan, it seems to me that the original significance of the word religion, from the Latin *religare* or “bring together”, “to bind”, is particularly true⁵. Religion here is not (only) the abstract ritual full of out-of-the-world terminology, complicated, ancient words of (supposed to be) wisdom that arouse mystery or awe in the minds of the believers: its value and importance are not in its externalizations, in the merely verbal-decorative elements of its rituals and customs (the ones that Leroi-Gourhan defined the “dernier degrés du fait”⁶). These are necessary, rather, in the legitimization of religion as a magical power, as a transcendent wisdom whose effectiveness is able to overcome the mundane world, its problems, its constraints, or, in another sense, to legitimate the superior rank of the officers of the cult who are considered, due to their power or out-of-the-ordinary knowledge, worth of reverence and respect by the commoners. However, the value of religion, I repeat, lays in its efficacy for the actors, in its praxis, in its power to bridge the gap between theory and practice, words and actions, or rather in the simultaneous abridgment of concepts with its praxis. Why rituals are most adept moments to study this praxis? Because during these sequences of conscious and unconscious actions, the actors or practitioners actively experience their religion and merge it with their living values and experiences. In these moments, that represent a clear caesura from the routinization of everyday life and habits, I believe that the main features of religion, are

relative financial stability (that is, positive ratio at the end of each month). My reference is the entry number 1 and 2 of Merriam-Webster dictionary for the word: bourgeois (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bourgeois>).

³ Fieldwork conducted in a Sinhalese community in Milan and local temple (unpublished manuscript and documentary).

⁴ See the definition given by the European Parliament (<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/economy/20151201STO05603/circular-economy-definition-importance-and-benefits>): *This is a departure from the traditional, linear economic model, which is based on a take-make-consume-throw away pattern. This model relies on large quantities of cheap, easily accessible materials and energy.*

⁵ Other derivations of the term religion supposedly come from *religere*, or to repeat, to read again (as quoted by Cicero in *the natura deorum* 2, 28, 72), or alternatively from the English old term *reck*, or to heed, to have a care of (Journal of the American Oriental Society, 1912, Vol. 32, No. 2 (1912), pp. 126-129).

⁶ Or least degrees of technical variation (stylistic or aesthetic variations). As summarized by Françoise Audouze (Journal of Archaeological Research, Vol. 10, No. 4, December 2002: 284): “For Leroi-Gourhan, then, tools and implements are the “objectivation” or concrete expression of Pa tendance in technical facts at a specific place in space and time. Among the degrés du fait, Leroi-Gourhan gives primacy to function and physical constraints. Choices and style are in his view secondary and relate to ethnicity. In other words, social aspects express themselves in variations of secondary or superficial importance, which are expressed in the last degrés du fait”.

coalesced into a distinct frame of time, location, and interpretations of the actors. Not only verbal or hearing senses are utilized, then, but the everyday life, made of everyday actions and needs, becomes united with religion and religious moments such as the one, a funeral which is observed after 3 months of the death of a person, that is the subject of this paper. So, senses as a whole and not only as discrete parts, are engaged in the active definition of the world, that is continuously taking place, as it is clearly manifested by rituals, that are summaries and particularly dense moments of a culture *in divenire*. Every person then, carve her world, in a sense, during rituals, and actively contributes to its evolution. Every ritual, in this way, contains the keys to the understanding of a particular way of life and its *weltanschauung*. And it is a meaning not fixed in time. In Turner's words, "in social life cognitive, affective, and volitional elements are bound up with one another and are alike primary, seldom found in their pure form, often hybridized, and only comprehensible by the investigator as lived experience, his/hers as well as, and in relation to, theirs"⁷.

Religious meanings, concepts, ideals but also certain cultural habits are not received passively by the people but are reasserted and practiced actively both during ceremonies (where they are more apparent) and other moments of the people's life, where they might be more difficult to unearth by the external observer, because they are silent, they merge with other common activities that may seem standardized. Naturally, the funerary rite that is the subject of this study and other rituals reveal that Buddhist precepts are ubiquitous and dominant in the Sinhalese people's *habitus*, both at conscious and unconscious levels.

By conscious I mean the way the people actively perceive their actions according to a Buddhist knowledge that was imparted on them during youth or thanks to a secondary influx of knowledge and religious propaganda, to which they were exposed. In this regard, there are at least two modes of exposure at Buddhist rituals and celebrations, that really characterize the whole Sinhalese year; and by means of social persuasion or influence, that is, the way people are convinced to accept or conform to determined values or customs, or behaviors, a social phenomenon, also studied by Goffman (1963), that I call *induced behavioral response*. This is, however, common to many aspects of culture and not only of religious features: vogues, clothes, costumes, technological items, or even languages (new slang expressions), even though individual differences are always present and actively influence the way, degree and force to which these external elements are perceived, adopted, contrasted, naturalized in an individual's life.

By unconscious level, I mean when particular aspects of a culture are naturalized and exercised in a person's behavior with no apparent awareness of them being part of a culture, or religion. The anthropologist's or anyway the external observer's gaze is, in this regard, particularly helpful in understanding the unconscious behaviors of people that may be, nonetheless, deeply cultural or culturally bounded⁸. There are clearly signs, as it will become manifest in the ceremony description below, of common or group behaviors that the actors perform because they are taken as natural, granted, simply inevitable in a particular context, environment, social setting. In these actions, there is

⁷ Victor Turner (1979), *Dramatic Ritual/Ritual Drama: Performative and Reflexive Anthropology*. The Kenyon Review, New Series, Vol. 1, No. 3, page 80.

⁸ This because the natives or the native's perspective is too biased, too conformed, too habituated to a particular activity or ritual or behavior to endow it with much consideration or attention. So, the external view may shed new light, also by means of sudden epiphanies, also through juxtaposition of particular cultural elements from his own culture to the one that is being investigated. Very clear contrasts or differences can work as detonators or breaks or catalysts in the anthropological understanding.

no hiatus between thought and action, doctrine and behavior, script and acting, simply because actions are the way they are: simply conformed to a supposed to be standard of values and rules. So, people do perform these actions in a way that is socially bound, in order to be recognized and promoted by the group. This is not, though, a merely utilitarian response, but a (silently enacted) desire to be accepted within a social context, and to gain the advantage in it. An advantage that is not merely economic, but also ethic, religious, moral, human.

Buddhism has been since its inception a religion concerned with Dukkha (suffering) and death as its arguably fundamental concerns (Holt 2017: introduction). The historical Buddha's life and quest for Nibbana as an awakening from the illusion that permeates material phenomena, an illusion that continuously causes suffering, was aimed to escape the inescapable cycle of rebirths (samsara) to which all living beings are subject. Thus, dying is envisioned as a continuation and final goal of life, a destination to which every human being must be prepared. In this regard, the accumulation of a "field of merit", or meritorious deeds during one's lifetime can contribute to a positive reincarnation at the end of the journey. These deeds, as explained in the following pages, are accumulated through an observance of some basic principles that, rather than mentioned, are practiced in the everyday life. Thus, they ascribe to a sort of non-verbal or tacit or embodied knowledge that is socially sanctioned because almost omnipresent in Sinhalese society. In this sense, conformation to the rules and socially accepted norms of behavior regulates many aspects of life that transcend the concept of religion *stricto sensu* to embrace a comprehensive definition of religion that is close to its etymology of "bring or bind the community together in the participation of common meaningful acts". I agree in this sense with Southwold when he states that religion is an experienced and actualized demonstration rather than an abstract imperative to be followed:

what he found to be quintessentially Buddhist about the villagers among whom he lived was the cultivation of an intensely this-worldly oriented ethical consciousness that engendered positive acts of compassion for the welfare of the many. For these villagers, Southwold averred, Buddhism was not primarily concerned with an individual's creedal-centered and "*nibbana*-grabbing quest" (his phrase), but consists, instead, of an ethical imperative to assuage the conditions of *dukkha* (or suffering) in the world (Holt 2017: 8).

Among the middle class Sinhalese people with whom I worked in a suburb of Colombo the dimension of religion is absolutely practical but also has transcendental motivations. In rituals such as the Tummase Dane, religion finds its conditions of existence, popularization and transmission because it is a shared and meaningful act that brings together the symbolism (the paraphernalia used for the ceremony), material pleasures (the food and gifts given to attending guests and monks) and a consciousness about the rewards that are gained thanks to these acts of merit for the deceased and the Samgha or clergy. In this sense, a religious ritual such as this is also a social performance in which economic criteria of status and influence are determined and assessed within the community. Therefore, the funeral ritual, as explained in Dietler and Hayden's ethnographic compilation on feasting studies (2001: introduction), matches well into this framework in which the display and donation of goods determine a renegotiation of mutual obligations between the actors and thus can be considered to be an important political event. The convergence of many facets of public behavior in the same ritual, together with magic and material meanings associated with it, opens up challenges and perspectives for a research that here could only be outlined.

The Tummase Dane⁹ ceremony

That is, ritual has a “performative” dimension that is concomitantly generative of qualitatively affective experiences. What this means practically [...] is the assertion that by studying selected rituals of central importance to Theravada Buddhist traditions, we can understand how Buddhists in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia generate meaning, negotiate power, experience an aesthetic, and embrace identity existentially as individuals, communities, and nations (Holt 2017: 5).

The Malabage Perera family house, the former house of the deceased lady, is located in a peripheral district of the mega-city of Colombo, a popular, low to middle class neighborhood with no particular remarkable features. The house is in a lateral street, nestled in a quiet, residential area, has a big yard and garden and a big dining-leisure room in the middle. Currently, two of the Perera daughters reside there, although temporarily (their families are in Italy), and a third is visiting for a few weeks in order to attend the ceremony. I am hosted in one of the deceased lady’s daughters’ houses. I know this lady thanks to family (work) connections in Milan, Italy.

Preparations for the ceremony begin several days before. The house, inside and outside, is cleaned up. The large living room is carefully prepared for hosting the monks who will take part in the ritual, space, and tables for them are set up. The ladies, aided by their husbands or friends, go to the market almost every day and begin a great accumulation of food and sweets, which will be cooked for monks and guests and attendees. Many women of the family, close and distant relatives, friends, neighbors participate actively in cooking, cleaning, serving. A girl who is working at a nearby factory, and her mother, friends of a daughter of the deceased, who live almost *pro bono* in the adjoining house (that looks quite dilapidated), worked hard for the duration of the ceremony. They are very helpful, polite and kind towards everybody. They are always around serving tea to people. I could not ascertain if they would do it for monetary compensation. Perhaps they received a small pay from the organizers (the daughters of the deceased and their husbands), but they probably helped because they were compelled to help, because they thought that was a good and dutiful action to do, a way to somehow enlarge their “field of merits”, as it is said in popular Buddhist terminology and possibly reciprocate their obligation towards the Perera family for living in their property for free. Many other people gather and help alongside the owners, even for a small time every day.

Two cooks are hired by the eldest daughter, Kaylani, who is the main organizer of the event, the one who gives dispositions to the other helpers, all close relatives who arrived on Friday before the rite (that will be held on Sunday). The outdoor kitchen - cooking yard -, if we may call it, is an open space on the back of the kitchen proper, where the two cooks work.

A man, a craftsman, for the whole day on Friday, Saturday, cuts palm branches from a big palm tree that had been cut already by his son, and makes complicated caskets with them, that are prepared for this funerary ritual essentially. These caskets, that bear complex decorations with carved palm sticks, branches, and leaves, are called *crop kala* (fig. 1).

⁹ From the Sanskrit Dana, “to offer”, “to give”, one of the ten paramis (virtues) in the Pali tradition of Buddhism. This ritual, to be observed 3 months after the death of the person, it is not fundamentally different from the funeral officiated 3 days after the death. The tummase dane is then celebrated annually after the first commemoration.



Figure 1: an old man, a neighbor and friend of the deceased woman's family, is responsible for the preparations of the ritual crop *kala*, complex ornamental and symbolic palm leaves' caskets that will be offered to the monks and placed in the hall where the monk will give the ritual sermon (as in fig. 3)

They have apotropaic, fortune-propitiatory meanings attached with their ornamental forms¹⁰. The whole ceremony, is, as we will see later, in fact a blessing spell for the soul of the deceased person, in order to accompany it to Nibbana, or liberation from the chain of rebirth (*samsara*), and the wish of a peaceful transmigration and a positive reincarnation. At the same time, as we can see from the ceremony's name (*Dane* = *Dana*), it is also a propitiatory offer of gifts to the clergy and, by consequence, to the deceased soul. Kaylani once told me: "If this ceremony wasn't offered to the dead soul, or if proper treatment was not given to the clergy, there would be a risk for the deceased soul to return to the world of the living asking for proper compensation for its troubles". Needless to say, a ghost or haunted presence is something the relatives wish to avoid at all costs (see Langer 2007: 148 and following for an account of the belief on ghosts and spirits in Sinhalese post-mortem situations)¹¹.

¹⁰ Their diffusion and variation of form, is also present in other Theravada Buddhist cultures (such as the Cambodian), and deserve further research.

¹¹ An interesting comparison could be made with the ancestral feasts among the Lamet of Laos (Hayden 2016: 13-16): *Ancestral feasts –lasting as long as ten days and involving great quantities of pigs, chickens, water buffaloes, rice, and alcohol– made ancestors powerful spirits who, in turn, were supposed to give their descendants power and wealth (or, more sanguinely, justified their acquisition of power and wealth)*. In this case, in an opposite but specular way, the ceremonies aim at propitiate and ingratiate the spirits of the ancestors and thus granting for the living possible merits and fortune. Propitiating good entities or averting possible evil spirits are in fact similar objectives.

Three musicians are hired by the House too (fig. 2). They play three instruments: drum, fife, and a double drum struck with two splints. At the beginning of every hour, from morning to evening on Saturday and Sunday, which is the climax of the ritual, they perform a melody which follows a similar structure but with tonal differences¹². The musicians at each time exchange their instruments: so, each one of them is a multi-instrumentalist. They are specialists of this job and their role is much respected by everyone: no one tries to interact with them for the whole ceremony time, they stay quite secluded from the general crowd. We can say that they are quite hieratic figures in this respect, figures endowed with a certain degree of dignity.



Figure 2: the three musicians hired by the house for the three-day ceremony. They will repeat similar repetitive rhythms alternating each other at the instruments. Their separation and non-participation in interloquy with other guests of the ceremony and following banquet distinguish their somehow “hieratic” status.

On the day before the ceremony (on Friday), great decorations are prepared in the room where the guests will sit to listen to the monk’s sermon (on Saturday afternoon) and where the ceremonial, almsgiving meal will be served on Sunday at noon (fig. 3). White ribbons are hung on the 4 pillars of the veranda, a candid white cloth covering the veranda’s coarse iron top part. Chairs have been hired from a retailer for the occasion, and are displayed in three lines, each chair well distanced from the next due to vague Covid-19 health precautions.

¹² The fife is always guiding the main rhythm, the drum marks the intersections and carries on the whole pace, and the double drum fills up the figure with its constant insistent beat.



Figure 3: The “Throne of the Law”, resembling the one of the Buddha during his sermons, is prepared for the monk to deliver his sermon on Saturday. Punkalas and crop kala, or palm leaves decorations, are also prepared along with a statue of the Buddha and a photo of the deceased lady.

A white shroud, symbolizing cleanliness and sanctity, is placed on the chairs and verandah (fig. 4).



Figure 4: the verandah outside the house where the guests will listen to the sermons on Saturday and Sunday and the final banquet will be hosted.

White is a very important color in Sri Lanka, and in Buddhism in general: it is considered the color of purity and detachment from worldly affairs, the color of virginity and dignity. People, but especially women, dress rigorously in white when they attend *puja* (offerings) at temples or monasteries, or when they participate in Buddhist ceremonies. During the ceremony, to which I was invited as a family guest, I was wearing a white shirt and white-blue sarong, a traditional, simple cloth that Sinhalese men wear still today in many cases: it is comfortable to cover the legs from ubiquitous mosquitoes and radiating sun during the day, thanks to its thin cotton fabric. Many other men wore white garments and shirts when attending and helping. Males do not participate, in general, to cooking phases (except the salaried cooks), but give a valuable hand around with other menial tasks.

On Saturday morning, all the necessary last-minute arrangements are carried out. Many guests and relatives of the Perera family start flowing in the premises since midday, many of them bringing gifts of symbolic kind, presents added to the ones already brought in the few days before. Presents are welcome but are not the *sine qua non*. What is most important, in fact, is the presence of people, their presence to honor the deceased and her family. Gifts obviously are of different varieties, but usually consist of sweets, flowers, biscuits, and the like, all arranged in a delightful *bouquet*.

At about 5 in the afternoon, the senior monk of the local monastery arrives by car, driven by his *chauffeur*. He is barefoot, and before entering the house, relatives of Perera's family wash his feet with water and soap and then dry them up. The main hall, where the monk takes a seat, has been already arranged with scrupulous attention: a great Buddha in *samadhi mudra* (the meditation posture) has been placed on a pedestal-throne in the northern part of the chamber and dominates the audience before him with his calm and dignified composure. A golden umbrella is opened on the statue, to protect him like the Naga, the god-serpent did when the historical Buddha was meditating, according to the legend, under the Bodhi Tree. Flowers of different kinds, but especially elegant lilies and roses, are arranged under the holy figure. A long white silk walkway is unfolded before the monks walk into the inner chamber and folded immediately after. The monk, from his seat, recites a long sermon of which meaning, unfortunately, no one of the local informants could give me much advice, but most probably contained excerpts from the Mahaparinirvana Sutra, which recalls the last days of Shakyamuni's life. It lasted for about one and a half hour. Before the monk, two carpets are open just in the middle of the room, and some kids sit there in a respectful manner. I and other attendees sit on the floor here and there in the room. After the speech, a hot herbal tea is offered to the monk by members of the house, since the Buddhist clergy ought not to eat anything from noon onward¹³. At this stage, the same carpet is then unfolded, everyone bows at his passage, and the monk slowly returns to his car, to return to his lodges. The musicians, in a similar vein as the monk's arrival on the place, perform their high pitch, farewell melody when the monk live the house precincts.

The day after, on Sunday, a crowd of guests assemble in the yard, within the house's walls, all of them, before dispersing in the space, give usually their regards to the Perera family member from whom they were invited. At about 10 in the morning, I accompany three men, one of whom is a deceased's daughter's husband, who speaks a pretty good Italian after working there for 30 years as a sailor, to the small monastery just around the corner, to pick up the monks who will be attending the puja and their objects. We drive a minivan to the temple. After a short discussion, three resident monks, one of whom is from Burma, come with us to the car. My informant, the man who worked in Italy, named Pilitha, takes from the main hall of the monastery a sort of casket covered by a golden thread. He places it on his head, and slowly walks to the minivan carrying it. A golden umbrella is opened on it for symbolic protection, as we have seen before in the case of the Buddha statue. This casket, a reliquary, is a mysterious object of which real content none of the people could enlighten me. The Perera elder daughter, Kaylani, speculated it is an urn containing some small relics of the Buddha, but of this none is certain. The reliquary is anyway put on a pedestal besides the Buddha figure in the main room of the house. The monks now are driven home, and we accompany them to the entrance, where their feet are again washed. Other monks, from other monasteries, arrive at the place, and they are shown their seat in the hall.

¹³ Precepts for Buddhist Samgha contained and explained in the Vinaya corpus that regulates the behavior of monks and nuns in and outside the monasteries.

The elderly monks sit closer to the Buddha statue and the younger ones farther. There is a hierarchical subdivision of order in the sitting arrangement (fig. 5).



Figure 5: after an initial sermon on Sunday morning, at about 11 AM food begin to be offered to the monks of the nearby monastery along with many gifts. Everyone is dressed in white and carpets are spread on the floor. After the monks have finished eating and leave the house, the big banquet for the guests begins. After the guests have finished their meal, the house members and relatives (including the anthropologist) can start eating. Offering and serving the meal, including preparation and cleaning, is considered a collective effort which is meritorious by those who knew or respected the deceased woman.

Two elderly monks now recite a sermon that lasts for about an hour, and around 11 am the food begins to be served by the members of the house, including me, invited to do so by Perera's sisters, of whom I was a guest¹⁴. Dishes are distributed around, and we serve food to the monks: foods are of an astounding variety, more than 20 courses are offered in total. Contrarily to other Buddhist traditions, here cooked meat and fish can be consumed by the clergy. When the meal comes to an end, each of the devotees offers an already prepared gift to each monk. These offerings include, among other things, fruits, sweets, dry fruits, a robe, chocolate, nuts, and a bowl to the eldest monks. At the end of the offering, the gifts are put into plastic bags and the monks are escorted by everyone to their vehicles. After the monks have left, big bowls with foods are presented onto trays, just underneath the veranda where the people gathered. About 300 guests attend the ceremonial lunch. Several varieties of rice, vegetables with spices, fish,

¹⁴ I was a guest in one of the Perera sisters' houses, very near to the ceremony house. My host, Dammika, has been a maid for my family members in Milan for more than 20 years.

chicken, and then desserts and fruits are offered. The lunch takes place in a serene, jovial albeit serene atmosphere until the guests slowly leave for their respective whereabouts. This circumstance is everything but sad, social bonds are consolidated and established, occasional laughter also happens, and a social display of people takes place.

The deceased was called Kothalawalage Jennona and had a reputation of much respected mother and nurse in the Homagama district, in the south-east of Colombo metropolitan area, Sri Lankan commercial capital. The family, named Malabage Perera, consists of 4 daughters, now between 50 and 70 years old, their offspring and adjunct relatives. The ceremony for the positive transmigration of the deceased is called *tummase dane*, or තුම්මාසේ දානයේ in the Sinhala language¹⁵.

If this ceremony is not attended properly, it is said, the soul of the dead person will not find peace and continue to wander between life and death in a haunted state, in a limbo that could cause severe problems to the people who are still alive. It is said that the soul could even come back to the world to admonish or frighten the living, under the form of a ghost called generally *preta* (Langer 2007). More generally, bad karma will generate out of this situation, eventuality that the living do their best to avert. But how the ceremony is best conducted in order to ward off this understandable danger?

The fundamental qualities of a good Buddhist believer, according to Theravada doctrine¹⁶, are exerted in the Buddha's four noble truths¹⁷ and, in extension, in the 10 paramitas or paramis (Sanskrit पारमिता, or “to conduct to the opposite side (of the river)” or, by extension, “perfection”)¹⁸ that are considered the virtues for the correct accomplishment of a Bodhisattva's path towards Nibbana or liberation from suffering. In this regard, Theravada Buddhism, based on the Pali corpus, is different from the interpretation of paramitas as intended in the Mahayana tradition. Ten are the paramitas commonly observed:

- Dāna pāramī: generosity, giving of oneself
- Sīla pāramī: virtue, morality, proper conduct
- Nekkhamma pāramī: renunciation
- Paññā pāramī: wisdom, discernment
- Viriya pāramī: energy, diligence, vigor, effort
- Khanti pāramī: patience, tolerance, forbearance, acceptance, endurance
- Sacca pāramī: truthfulness, honesty
- Adhiṭṭhāna pāramī: determination, resolution
- Mettā pāramī: goodwill, friendliness, loving-kindness
- Upekkhā pāramī: equanimity, serenity

¹⁵ It is also called Sanghika Dana (almsgiving) or Mataka-Dana (offering in the name of the dead) in Kariyawasam 1995: 44.

¹⁶ Sinhalese Buddhists take great pride on their belief, always asserting that Theravada Buddhism is the most original and authentic corpus of teachings, being the one closest to the Buddha's original words. The Sinhalese also say Theravada is the oldest doctrine, for it has been brought to the island close after the death of the Master in the II century BC. There are sources, in this regard, and archaeological data from the ancient capital of Anurādhapura, witnessing a very early adoption and reception of Buddhism (Viskam, Creativity, 1976: 8-16). This notwithstanding, the term Theravada is just an umbrella, commonly accepted term used in the literature, and seldom by believers themselves in their daily life (see Holt 2017: 1-5).

¹⁷ That are: all existence is Dukkha (suffering); the cause of Dukkha is craving; the cessation of Dukkha comes with the cessation of craving; there is a path that leads from Dukkha (<https://thebuddhistcentre.com/text/four-noble-truths>).

¹⁸ The paramitas are often modeled, in the Theravada Tradition, after the life of the Buddha or his previous lifetimes (Holt 2017: 28).

These values are normally ignored in their literal sense in the common people's everyday life, however they are embodied (with a significant degree of personal variation) by many people in their (unconscious) actions (*habitus*¹⁹), and upheld in high consideration²⁰ when these qualities of goodness are to be shown in a social ritual like the one we hitherto described. It is my impression, in this regard, that ritual, as a generative performance, has a meaning in itself (which can be melodic, participatory, socially constructed or shared) for the people who experience it and this is beyond or more relevant to investigate than the mere literary or philosophical meaning of the ritual, which is anyway not always clearly known or understood by the people²¹. The common populace makes use of the rituals in order to understand their roles in society and insert them into a "system of regulated representation" in which emotional and devotional needs can find explanation and acceptance within the socio-economic sphere of values²². This is also the way, as Kariyawasam (1995: V) argues, in which the canonical Buddhism, made often of abstruse or complex literature, could have been assimilated by the people through the complement of a "small tradition" of rituals and ceremonies. Thus, we can say, the material and the idealistic, the rational and the irrational were merged in order to survive in meaningful practice. Here I agree with Holt (2017: 9) in

how the religious ritual life of most Theravada Buddhists is concerned with tapping and channeling power that ameliorates the experience of *dukkha*. In each of these studies, the basic object is not an abstract philosophical Buddhism that supports the practice of individually, soteriologically oriented middle-class religion, but rather a dynamic religious culture within which Buddhist ideas and practices are intricately related to the realization of power and well-being.

This is because social occasions are primarily showcases in which the role and social status of a person, or of a kin or a group, is asserted, judged, put into display, and assessed by social judgment. In these occasions appearance and agency of individuals are scrutinized. The actors themselves, being involved in this social game, are compelled to be accepted into the social reality once again, and to achieve this socially respectable status have to be assertive and imitative in relation to their personal actions and in relation to their affiliates' actions. Imitation in these social and dramatic rituals is more crucial than creativity or individuality. In this socially-affected group behavior, of which Erwin Goffman wrote (1963), good deeds (whose reference is, first of all, the four noble truths and secondarily the Buddhist paramitas) and acts of distinction (that, in fact, distinguish a person and his kin within a particular social milieu) are powerful means or

¹⁹ I report the definition given in the Oxford Dictionary of Media and Communication (2011):

A set of norms and expectations unconsciously acquired by individuals through experience and socialization as embodied dispositions, 'internalized as second nature' (Bourdieu), predisposing us to act improvisationally in certain ways within the constraints of particular social fields. The concept of the *habitus* was proposed by Bourdieu as an integral part of behaviour reflected in a 'way of being': including ways of seeing, moving, talking, and so on. It functions to mediate between individual subjectivity and the social structures of relations.

²⁰ Again, not a verbal display of concepts or wisdom, but an embodied *habitus* or knowledge, a theory enacted and made practice.

²¹ This is because the Pali language used by the monks during ceremonies is not easily understood by the majority of the people which in any case does not seem particularly keen to analyze or interpret the meaning of the words but rather to listen to it and be infused by their sanctity. The holy words themselves seem to be undisputable. I base these observations on my fieldwork experiences but they should be taken as absolutely provisory and more research is much encouraged in this regard.

²² This is why this funerary ritual can be also investigated as a total social phenomenon in the sense used by Mauss, that is: a technique or system that is simultaneously material, social and symbolic (see Pfaffenberger, Bryan. *Man*, New Series, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Jun., 1988), pp. 236-252).

ways that people employ in order to be respected, to win the affection and support of others affiliates or similes in a socially sanctioned situation, and, *mutatis mutandis*, to guarantee the others' support and respect and help in case of future needs or similar social occasions (as Mauss argues in *The Gift*). I do not rule out that a perceived theory and practical reason of Karma²³-bound behavior would also affect similar group conduct. In general, a mediated and socially affected behavior is adopted in public by the people in reaction to particular constraints, that can be social or cultural or both.

Briefly, a social order may be defined as the consequence of any set of moral norms that regulates the way in which persons pursue objectives. The set of norms does not specify the objectives the participants are to seek, nor the pattern formed by and through the coordination or integration of these ends, but merely the modes of seeking them²⁴.

Good karma, or good deed, is perceived by everyone as a powerful rule of conduct in life, a force or energy that, accumulated at the end of one's life, will guarantee a better reincarnation after death. Many of my informants, not casually, insist that they help the others, they offer their contribution because they just like to do so, because of the good karma that those actions entail. This conformation to needs and goals does not, however, exclude the individual inclinations of each person, as it is witnessed by different behaviors and more or less zealous conducts of each practitioner during the ritual. Good actions in the material world are furthermore sought after and revered because of their conceived power in "ameliorating the experience of Dukkha" in the material world. Dukkha, in this regard, being the first of the Four Noble Truths of the Buddha, *it has been argued that assuaging that condition is perhaps the basic fundamental concern of the Buddhist religious path* (Holt 2017: 184).

Now, by reason of clarity, let us try to analyze the single paramitas explained above in light of actual examples of actions performed during the *tummase dane* funerary ritual of Mrs. Jennona.

Dana, generosity or giving of oneself for a positive action, is clearly revealed in the good actions of help performed during the ceremony by people of any sort: close and distant relatives of the deceased's family, neighbors, friends, acquaintances. Many people offer their help in the numerous tasks needed during the ceremony apparently without any immediate interests in it, apart those of mere sincere friendliness. I do not exclude, however, that rewards of these positive actions will be returned in a second instant or future occasions under the form of monetary or practical or other forms of help²⁵. Marcel Mauss, nonetheless, in his famous treatise on the Gift (2012 (1966)), asserted that every gift prompts a counter-gift, and in general every gift giving is an attempt or desire to establish a social or economic relationship of interest (relation of prestation).

Generosity, in this respect, is also a synonym for unselfishness, and I had the feeling, observing the people's behavior when helping out, that their ego was, in fact, dissolved in the flow, melted into the group's common responsibility and goal²⁶, as though the

²³ "(in the Buddhist and Hindu religions) the force produced by a person's actions in one life which influences what happens to that person in future lives" (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/karma>).

²⁴ Goffman (1963: 8).

²⁵ I already mentioned a poor girl factory worker of about 20, along with her mother, who participated in the ceremony with great fervor and relentless help, with only a small reward in terms of food (that they have nonetheless consumed in a very discrete and humble way, *hidden* from the guests' crowd). They live in one of the deceased's daughter's small houses, just adjoining the main family house where the ceremony is held. This small house is quite dilapidated but they live there almost for free (Kaylani, the older Perera daughter, confessed it to me).

²⁶ At least, egotistic attachment is not the most important discerning faculty during such moments of engagement, socially mediated behavior and mutual help. Egotism is rather compensated by a group-ego, a group-consciousness,

whole group taking part in the ceremony had become an equalitarian society with common rules and welfare.

Sila, proper conduct or virtue, is again shown and embodied by the people whom, during the long ceremony preparations and development, do their best to conform and behave according to a conduct that, itself, corresponds to an idealized (but, at the same time, exerted in practice) ethical model or canon. This is the canon of worthy behavior mediated in a social contest, and towards the people in need of help. Who does not conform to this conduct is not, however, excluded or marginalized by the rest of the group: there is no apparent judgment but I found great tolerance toward the different characters, different inclinations of the people. So, in this cultural context, virtue is not an exclusive, judgmental virtue, but is a virtue of forbearance and inclusion.

Nekkhamma, renunciation, is specifically seen in the behavior of the mourning family's daughters and close relatives, those principally involved in the preparation of the ceremony and reception of guests and monks. The rent of many appliances (microphone and audio system, cooking vessels, a car van, tables and chairs and white covers, carpets) and the hiring of people (the three traditional musicians, the cooks, car drivers) requires a certain amount of money that is entirely shared by the organizing family. Moreover, the Pereras and their close relatives, do not participate or abstain in none of the common ritual meals (especially the one on Sunday, after the monk's own ritual alms giving) before all the guests have finished their meal. Even after everyone else have finished eating, the Pereras eat in a very low scale, humble and discrete way (I, myself, did not notice any of the daughters eating after the ceremony), and the women almost always eat after the males as I could see in many occasions. Therefore, humility, renunciation and discreteness are definitely observed during the ritual as a form of respect towards the guests and clergy, and as a form of profound penitence toward the deceased.

Panna, or wisdom, is a value that is obviously held in high esteem, and I believe the monks, with their sermons on Saturday and on Sunday before the alms meal, personify the role of wisdom-bearers²⁷. Their speech is expanded with a microphone (in much the same fashion as the morning and evening prayers that are transmitted by public speakers everywhere in the city, except the Muslim and catholic quarters where the local religious prayers are preferred) to the audience and it can be heard from as far as three or four hundred meters in all directions. The audience is therefore immersed in the pervasiveness of words of wisdom and imbued by it²⁸. The presence of monks and the donation of alms to them (the big meal offered on Sunday) restores and increases the "field of worth" that, in Buddhist terminology, is the correct path of every Buddhist believer's life. People are compelled, then, in this worldview, in this society in which religion still plays a very important part in the definition of identity (the role of people in a certain universe of meaning), to dedicate energies and efforts towards not only a personal goal, but an individual's goal that is not completed without a common sharing of responsibilities, without a common pursuit of (perceived-to-be) goodness.

Viriya, or energy, diligence and effort, is exactly this effort, this need, that is felt by the singles and by the group's common behavior (that, itself, acts as a powerful catalyst

that is also a common responsibility, if we may define it thus.

²⁷ Their sole presence, according to the Sinhalese people I have interviewed, is warranty of holiness. Great respect and profound obeisance, are manifested to monks.

²⁸ This is also a powerful means of social and cultural conformation and indoctrination. The vision and understanding of the world is then shaped by this silent but pervasive exposure to preaching sounds. It would be interesting here to refer to what Serge Gruzinky (2017) called "Colonization of the Imaginary".

to the actions of the singles), to work toward a positive goal that is beneficial to all, *because it is honorable in itself*²⁹.

Khanti, the paramita of tolerance and patience, has already been explained in certain behaviors of the actors during the ritual. The tolerance of bearing long hours of work and the inclination “to serve” the others, holy men and not, is always seen in a positive perspective. The perspective of a good reward for these positive deeds in this life or after it.

Sacca, or honesty, is, again, in the same vein, the conviction of searching truth and goodness with one’s actions and deeds. Everyone that is cooperating during the ritual is working in the same direction because they are convinced that they are following a truthful objective. Honorable behavior, towards the community and the Samgha, triggers, ideally but also practically, a positive feedback for oneself, its relatives, and the society as a whole.

Adhittana is to a certain extent equivalent to Viriya, and I will omit it here.

Metta, one of the most important paramitas, corresponds to our categories of compassion, friendliness and kindness. To take care of the others (guests and monks alike), to demonstrate attention, generosity, care and goodwill towards the fellow human beings, is a sentiment that is profoundly observed and enacted during the ceremony, even more in this occasion (for the reasons explained above, due to socially influenced respectability) than in the everyday living, in which individual needs and interests are somehow affected by routine (in which movements and actions of people are hybridized and standardized in a commonly accepted framework³⁰). The Perera family members continuously offer food and beverages to the guests during the ceremony, and especially during the ceremonial meals. The huge amount of food, that exceeds by far the quantity needed for the invited guests, is offered to neighbors, people in need and beggars that may pass by during the celebration and after its end. At least two old beggars, were offered food and beverage by Kaylani, the oldest daughter of the deceased. Food is offered to the house’s neighbors (numerous family houses are located at both ends of the 400 meters’ lane called Dutugemunu Mawatha), and some of them, mostly young fellows, are invited to participate to the lunch. After the ceremony, the food in excess, is brought to temples and charity centers for people in need. Extreme kindness and boundless generosity are anyway exerted in the people’s manners and this is even more striking given the Perera family and relatives’ restraint and modesty of conduit. They are, during the ritual, totally concentrated about their task and the positive development of the ceremony. It is as if their wholehearted effort and generosity would be their nourishment, a nourishment of energy and value that fulfills their scopes.

Upekkha, equanimity and serenity are especially visible in the degree of equality with which the hosts treat anyone, disregarding their social standing or position. Kindness is offered to the mendicant and the millionaire and the army high officer, who were altogether present among the crowd at the rituals’ venue.

Much more could be said about this tentative religious explanation of a cultural happening, but suffice it to say that these religious elements or concepts are best experienced in the actions of the people, as I tried to outline above. These actions are personified by the actors³¹ who perform the rituals, not only perceived or experienced,

²⁹ Shared by the majority and indisputable in its values.

³⁰ The anthropologist, though, with his foreign eyes, may be able to catch novelty and embedded significance even in the routinized habits of everyday contingency.

³¹ By this term I mean the people involved in the preparation and execution of the ritual.

then, but utterly embodied: there is no separation between theory, thought, and practice in their action, or better, if there is separation, it is almost entirely fictitious, and can only be employed for the sake of ethnographic description. There is, in sum, a continuum of actions that gives life to a performance of which the actors are unaware, because in their eyes, what they do is a natural response to a certain circumstance in which they find themselves living³². We can say, perhaps, that during this funerary ritual, spiritual constraints and cultural habits are perceived as social boundaries that simply encapsulate the individual capacity of people to interpret or behave in an assertive, creative way. Individual assertiveness is thus limited to small actions that do not deviate, do not disrupt, or do it minimally, the main direction and development of the ritual itself. Therefore, creativity or individual egotistic action are not necessary, because they deviate from mutually and collectively-perceived goals, in this case the “giving of merit” of the *matakadane* offering rite. These are the preconditions, the conditions of existence of a ritual of this kind. It is necessary, as an obligatory condition for its existence, that the individuals subdue or limit their egotistic pursuit in order to achieve a common, unitary response. Individual perspectives are melted, we can say, in a social drama (a term we owe to Victor Turner³³) whose meaning and value have been already accepted and exhausted by the people and for the people. The *liminality*³⁴ (its being on a threshold) of this social ritual marks its separateness from the routine and thus works as a community building act. Any significant deviation from this commonly accepted order of matters will cause unnecessary disruption to the whole course of the event: that is why the bidders and the receivers, as we may call them, behave more or less and abide according to a socially and culturally confirmed script, which they, individually, fundamentally accept. This framework gives meaning to their world, an order of things that is socially profitable and *economically sustainable* for them. Why do I use this abused term? Because I believe that economy (in the old sense of *oikonomia*: from the Greek, “organization of the house resources”) is a very important part in understanding why the people of a certain cultural context accepts or live according to particular cultural constraints. Economy, in the sense of distribution of resources, efficacious methods in the organization and exploitation of tasks, re-distribution, sharing, and the establishment of an order of life (how humans organize their world in order to differentiate it from natural anarchy: the classic difference between civilization and nature, rationality and irrationality, and so forth) is a powerful index and cause of a ritual like this. Concepts and ideas are, in a way, reinforced and confirmed, assessed in a positive economical outcome for the people who find themselves enmeshed in this logic. This is not merely a genetic or environmentally- related constraint, but a result of an assessment of the individuals that takes place continuously, an implicit or explicit measurement of its actual benefits, perhaps a tacit or embodied knowledge found in expression and participation to shared occasions of economic and social relevance. These are meritorious acts that, to become effective, to make sense for the people who engage in them, have to be sensed and felt actively on their skins and stomachs. I do not rule out, after all, that culture imperatives and deeply rooted rituals like the *tummase dane* are simply enacted by communities beyond their initial outcome or effectiveness,

³² That is, perhaps this ritualistic or cultural trait is ingrained and natural in the actors’ conduct.

³³ A social drama is “a spontaneous unit of social process and a fact of everyone’s experience in every human society” (Turner 1980: 149).

³⁴ A term I owe, again, to Turner, after the *limes*, border, of Latin memory.

and they are performed because of shared socio-religious significance³⁵. In this regard I agree with Holt's interpretation of rituals:

Religious culture stands in reflexive relation to social, economic, and political change. Religious cultures are dynamic rather than static, fluid rather than fixed. How various rites rise and fall in popularity may be accurate indices of social, economic, or political change. Indeed, in this consideration, religion, or religious culture, does not stand apart from social process (Holt 2017: 6).

Social, moral and economic criteria embedded: a cross-cultural comparison

And here we come to the last part of this exploratory essay, in which we will investigate the analogies of this funerary ritual with the Potlatch of early anthropological accounts, which is only one of the many kinds of festive rituals that could be compared due to their cogency with our case. Feasts, according to Hayden (2001: 30), for the great part revolve around basic elements that are ultimately and fundamentally aimed at the *creation and maintenance of important social relationships*. Political alliance, cooperative relationships, creation of political power, the production of surplus for exclusive use, the solicitation of favors, and compensation of transgression are some of the connected functions or outputs of feasts as these have been observed in local examples (Hayden 2001: 29-30). Some of them are indeed present in both the Tummase Dane as I described it and the Potlatch ritual.

The institution of the Potlatch, among the native people of coastal Northwest North America (Haida, Tsimshian, Kwakiutl, Tlingit, Salish etc.), was, to my memory, first methodically investigated by Franz Boas and later by Drucker (1967), Codere (1966), and others.

Boas defines it briefly as: "The underlying principle [of the potlatch] is that of the interest-bearing investment of property" (1966: 77). According to Boas, "the principal motivation in the behavior of the I Kwakiutl Indians is the desire to obtain social prestige" (1966: 51). Acquiring and maintaining high prestige required correct marriages, and wealth accumulated via industry and potlatch investments (Boas [1966: 51] in: Dietler, Hayden [eds.] 2001: 187).

The Kwakiutl people organized this festival, in occasion of accessions or marriages, in order to assess and decide the hierarchy and the relative positions of power (status) into the community. In brief, the Potlatch consisted in an overabundant display of objects, treasures, masks, artistic items and other sources of wealth, which were accumulated, exhibited and given by the most influential persons to the community at large during solemn ceremonies and banquets in which display and munificence were stressed. Some of these items and much food were in fact wasted in great pomp and outright disdain for them, or their property. This behavior was interpreted by commentators as the refusal of abundance and opulence given the already achieved high status of the person, or the desired accession to it, and therefore the denial of the need of superfluous possession of goods. Gifts were given, of course, according to the status or power of each person. In the case of inter-tribal Potlatches, these took the form of competitive exchanges and manifestation of wealth, under the form of objects, totemic masks, and other sources of abundance that, as well as before, did not relate directly to physical needs.

³⁵ Here belief, as much as magic, is not totally reducible to economical discourses.

Food, it is true, is consumed upon occasions which count in every way as Potlatches; but the kinds and the quantities of food proper to such feasts preclude them from the category of subsistence economy. This becomes more certain when we realize that the materials of the Potlatch are not intended to satisfy the hunger and comfort wants of the guests, but first and foremost to satisfy the prestige demands of the host, and secondarily that of the individual guests.³⁶

Often, in these occasions, the overdose of materials (unbestowed gifts) was burned in order to assert the donor's superior wealth³⁷, so the uncontrolled competition could take on the features of a frenzy in which the influential people wanted to assert their superiority over the others. In ethnographic terms, such a contempt over materialism (at least in a socially regulated and meaningful rite, and not at all times), despite the impoverishment that the donors would inevitably face, could bring to a great aggrandizement of power, status and influence within the single kin, tribe or larger community, with the possible result that the exploited wealth would be recuperated in middle to long periods of time thanks to counter-gifts, donations, invitations to other Potlatches, etc. It should be noted, though, that the Potlatch is rarely if at all an affair of a single powerful person:

Since the Potlatch is by nature a mechanism serving restricted family and individual interests, one person (or at most a few who are closely related) declares his intentions, invites the guests, and assumes the role of host. He is, in consequence, to be regarded as the donor. A Potlatch, however, is by no means always a simple affair with one donor. Actually, in most cases it is either a series of minor individual distributions clustering about and taking advantage of the congregation occasioned by the major event; or it is a conjoint enterprise with any number of lesser contributors who publicize and retain their personal connections with their contributions and benefit accordingly³⁸.

Often, therefore, the whole group, kin, subjects, or affiliated to the powerful chief(s) or big men was beneficial of this display and offering of wealth. An easy explanation is that, in a society where public occasions and rituals were the only form of encounter and possibility for trade, exchange and financial or social improvement, Potlatches were an important standpoint from which to gain prestige, recognition and status, especially after warfare was regulated and banned thanks to European intervention³⁹. This was, then, not only the case of the chiefs, who were anyway, potentially the most beneficial, but the whole group behind or affiliated to them, except the slaves, could gain profit in respect of the larger social sphere.

What is particularly striking is the apparent anti-economical reason and result of these rituals. Often, as is the case with the *tummase dane* funeral, *sometimes members of the host group do more real labor than those who are paid for it. Again, imaginary services are paid for so that no one will be overlooked. Regularly, those who have given Potlatches receive more than others*⁴⁰, at least under the form of prestige and social

³⁶ Barnett (1938: 351).

³⁷ And here there is a parallel with the abundant acts of generosity manifested by the hosts during the *Tummase Dane*.

³⁸ Barnett (1938: 350).

³⁹ Many other societies were and are based upon the accumulation, display and donation of goods and wealth as a spectacle and assertion of one's own status and desire of recognition in the community (see Kirch 1991: 144, Denning 1980: 63).

⁴⁰ *Idem*, pag. 352.

standing⁴¹. In general, in both cases, the rule is: I will gain something in return of my services, but at no precise time and not in a precise amount, however I project myself and my kin in a position of moral and social achievement. The rule seems to be close to Marcel Mauss's (1950) theory of the gift, in which gift giving is explained, according to the French anthropologist, as an apparently disinterested action, but an action to which the receiver is later compelled to compensate with a return-gift. Social bonds, but also relative spheres of personal influence are determined by these relationships.

Further, the function of the Potlatch (and the *tummase dane* ceremony as well) consists

in a convention of witnesses, [in which it] provides the means by which the individual may gain the desired publicity outside his own group. But publicity alone is not enough. He demands an active concern on the part of others with his worth. To achieve this he aims, by exploiting and virtue of liberality, to establish a basis of reputability in his associates' opinion. Until he has done this he has no social standing whatever; he has no name, no means of being recognized as a member of the society⁴².

Now, in the Sinhalese example, the individuals use this manifestation of unconditioned offer and demonstration of abundance of resources and means, in order to reaffirm, again, both their individual status, (and, by consequence, their kin importance within the larger social group), and, moreover, their moral standing and correctness within the Buddhist framework that we described above, that is: almsgiving as the obligation to the living, and as a token for the positive transmigration of the soul of the deceased, so it will not be forced to come back to ask compensation under the form of a *preta*, or hungry ghost. This action is performed with no expectation of immediate economic or social gain. But, the publicity and display of effort, the respect of the paramitas that we have seen above, and the generosity and liberality with which his/her deeds are offered, all contribute to the host(s)'s respect, virtue, and recognition *in the eyes of the others*. The others, in future, will be similarly compelled to return the favor, under the same guise, as well as the receiver of the gift is soon or late necessitous of a reciprocation. Social bonding is thus created, asserted, and mutually assessed at any given time within the same accepted logic.

In this regard, regarding the Sinhalese funerary ritual, it is not so much the competitive aspect of the "game" which is noteworthy, but the forging of a sort of "social and spiritual insurance" by which the donors' and their kin guarantee a strong and assertive loyalty within a larger social sphere. Religion, economy, and the creation of social bonds merge into a cultural form that is both traditional and efficient⁴³, and assume an indistinguishable value for the people who practice them. If these social facts or rituals transcend the sphere of individual aggrandizement to encompass society, economical and status relationship and spirituality, they can be called "total social facts" as Mauss called acts of social prestation in the *Gift* (1950: 100). They are more than merely morphological or aesthetic, but also symbolic in as much as they extend their significance beyond the realm of the contingent experience to attain a teleological value.

Clearly, the Potlatch is (or was) a much more relevant ceremonial ritual for the North Western Tribes' society than the *tummase dane* is for the Sinhalese society. The latter

⁴¹ As reported in Hayden 2016: 6.

⁴² *Idem*, pag. 354.

⁴³ Mauss, again, was the first to define techniques as culturally bound and "traditionally efficient acts" (Schlanger 2014: 2).

is, after all, just a single ritual in the whole cultural universe of the Sinhalese people (weddings, initiations, different forms of alms giving (*puja*), and many other rituals characterize the Sinhalese culture even more profoundly than the tummasse dane in itself). But, in any case, this comparison provides some interesting clues with which to understand a social drama that is also, at the same time, a religious ritual and a moment of precise cultural bonding. Elderly people, in the *tummase dane*, enact a precise role: the role of guarantors and promoters of the society's status quo⁴⁴ and, at the same time, the arbiters of the individuals' status. A stability that is, in a way, not detrimental to the social group itself, precisely for its egalitarian character. This is, in fact, a ritual in which the elders play a crucial and active part: their role is active in the continuous definition of a society and its rules of behavior. No one is left out of this system of wealth distribution, which is primarily symbolic, but also factual. However, the receivers of this munificence should, by contrast, pay a price for it, are compelled to reciprocate it, and their comparative social or community status may be affected by this debt until they have fulfilled it. This debt is, probably, a limitation of their own individuality, and the definition of their liability towards the others. The older generation, thus, defines the rules of conduct, and obliges the youth to adopt the same *habitus*, that is the key with which a society is protected, handed down in time, understood by its practitioners, and conceived by them as a coherent system of value. The same, unfortunately, could not be said for the elderly generations in certain western countries. The passive role in which they are relegated⁴⁵, and its linked fragility, to which little to null spiritual nor social role is attached, would surely deserve another ethnographic analysis.

⁴⁴ That is, the traditional heritage *per se*.

⁴⁵ Fragility highlighted especially by the Covid-19 pandemic, which struck particularly the hospices or elderly houses.

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