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A life of piety: aging and dying in a rural Sinhala Buddhist village

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationship between aging, care, and death in a rural village in Sri Lanka from an anthropological perspective. It examines how the Buddhist concept of merit acts as a link between these elements. Through a 14-month ethnographic study, I observed how elders, and their younger caregivers engage in a reciprocal exchange of care and merit. Elders in the village engage in various pious activities to accumulate merit, which in turn leads to the care they receive from others as a meritorious deed. The responsibility of caring for the elderly primarily falls on women, who seek to accumulate more merit to alleviate their suffering. Both elders and caregivers believe that accumulating merit reduces suffering, leads to a good death, and ensures a good rebirth. These beliefs are reinforced and evaluated by Buddhist clergy in funeral sermons. This article illustrates how Buddhist ideas of accumulating merit give rise to an emerging 'economy of merit,' wherein elders are cared for by their families and communities. This finding has significant implications for understanding and addressing the challenges of an aging population in Sri Lanka.

KEYWORDS

Ageing; Buddhist piety; care; death; economy of merit

Introduction

Population aging is a global reality, and both less developed and transitional countries are expected to face this phenomenon in the first fifty years of the 21st century (Harper, 2006). Sri Lanka is no exception, having entered a phase of an aging population. It is projected that by 2030, 22% of the Sri Lankan population will be over 60, with the median age predicted to increase to 40.3 by the same year (Siddhisena, 2004). This demographic shift gives Sri Lanka one of the highest aging populations in South Asia, with significant societal implications. One major consequence of population aging is the expected increase in dependency among older people over the next two decades (Siddhisena, 2004). Analysis of 2012 census data shows that old age dependency has risen to 20 per 100 working-age people (Perera, 2017), while the

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number of persons available to provide support to one older person has decreased to four (Perera, 2017). These trends indicate that Sri Lanka will likely face challenges in caring for its elders in the future.

Elderly care in Sri Lanka primarily revolves around intergenerational and intragenerational family and kin networks (Gamburd, 2021; Silva, 2004). Filial piety, deeply ingrained in the Buddhist culture of the country, is considered a moral obligation for children to honour and care for their parents (Croll, 2006). Due to the gendered division of labour within families, women predominantly take on the role of primary caregivers for elders. This includes caring for husbands in old age, as women are typically younger than their spouses (Siddhisena, 2004; Silva, 2004). Most elders live with their children, often under the care of a daughter or daughter-in-law (Silva, 2004). According to 2012 census data, 99% of older persons live in households, while one percent remain institutionalized (Perera, 2017). However, the increase in female migration from Sri Lanka to the Gulf countries has significantly affected familial caregiving patterns (Gamburd, 2013, 2021).

When there is no family member available to care for an elder, institutional care at 'Homes for the Elders,' supported by the government, NGOs, or private philanthropists, becomes necessary (Gamburd, 2021; Silva, 2004). However, existing facilities are often inadequate to meet the rising demand (Sanderatne, 2004). Despite this, many elders, even at advanced ages, are in relatively good health and can care for themselves without relying on support from family members.

Intergenerational reciprocity within families is evident in Sri Lanka. For instance, elders now contribute to their households by caring for grandchildren and allocating portions of their pensions for household expenses (Sanderatne, 2004; Silva, 2004). In rural households, where livelihoods are primarily agriculture-based, property transfers from parents to children often come with commitments regarding caring responsibilities (Silva, 2004). The inheritance of property is linked to kinship obligations, with children expected to share in caring for their elderly parents through remittances, periodic visits, and gifts (Gamburd, 2013, 2021; Silva, 2004). However, it's not just material reciprocities that are exchanged between the elderly and their kin. This article introduces another layer to intergenerational reciprocities by exploring the underlying Buddhist beliefs of merit (*pin*) that influence practices of care for the elderly.

Meritorious deeds in Divulvæva

My fieldwork took place between 2015 and 2016 in Divulvæva (pseudonym), a Sinhala Buddhist village located in the North Central Province of Sri Lanka. The village was relatively large, consisting of 256 households situated along eight roads. The majority of villagers were engaged in farming, while a small

number worked abroad, in the armed forces, or at the nearby phosphate factory. I was introduced to the village by an agronomist I befriended at the regional office of the Mahaweli Development Programme (MDP).[1] With his assistance, I found two rooms for rent in a house owned by an elderly couple in the village. The couple's children had married and moved out, but they were still able to work independently and support themselves. Their children visited them occasionally, bringing gifts. As time passed, I became regarded as a 'daughter-like' figure (*duvek vagē*) in the village – a kinship reference falling under fictive kinship, where my role was akin to that of a daughter in the family. My interactions with the elderly couple, whom I addressed as *māmā* (uncle) and *nænda* (aunt), provided insights into the pious lives of the elderly. Elder care was a frequent topic of conversation among the women I interacted with in the village. Being Sri Lankan by birth and raised as a Buddhist woman, this topic was one that my informants assumed I would readily understand and empathise with.

A common practice among the villagers of Divulvæva is engaging in what they call 'meritorious deeds' (*pin atē væda*). For example, participating in my household survey was considered a meritorious deed. When I asked them why, they explained that it is a good gesture to help someone educate themselves. Therefore, by taking part in my survey, they were helping me achieve my educational goals and, in turn, gaining merit. The villagers' way of life was heavily influenced by Buddhist teachings. They believed that their lives were filled with suffering due to accumulated bad karma, and to improve their karma, they needed to perform meritorious deeds. The villagers frequently interacted with the Buddhist temple located a few miles away from the village, and their understanding and practice of merit were deeply rooted in Buddhism.

In Buddhism, merit is closely tied to an individual's moral responsibility in daily life (Gombrich, 1971a, p. 203). The morality of one's actions determines the rewards or punishments one may receive in this life or the next, as well as one's overall well-being (Gombrich, 1971a, p. 203). Gombrich associate morality with intention (*cetanā*), which he interprets as karma (Gombrich, 1971a, p. 204). Good intentions lead to merit, while bad intentions lead to sin. Thus, merit is essentially good karma. Gombrich explores the exchange of good karma among people through the concept of the 'transference of merit' (Gombrich, 1971a, p. 204). Merit can be transferred when the doer of a good deed wishes to pass on the merit they have gained to others or to all beings (Gombrich, 1971a, p. 204). Importantly, the doer of the good deed does not lose the merit they have gained; instead, they accumulate even more merit because the act of transferring merit is itself virtuous (Gombrich, 1971a, p. 204). Additionally, rejoicing in a good deed is considered more meritorious than performing the deed itself (Gombrich,

1971a, p. 205). According to Buddhist doctrine, the recipients of merit can be living beings, deceased individuals, or supernatural being (Gombrich, 1971a). The ability to transfer merit provides a chance for those who cannot or did not accumulate merit to have a better life or afterlife. Therefore, merit acts as a shared resource within a social group, allowing individuals to support each other in obtaining better lives or afterlives (Gombrich, 1971a).

In this article, the focus is on exploring the exchange of care and merit between elders and their caregivers. This reciprocal exchange can be understood in terms of classic gift transactions described by Mauss and Cunnison (1954), where the gift giver and receiver engage in giving, receiving, and reciprocating. Parry and Laidlaw's observations on gift transactions provide insights into South Asian conceptions of giving (Laidlaw, 2000; Parry, 1986). Parry discusses non-reciprocity, exemplifying gifts given to Buddha, who has attained nirvana, showing how gifts are given without a recipient (Parry, 1986, p. 462). Additionally, he notes that Buddhist priests provide merit for donors out of compassion without reciprocating gifts received (Parry, 1986, p. 462). Thus, gifts are not solely about equal reciprocity but can take various forms (Parry, 1986). Laidlaw explores the practice of *dan* among Shwetambar Jain followers and renouncers, arguing that free gifts without creating obligations hold social importance (Laidlaw, 2000, p. 618). By not reciprocating, the gift remains in its purest form and doesn't enter an economic exchange cycle (Laidlaw, 2000). Although donors of *dan* don't receive anything from Jain renouncers, the natural result is merit for their good action (Laidlaw, 2000, p. 624). It's an impersonal process where the giver has no control over when or how the merit gained through *dan* will lead to good fortune (Laidlaw, 2000, p. 624).

The villagers' belief in accumulating merit through meritorious deeds, which I term the 'economy of merit,' is central to their understanding of ending suffering. By performing good deeds, they gain merit that can be transferred to others as they see fit. This accumulation of merit allows individuals to have a good life in the present and a better afterlife. In the case of elders and their caregivers, elders engage in meritorious deeds to accrue merit, hoping it will bring them care in old age, a good death, and a favourable rebirth. Conversely, caregivers gain merit for their act of looking after the elderly, which promises them good fortune in this life or the next. Drawing on eulogies delivered at funerals, I suggest that a deceased person's life provides a Buddhist moral framework within which caring behaviour unfolds. Funerals serve as important platforms where villagers are encouraged to engage in meritorious deeds, particularly directed towards the elderly. In conclusion, I reflect on how the economy of merit serves as a distinctly Buddhist response to the aging population in contemporary Sri Lanka.

Living piously

An individual becomes recognised as an elder in the community once they have fulfilled their worldly duties to their family (*pavula*). This milestone is often marked by the marriage of their children and the arrival of grandchildren, symbolizing the completion of familial responsibilities. Thus, being an elder is not solely determined by one's age, but rather by their relational status. Upon reaching this stage, individuals enter a life of piety (*dharmika jīvitayak*), focusing on ensuring a good death and a favourable rebirth. Piety plays a significant role in the elder's present life as well. Many elders in Divulvæva explained to me that piety determines the level of respect and care they receive within the village. Therefore, piety becomes the means through which an elder earns respect. Elders demonstrate their piety through various meritorious deeds, such as observing religious rites (*sil*), listening to sacred texts (*pirit*), going on pilgrimages, making offerings to clergy (*pirikara*), and engaging in acts of generosity (*danē*). These practices bestow upon elders the designation of lay devotee, known as *upāsaka* for males and *upāsika* for females. It is this designation as an *upāsaka* or *upāsika* that garners respect and the potential for care from the younger generation.

Meritorious giving (danē)

Kapuruhami,[2] a 93-year-old man, held the distinction of being the oldest resident in the village during my fieldwork. He resided with his youngest son, Sarath, along with Sarath's wife, Nirmala, and their two children. Sarath, employed in the Middle East, had modernized their ancestral home and the family also engaged in farming corn on their inherited land. In Sarath's absence, Nirmala managed both the household and the farm. During my visits to Kapuruhami to learn about his life and memories of the village, he shared insights that shed light on the piety of elders.

> I have done enough merit for a good rebirth, everything written in that book of merit (*pin pota*) I have done with what I earned from farming. I brought up and educated 11 children without my wife, she died when our youngest son was 9 months. That is when I realised that life is suffering (*dukkha*) and started doing meritorious deeds. And now I am happy, my children, especially my daughter in law takes very good care of me. I have lived a pious life. I have nothing to worry[about my death and rebirth].

He gave me his *pin pota* and explained all the meritorious deeds he had done since 1971. A *pin pota*, translated as a 'book of merit,' is a record of meritorious deeds by an individual. Sometimes, it's read when the person is near death to generate good thoughts for a peaceful passing. According to Langer, this custom originated from King Dutugamunu,[3] who had a record of his meritorious deeds read to him in his final hours (Langer, 2007).

Most of the deeds listed in Kapuruhami's book of merit were acts of giving alms to the clergy (*sangha*). In Buddhism, any act of giving is referred to as *danē*, and giving alms is a common Buddhist practice performed in exchange for merit (Simpson, 2004, 2009). While *danē* can take many forms, in this article, it is understood primarily as giving cooked food and gifts such as dry rations, clothes, and money. *danē* is considered the most important of the ten moral actions (*dasa kusala karma*) for accruing merit, aiming to lead to a life with less suffering, a good death, and a good rebirth (Langer, 2007; Obeyesekere, 2002; Samuels, 2008).

However, for the donor to obtain merit through *danē*, the virtue of the recipient is also crucial. Giving to Buddhist clergy, who are seen as highly virtuous due to their ascetic way of life, is believed to bring more merit to the donor (Gombrich, 1971a, 1971b; Samuels, 2008). Additionally, there is a stratification among the clergy, with donations to those who lead ascetic lives in the forest considered more meritorious than those given to priests who live in temples and are closer to worldly affairs (Carrithers, 1983; Obeyesekere, 2002; Samuels, 2008). This stratification is based on the perceived level of piety of the clergy; giving to those considered more pious is expected to bring more merit to the layperson.

Conversely, Samuels (2008) argues that for lay Buddhists, what is more important than the virtue of the recipient is the emotion felt when engaging in *danē*. Many of his interlocutors explained this feeling as one of happiness (*satuta*). My interlocutor, Kapuruhami, also explained how he feels happiness when he engages in meritorious acts. He situates his happiness in relation to his experiences of having lost his wife and undergone hardships to raise his children. In this sense, the engagement with meritorious deeds is a way to mitigate his sense of suffering. Kapuruhami's later years were characterized by happiness and contentment. He felt he had completed his worldly duties and met his obligations to his children, and he was now well taken care of by his daughter-in-law. His pious life had brought merit and the prospect of good karma, leaving him calm in the face of his life, his impending death, and future rebirth.

Pilgrimage

Furthermore, Kapuruhami had organized pilgrimages for the villagers every year since 1985. Typically, he arranged a bus to travel to a monastery in Ritigala[4] or to *punci* Dambadiva.[5] Other than worshipping, pilgrimages to Ritigala and *punci* Dambadiva entail giving *danē* to the priests' resident in these temples. In 2015, Kapuruhami's children arranged a pilgrimage to *punci* Dambadiva on his behalf. *punci* Dambadiva is a model of Dambadiva, the popular Buddhist religious site in India. Elders hope to visit Dambadiva at least once before they pass on because,

as an elderly woman said, 'one visit to Dambadiva refutes all demerit and brings much merit'. There are many agencies around the country that organize pilgrimages to Dambadiva, but it is an expensive trip and unaffordable to many elders in the village in which I worked. Visiting *punci* Dambadiva where all the religious sites in Dambadiva are meticulously replicated, was an affordable option for the elders. The organized pilgrimages to this site, were very popular among the elders in Divulveva and neighbouring villages, as the cost was only LKR 200 (£1) per person for the rented bus.[6]

The elderly couple from whom I rented two rooms participated in the pilgrimage to *punci* Dambadiva organized by Kapuruhami's children. Upon their return, they described how they spread mats and sheets on the hall floor to sleep for a few hours, waking up early to prepare food for the priests. They then offered *pirikara* and listened to sermons by the priests before visiting replica religious sites associated with the life of Buddha. At these sites, they offered flowers, incense sticks, and lighted lamps, and chanted religious verses (*gata*) as forms of worship. Some also meditated, finding peace and comfort at certain locations. The elders believed that these acts of worship would bring them merit. Additionally, they believed that deeds done with the contribution of many people carry more merit, so the pilgrimages brought a sense of sociality as well as the opportunity to accumulate merit through collective actions.

Through acts of *danē*, participation in pilgrimage, and various opportunities for accumulating merit, elders are regarded by the younger generation as models of piety. Consequently, treating elders with care and respect is not only a fulfilment of kin obligation but also a meritorious deed. This understanding of merit is akin to the circulation of money, as described by Heslop's concept of 'rolling the money,' which illustrates the movement of money between individuals and business ventures (Heslop, 2016, p. 543). Similarly, merit moves between people through processes of accumulation and transference. Engaging in good deeds enables the accumulation of merit, which plays a significant role in mobilizing care for elders, with merit being transferred to the caregiver as a kind of virtual transaction. The villagers' understanding of this transactional dynamic keeps the economy of merit functioning.

Good daughter-in law

Many elders live with their sons, as sons typically inherit the ancestral house. Consequently, parents are particularly concerned about their son's choice of partner, knowing that she will likely become their caregiver as they age and become frail. An elderly woman expressed strong disapproval of her son's relationship with a Chinese woman, fearing that she wouldn't understand their culture or ways and might not fulfil traditional caregiving roles. She remarked,

'They don't know our culture and our ways, who knows if she will do the housework and take care of us when we are old. I wouldn't even be able to speak with her!' For the elders, having a daughter-in-law who is diligent in caring for her elderly in-laws is considered a merit.

For instance, at a meeting of the village Death Donation Association,[7] Kapuruhami's daughter-in-law, Nirmala, was publicly praised for her exemplary care of Kapuruhami, serving as a model for future generations on how to care for the elderly. Kapuruhami himself expressed his gratitude for Nirmala's care, stating, 'My daughter-in-law Nirmala is the reason why I am still alive. She takes such good care of me, even better than my own daughters. She doesn't need to go to the temple to obtain merit.' Thus, by caring for Kapuruhami, who is still very much able at the age of 93, Nirmala accumulates merit. Kapuruhami attributes his good fortune in having such a caring daughter-in-law to his own pious living, stating, 'I got a good daughter-in-law as a merit of mine. All the meritorious deeds I did are returned to me as she takes very good care of me.' In caring for Kapuruhami, Nirmala is obtaining merit that will, in turn, bring her a good life with less suffering, a good death, and a good rebirth.

The transactions in an economy of merit

Meritorious giving to elders

The Dedunu Women's Association, a village welfare organization, prepared lunch for all the elders in the village and distributed lunch packets to them as a form of meritorious giving. When I asked the society's secretary about the reason for this gesture, she explained 'it is a meritorious deed to give *danē* to elderly people. Most of them are now feeble. So, giving them a good meal will make them happy'. On the day of the *danē*, I joined the women in their meritorious task. They gathered at a member's house to cook and prepare the lunch packets. The women had compiled a list of households where elderly individuals resided, ensuring that no one was left out. They emphasized that they selected older persons (*vædihiti aya*) in advanced age (*vayasa*) who were unable to do much on their own.

The women formed groups of twos and threes and visited each house where the elders lived, offering them a packet of lunch. I accompanied one of the groups. They engaged in conversations with the elders, inquiring about their well-being and any ailments they might have. After spending a short time at each place, they respectfully worshipped at the feet of the elders before leaving. At this point, the elder would often say, 'may merit be to you' (*pin sidda vetccave*), indicating their gratitude and acceptance of the *danē*. Elders like Kapuruhami would chant Buddhist verses (*gata*).[8] These verses, usually

recited by Buddhist priests, offer blessings to lay persons. Through such recitations, the *danē* is completed, and merit is conferred by the elder onto the women for providing a cooked meal. However, the encounter is also significant for the elder, imparting a sense of belonging and being cared for.

During one visit, the group of women from the Association that I accompanied went to the home of an elderly woman named Karunawathi. Her daughter was bathing her near the well when we arrived. The women immediately offered to help by bringing hot water from a large pot that was boiling on a makeshift hearth nearby, then proceeded to soap and dry Karunavathi. She appeared very happy to be the centre of attention. When the women mentioned that they had also brought her a hearty lunch to enjoy after her bath, Karunawathi laughed and said, 'Ahhh. . . today I am going to eat everything and not waste a single grain of rice!' This exchange of food, in the form of *danē*, is an expression of care that extends beyond kinship boundaries, practiced not only among relatives but also among non-relatives. In return for this care, elders like Karunavathi transfer merit to the younger women, believed to bring them good fortune in this life or the next.

The practice of giving while alive (Jīva Danē)

To delve deeper into the economy of merit, we must examine an aspect of filial piety known as *jīva danē*, wherein children transfer merit to their parents for all they have done for them, and in return gain merit from their parents for appreciating them. Langer (2007) describes *jīva danē* as a practice performed in preparation for death, where elders express a wish to perform a last *danē* before passing away. However, in Divulvæva, the practice is more about a transfer of merit between children and their elderly parents. *jīva danē* events I attended in the village were for elders who were not necessarily nearing death but were simply elders. These events were organized by children for their parents to dedicate merit. The rituals were the same as those performed in a *danē* given after the death of a person, occurring at intervals of 7 days, 3 months, 1 year, and then annually. These rituals are referred to as *mataka danē* (giving in remembrance). The children believe that by performing a *jīva danē* while their parents are still alive, they can express their appreciation, make their parents happy, and gain merit.

Sumana and her siblings had organized a *jīva danē* for their parents, Seelawathi and Gunasena. The elderly couple were frail but healthy enough to independently do their work. They lived with Sumana and her family in a solidly built house with a tiled floor and an asbestos roof. Their wealth came from a jewellery shop they owned in town. The house was bustling with activity when I arrived in the morning, with many village women helping with the cooking. When I asked Sumana why they organized the *jīva danē*, she explained, 'When we give *danē*

after the parent passes away, they don't really know what we do, but now by giving a *jīva danē* they can see, feel, and know we appreciate them.'

Ten priests from the village temple arrived at the house around 10:30 am. The temple relic, representing the Buddha, was brought in with much reverence and placed on a stand by Sumana's younger brother. Special seating was arranged at a table, with each priest having a plate and a bowl in front of their seat. The elderly parents sat on a low bench in front of the priests. Everyone else present sat on floor mats. The head priest began the ceremony by chanting the five precepts (*pansil*), followed by *gata*[9] indicating the start of the *jīva danē*. A grand lunch was served, including three kinds of rice and about 20 different curries, along with fruits and sweetmeats. Big jugs at the end of the table held cool water, hot water, and soup. The elderly parents, their children, and others present served the dishes to the priests. After the priests finished their meal, they were given *pirikara*. Then, the head priest asked everyone to settle down for a sermon. During the sermon, the children performed a ritual of pouring water into a bowl placed within a plate until it overflowed (*pæn vædīma*). This ritual is typically performed at funerals to symbolize the transfer of merit from the living to the deceased, aiming to alleviate any negative consequences in their next life (Kariyawasam, 1995). However, during the *jīva danē*, it symbolizes the transfer of merit from children to their living elderly parents.

The head priest emphasized that the *jīva danē* was the best form of appreciation a child could show to their parents, symbolizing affection and care. He explained that the ceremony would transfer merit to the parents and also bring merit to the children for making their parents happy. The priests concluded the *jīva danē* by chanting *gata*[10] to confer merit on those present. Afterwards, the priests left amidst the worship of the gathering, and the relic was taken back to the temple by Sumana's younger brother. Some men present carried the gifts given to the priests to the temple.

Contrary to what Langer observed, the act of children organizing *jīva danē* for their parents while they are still alive, has become quite popular in the village (Langer, 2007). This popularity stems from the fact that it's now recognized as a meritorious act by the temple itself. In Langer's analysis, *jīva danē* was often associated with preparing for death, but in the village, it has evolved into a way of expressing gratitude and appreciation to parents while they are still living. When children organize a *jīva danē* for their parents, it not only brings merit to the parents but also enhances the family's reputation within the village. This act is seen as a mark of respect and care for elders, reflecting positively on the family's values and status in the community. The practice of *jīva danē* underscores the concept of intergenerational reciprocity. Both parents and their children benefit from the accumulation of merit through this act. Parents receive merit as a result of their children's appreciation and care, while children gain merit by making their parents happy and

expressing their gratitude. Moreover, just like in other forms of *danē* , everyone who participates in the *jīva danē* also obtains merit.

Caring for the elderly goes beyond mere acts of kinship obligation; it is deeply rooted in Buddhist morality (Gamburd, 2013, 2021; Silva, 2004). However, this doesn't imply that the younger generation engages with the elderly solely for karmic benefits. Familial affections and bonds also play a significant role in caring for the elderly. Moreover, the interactions between the younger generation and the elderly provide the latter with essential social relationships that contribute to their wellbeing and enhance the quality of their old age (Litwin, 2012). As demonstrated in this section, women, both with kinship ties to the elders and those within the community, are primarily involved in caregiving practices.

The cultural belief that women are of lower birth, often attributed to bad karma, implies that they need to accumulate merit to change their karma (Obeyesekere, 1963). This belief is rooted in traditional Buddhist ideology, where women are seen as being born into a lower status due to past karma. To improve their status and spiritual well-being, women are encouraged to engage in meritorious acts. In this cultural context, caring for the elderly is viewed not only as a familial duty but also as a means for women to accumulate merit and improve their karma. By caring for the elderly, women believe they are not only fulfilling their societal roles but also working towards their spiritual betterment. Furthermore, this gendered division of labour in caregiving practices highlights how women are culturally entrusted with unpaid care work. Despite being essential for the wellbeing of society, this contribution often goes unrecognized and unacknowledged in economic terms. In broader terms, this gendered division of labour perpetuates gender inequalities by reinforcing traditional roles and expectations for women. While caregiving is vital for the functioning of society, it is often undervalued and overlooked as a significant contribution to the economy, particularly when it comes to women's unpaid labour.

Pious death and rebirth

As previously mentioned, the idea of achieving a good death and a favourable rebirth is linked to the piety displayed throughout one's life. In Divulvaeva, this connection was explicitly emphasized during funerals. I attended two funerals where the importance of engaging in meritorious deeds for the benefit of this life and the afterlife was emphasized to the community. During one funeral, the significance of piety was highlighted by illustrating what happens when someone is not pious. In the other instance, the positive correlation between piety, a good life, death, and rebirth was explained. These ideas were conveyed not only by the clergy but also by the laypeople present at the

funerals. Both deaths occurred while I was in the village. During the funeral gatherings, which typically lasted for at least two days, I had the opportunity to interact with attendees extensively. I would take notes of conversations in my pocket notebook and later transcribe them on my laptop computer. Being a native Sinhala speaker enabled me to recall conversations accurately and easily.

Anthony's murder

Anthony was widely recognized as a moneylender in the village, readily lending money to anyone in need without hesitation. Despite his immense wealth, he lived modestly, often dressed in rags and traveling on his old bicycle. He resided on a poultry farm on the outskirts of the village, which the villagers humorously referred to as *ūru kotuva*, meaning 'pig's sty.' His farm, situated at the forest's edge, was home to pigs, goats, and chickens, providing him with a steady income. Anthony lived in a simple one-room hut on the farm itself. Despite having a house in the village, he chose not to live there due to a dispute with his wife. His five children were all married and had their own families and homes. He employed an assistant named Darwid, who lived with him and helped manage the farm. Tragically, both Anthony and Darwid were discovered dead one morning on the farm, sparking widespread speculation and rumours throughout the village. Some believed they were victims of sorcery initiated by Anthony's wife, while others speculated that debtors unable to repay their loans had murdered him. The truth, however, was that a group of robbers had attacked and killed Anthony and Darwid. Anthony, being illiterate, kept records of his debtors on the wall of his hut using symbols only he understood. He didn't use a bank, preferring to bury his money in clay pots inside his hut or carry it in the pockets of shorts worn under his sarong. The robbers stole the money from his pockets and ransacked the hut, taking whatever valuables they could find. As only Anthony knew the true extent of his wealth, the exact monetary loss could not be estimated.

His funeral was held at his half-built home in the village. When I visited the funeral house, I saw that the two caskets of Anthony and Darwid were kept open inside a room in the house. The room was so small that the caskets took up all the available space, causing those paying their last respects to stand at the doorway rather than going inside closer to the caskets. Tents were set up in the garden for the visitors to sit under. People were sitting around and talking about the murder of Anthony while waiting for the burial to take place in the evening.

I joined a group of women that I knew from the village. The women were discussing Anthony. One woman said, 'He was a good man, full of fun. He used to dress as a woman and dance at the musical concerts at the village grounds. Though he lent money, he was not inhumane. If the debtor couldn't

pay up, he would not hassle; the debtor could give even 100 rupees, and Anthony would leave it at that.' Another woman said, 'I think today is the first day he wore good, nice clothes,' referring to the new clothes the corpse was dressed in. She added, 'He was under the control of a ghost (*pereta bandhanaya*[11]); that is why he lived like a ghost (*peretaya*[12]), eating garbage that he brought to feed his pigs.' An elderly woman named Vimala said, 'He sinned a lot by killing pigs, goats, and chickens. That is why he died like a pig, strangled. He accumulated bad karma.' Another woman sitting next to Vimala remarked, 'He had vowed to come back as a cobra and harm every debtor who hadn't paid back his money.' The two women discussed how it might be possible for him to be born as a cobra because he didn't engage in meritorious deeds to obtain merit for another human birth.

The two caskets were taken out of the house and laid in front of the clergy that were to perform the last rites. The head priest said,

> Anthony had the ability to gain wealth, but he didn't have the ability to enjoy life with his wealth. Look at him now, he is still, he cannot hear us, he cannot feel anything. This is the reality of life; he is showing us the universal law of life and passing on. I met Anthony a month or so ago and advised him to live a normal life, giving up his unruly life living in a pig sty. I asked him to come to the temple and do meritorious deeds. Now it's too late for him. Everyone here should take to heart and engage in meritorious deeds understanding that we all have a common end that we cannot avoid.

After the sermon, the priests performed the last rites and left the funeral house. Then, the lay members presented their eulogies of the deceased. A man who claimed to have known Anthony for a long time gave a eulogy that warned the assembled crowd: 'Greed is not a good thing. Anthony could never use his wealth though he had it. This is bad karma (*akusala karmayak*)'. He then illustrated his point with a Buddhist parable (*jataka*[13]) about a greedy nobleman who lost all his wealth and his son because of greed. He continued, 'Killing animals is a sin. The pig sty should be closed, at least now. People should be taught the true meaning of righteousness (*dharma*[14]) and how to live piously so that they can achieve an end in the cycle of rebirth *(samsara*). My speech today is a dharma *danē*[15] to all present.' He then asked everyone to meditate for a moment on the nature of compassion (*maitrī*). The man concluded his eulogy saying, 'Such bad untimely deaths should never occur again.' After the eulogies, the two bodies were taken to the cemetery for burial.

Anthony's death exemplified the consequences of a dysfunctional economy of merit. Despite his wealth, he didn't engage in meritorious deeds, such as acts of piety or generosity, to accumulate positive karma. Instead, his actions, such as killing animals and other sinful deeds, contributed to the accumulation of bad karma. As a result, he didn't experience the benefits of a good life, and his death was perceived as unfortunate. This illustrates how the economy of merit operates: individuals who engage in meritorious actions accumulate positive

karma, leading to a better life, death, and rebirth, while those who neglect these actions face negative consequences. In Anthony's case, his lack of merit led to his downfall, serving as a cautionary tale for the community about the importance of engaging in virtuous deeds to ensure a favourable economy of merit.

Babynona's exemplary life

Babynona's passing, just weeks after Anthony's death, presented a stark contrast. She was revered as a pious woman who lived a life of virtue, leading to a good death and the promise of a good rebirth. At 81 years old, she peacefully passed away in her sleep from a heart attack. Her body was placed in her second daughter's house, a solidly built home with a tiled floor, where she had been living. Upon my arrival, I found her eldest daughter and son seated next to the casket inside the house. The daughter, overwhelmed with grief, tearfully expressed her sorrow, lamenting the loss of their beloved mother. As I paid my respects to Babynona, I sat with her eldest son, who shared the story of their father's passing. He explained that their father had suffered from paralysis for five years before his death at the age of 52. Despite his condition, Babynona had devotedly cared for him, ensuring his comfort until his last breath. Reflecting on his mother's life, he remarked, 'She didn't have any sickness when she was alive. She lived well and died well for the merit she earned by looking after our father so well.' Babynona's exemplary care for her husband was seen as a virtuous act, earning her merit that contributed to her peaceful passing. Her story served as a testament to the power of piety and compassionate caregiving in shaping one's life and death.

As Babynona's casket was carried out of the house and placed in front of the clergy for the final rites, her daughters expressed their grief with wails and tears. The head priest called for everyone to observe the five precepts (*pansil*) and commenced his sermon. Referring to Babynona as a 'female lay devotee' (*upāsakamātava*), he began his eulogy:

> This *upāsakamātava* lived in this village when it was not well developed. She belongs to a generation that developed the village and reared children to further develop the village. Life is full of uncertainties, what we wish for will hardly come true. This *upāsakamātava* went about her daily everyday routine and was suddenly taken by death. Death knows no relative, status or creed, so will take who ever at the right time. There are three types of death: when a person dies after his merit expires *(kammakka maranaya)*, when a person dies after his allotted time on this earth is over (*ubayakka maranaya)*, and when a person dies accidently *(upaccedaka maranaya)*. This death is a good death. She was very lucky to have good children who know their duties. I remember that they gave a *jīva danē* two three months ago for her. Her children have good government jobs that serve the country and the society. This earth is a stage and this *upāsakamātava* was a character in it. She performed many roles in this stage as a daughter, a wife, a mother, a grandmother, a villager, an *upāsika* and a relative. She performed every role very well in the proper manner. If a person fails to act in the proper manner his or her life will

be unsuccessful. But this *upāsakamātava* lived piously and will surely travel to a better rebirth.

Following the priest's sermon, the clergy performed the final rites and departed from the funeral house. Subsequently, several laypersons delivered eulogies. The casket was then transported to the crematorium in a hearse, with the family following in vehicles. Additionally, a bus was arranged for villagers who wished to attend the cremation.

Babynona's funeral differed significantly from Anthony's because she was regarded as having led a life of piety, which made the circumstances of her death completely understandable. The priest's designation of her as an *upāsakamātava* in his sermon explicitly recognized her as someone who had embraced a life of piety. He used her life and death as an example to encourage piety among those present at her funeral. Through her engagement in meritorious deeds, Babynona had not only ensured a good death and rebirth for herself but had also involved her children, who, as caregivers, might also benefit from her accumulated merit.

In the context of the economy of merit, the transactions extend even to the elder's death and subsequent rebirth. When an elder passes away, there is a public assessment of the deceased individual and the family they leave behind, which establishes a social hierarchy based on piety. For example, at Babynona's funeral, she and her family were praised by the priest, whereas Anthony and his family were not. The compassion Anthony showed towards his debtors was overlooked and not mentioned in the eulogies. Instead, the focus was on his unconventional way of life as a poultry farmer and money lender. This assessment of his life, death, and potential rebirth is predominantly based on Buddhist principles, which are echoed through sermons and eulogies at funerals.

During such gatherings, those present are reminded of the importance of accumulating merit to ensure a good life, a good death, and a good rebirth. Babynona's life of piety was recognized and celebrated, indicating that she had earned merit that would lead to a favourable rebirth. In contrast, Anthony's lack of piety and his sinful actions, such as killing animals, were emphasized, suggesting that he had accumulated bad karma, which might result in an unfavourable rebirth. Thus, the evaluation of one's life is deeply rooted in Buddhist principles, shaping perceptions of the individual's death and potential rebirth.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, this paper has provided a deep dive into the intricate workings of the economy of merit within the context of a rural Sri Lankan village rooted in Buddhist culture. Through ethnographic insights, I have

explored how care and merit are exchanged between the elderly and their caregivers, shaping social dynamics and moral frameworks within the community.

At the heart of this economy of merit lies the Buddhist belief in the accrual of merit for leading a life of piety, which encompasses acts of kindness, generosity, and compassion. Caring for the elderly is not only a kinship obligation but also a meritorious deed, emphasized by both the Buddhist community and clergy. This leads to a cycle of reciprocal care, where both caregivers and the elderly accumulate merit through their actions.

danē for elders and *jīva danē* are two significant events where care and merit are exchanged, involving both kin and non-kin participants. The communal effort in these events reflects the social cohesion and collective responsibility towards the elderly. Funerals further reinforce Buddhist piety and the importance of living a pious life, with the deceased's life serving as a lesson for the community. Through these exchanges, merit flows between individuals, transcending familial boundaries and encompassing the entire community. The belief in the transference of merit acts as a driving force behind the community's adherence to Buddhist morality and the practice of caring for the elderly.

In essence, the economy of merit not only facilitates the provision of care for the aging population but also fosters social cohesion, moral values, and a sense of community well-being. It highlights the importance of virtuous living and the interconnectedness of individuals within a Buddhist society, offering valuable insights into the cultural and social dynamics of rural Sri Lanka.

Notes

1. The Mahaweli Development Programme (MDP) is the largest multipurpose national development programme in Sri Lanka, encompassing a wide range of projects aimed at economic growth and social development. At its core, the MDP focuses on establishing hydraulic power plants to generate electricity and irrigating the northern parts of the country to promote cultivation.
2. All names mentioned in this article are pseudonyms.
3. King Dutugemunu is a significant figure in Sri Lankan history, revered for his role in unifying the island and establishing a golden era of prosperity and cultural advancement. He is believed to have ruled the island from 161 BC to 137 BC, a period marked by his remarkable leadership and military prowess.
4. Ritigala, situated just a few kilometres away from the city of Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka's North Central Province, is a prominent mountain known for its ancient Buddhist monastery, making it a revered pilgrimage site.
5. *punci* Dambadiva, which translates to 'Little Dambadiva,' is another pilgrimage destination in Sri Lanka, located in the Sabaragamuwa Province. It replicates the Buddhist religious sites found in Dambadiva, India.
6. The exchange rate used in this analysis is based on the average rate observed during my fieldwork in 2015–2016.

7. The Death Donation Association was established in the early 1950s to coordinate funerals in the village. Today, it is the most widely embraced society in the community, boasting a membership of 98% of the villagers.
8. Bhavatu sabba-maṅgalaṃ-Rakkhantu sabba-devatā.
   Sabba-buddhānubhāvena-Sadā sotthī bhavantu te.
   Bhavatu sabba-maṅgalaṃ-Rakkhantu sabba-devatā
   Sabba-dhammānubhāvena-Sadā sotthī bhavantu te.
   Bhavatu sabba-maṅgalaṃ-Rakkhantu sabba-devatā
   Sabba-saṅghānubhāvena-Sadā sotthī bhavantu te.
   May there be every blessing. May all heavenly beings protect you.
   Through the power of all the Buddhas, may you always be well.
   May there be every blessing. May all heavenly beings protect you.
   Through the power of all the Dhammas, may you always be well.
   May there be every blessing. May all heavenly beings protect you.
   Through the power of all the Saṅghas, may you always be well.
9. imam bhikkham saparikkharam bhikkhusanghassa dema (These alms, along with other requisites, we offer to the whole community of monks).
10. The stanzas are extracted from the Tirokuddha Sutta of the Khuddakapatha.
    Unname udakam vattam yatha ninnam pavattati
    evameva ito dinnam petanam upakappati.
    Yatha varivaha pura paripurenti sagaram
    evameva ito dinnam petanam upakappati.
    Just as the water fallen on high ground flows to a lower level,
    Even so what is given from here accrues to the departed.
    Just as the full flowing rivers fill the ocean,
    Even so what is given from here accrues to the departed.
11. A *pereta bandanaya* is when a *peretaya* has taken over the person and entered his consciousness. Thus, the person will act in ways unlike or unsuited for a person due to the influence of the *peretaya*.
12. The term *peretaya* in this context can be translated as 'ghost', however it should be noted that there are many Sinhalese terms that could be translated as ghost in English (Langer, 2007) but giving different meanings depending on the contexts it is used.
13. Stories of Gautama Buddha's previous births where he perfected virtues to reach enlightenment. These stories are retold to exemplify good morals that Buddhists should inculcate in them.
14. Buddhist teachings of how to live a good life and end the cycle of rebirth that cause suffering.
15. The meritorious deed of explaining Buddhist teachings on living a good life and ending the cycle of rebirth that cause suffering.

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