

Agency of the artist: Re-contextualizing the role of temple painters & sculptors in the British colonial period.

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Abstract

Scholarly research studies on the Low Country temple painters and sculptors during the colonial period are relatively very limited despite the fact that a large number of Buddhist temples in the maritime region have been embellished with their creations. This paper attempts to understand their role within the colonial socio-political context and therefore, the main research question addressed here is: 'Did the Low Country artists have agency in the art making process during the colonial period? In addition, several secondary issues; namely, how these artists responded to the colonial situation through their creations, how their work-culture was formed, and the nature of their relationship with monks and patrons are addressed. Qualitative research methodology was considered in this study and formal and contextual analysis were used in reading artworks. Materials such as existing artworks of temples, letters written for painters, contract agreements of art projects, memorial stone-plaques, poetical sources, and documents of colonial writers were used in this study. It was found that the Low Country artists were different from the hereditary temple artists in Sri Lanka in many aspects including caste-identity, social background, art training, value systems, work culture etc. Although these artists remained a subordinate group, at times, they have dared to criticize the person in power through artworks. Therefore, some inferior or lower-ranked characters; namely, sinners in Hell, executioners, servants, palanquin-bearers, guards, etc., are depicted in Buddhist art with Western elements of the colonizer.

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Also, these artists have changed signs of the British emblem by incorporating Buddhist symbols and some colonial rulers have been transformed into worshippers of the Buddha. This behavior, which is against Eurocentric discourses, challenges the popular colonial notion that the colonized is somebody with no agency.

Keywords: *Buddhist Art/ Temple Artists/ Agency/Colonial Period/ Visual Response*

Introduction

The community of temple artists in the Low Country who were largely involved in monastic projects in the maritime regions during the 19th century can be identified as a specific discourse community¹. However, they still remain as a less-studied community in Sri Lankan art historical discourse due to the lack of serious scholarly research to understand their role. The paucity of scholarly research on the Low Country temple artists, compared to the studies on Kandyan artists, can be attributed to two reasons. The reason is that the lack of primary sources such as *sanna*, *siṭṭu* and *tuḍapat* relating to the Low Country artists (Somathilaka 2002: 445 and Mahinda 2007: 317-318). The other reason is that there were several ideological barriers that caused to keep the Low Country temple artists away from the dominant art discourses in Sri Lanka.

One such barrier was criticism of the Eurocentric discourses that promoted the ‘superiority’ of Western academic art against local art practices. Early 19th century records of colonial writers on Buddhist murals in the Low Country reflect that they have denounced and rejected the creative projects of local temple painters in the maritime region. The following quotation from De Jonville who visited a number of temples in the Southern province provides significant clues to ascertain the attitudes of Europeans towards indigenous art practices. De Jonville (1801) describes the characteristics of murals at Veheragampīṭa Raja Mahā Vihāraya, one of the leading temples in Matara, as follows:

"The whole district of Matura (Matara) is full of Cingulois (Sinhalese) temples. ... I visited that name 'Veheredampittie' (Veheragampita). The priest in charge was one of the most learned of the island.... The walls of this temple are covered with paintings, as elsewhere, but in none does one find correctness of design, or attitude, or of facial expression."

(De Jonville 1801: 78)

The chain of negative connotations used by De Jonville with reference to the design, attitude, and facial expressions of the paintings of the temple, reflect how the mindsets with colonial attitudes looked at local art practices outside Europe. It is clear that De Jonville expected the same aesthetic standards followed in European art, which was developed through Academic Realism as seen in the works of the artists of the Royal Academy, from the local artists who had a totally different training. The terms used by the writer to describe the murals of the Veheragampita temple make it seem as if the work of local temple artists were amateur and low-quality productions. The writer has evaluated skills of local artists anchored in a Eurocentric perspective that promoted the superiority of Western art.

It is also seen that the attitudes of the majority of local elites in the colonial society were not different from the aforesaid Eurocentric notions. The following statement by M. Sarlis (1880-1955) who was a well-known temple painter and sculptor helps to understand this situation. Sarlis reveals that standards of traditional Buddhist art practice were rejected by the local elites who were used to 'European taste' discarding the works of Kandyan artists as ignorant and unskilled.

(tr. by author) ... at that time, there was no interest in art at a national level, as there is, now. Murals of the Kandyan period were considered merely as works of ignorant craftsmen. During that era, there was no place for 'nationalism'. It was those who followed the European lifestyle that were considered to be the cream of society... Therefore, Sinhalese value systems, arts and crafts deteriorated continuously. Although we knew traditional methods, we didn't have the chance to use them. We simply had to adjust to suit the demands of the

country. It mostly happened because the general public of the country bowed down to the thoughts and criticism of the ones with power. If we did not paint according to the tastes of those people, we may even have lost our livelihoods.

(Kalādīpa, May 15, 1953: 2)

Coomaraswamy's *Medieval Sinhalese Art* (1908) was a powerful theoretical response to the aforesaid Eurocentric notion that denounced the stylized indigenous art tradition. Nevertheless, while appreciating the works of local artists and craftsmen in the Up Country, Coomaraswamy (1908: 167) discarded the paintings of the Low Country temple artists of his time, criticizing that their works show a decline in indigenous art. He uses the term 'inferior artists' to refer to the temple painters in the Low Country stating: "...and the majority of inferior painters run riot with Aspinall's enamel and Rickett's blue, with which they depict designs more like those to be looked for on second-hand Christmas cards than suitable for temple walls" (*ibid.*).

Thus, Coomaraswamy rejects the use of paint materials obtained from the West and the hybrid painting style of southern temple artists that was prevalent in the late 19th century and the early 20th century as something of "poor taste". Although Kandyan artists and craftsmen have incorporated a large number of visual elements of South Indian origin in their works, Coomaraswamy does not condemn such hybrid art as low-grade, probably because he was tolerant towards a Pan-Indian character seen in Kandyan art, though he labels it as Sinhala Art. As such, the comments by Coomaraswamy inevitably reflect his personal Orientalist taste that made a considerable impact on a number of later researchers, for instance Ulluwishewa (1993).

Accordingly, the community of Low Country artists and their creative works seem to have often been misunderstood and misinterpreted by colonial writers as well as Sri Lankan traditional art historical scholarship. The study by Bandaranayake, *The Rock and Wall Paintings of Sri Lanka* (1986), is a significant attempt to contextualize the Southern School of Art within the Sri Lankan art historical discourse. Yet, neither Bandaranayake nor later researchers have attempted to examine the role of the Low Country temple artists in the art

production process in relation to socio-political dynamics of Sri Lankan society at that time.

Contemporary art historians do not perceive hybridization of Western and local visual elements and paint techniques, which is a noteworthy feature of the works of the Southern School, as a decline in art. Hybridization of visual elements absorbed from different art traditions is a common characteristic even in the works of the School of Modern Art. Rather than evaluating genres of art as *low art* or *high art*, contemporary art historians examine systems, discourses, and crises behind the art production process that prompted the artists to make such choices and changes. In that sense, the role of temple artists has to be understood not in isolation, but in relation to the socio-political dynamics, structures, crises and challenges in the context of where they worked.

In this article, I attempt to answer one major research question and several secondary issues relating to the art making process of the temple artists in the Low Country during the British colonial period. The main research is: 'Did the temple painters in the Low Country have 'agency' in the art making process during the colonial period?' The secondary issues are how have these artists responded to the colonial situation through their creative projects, how the work-culture and value systems of Low Country artists were formed, how was their relationship with monks and patrons, and what were their sources of inspiration. Materials such as existing artworks of the Low Country artists, letters written by monks to temple painters, contract agreements related to temple projects, memorial stone plaques, contemporary poetical sources, texts of colonial writers, and information provided by descendants of the artists' families were used in this research. Qualitative research methodology was considered in this study and formal and contextual analysis were used in reading art works. As most of the existing artworks of 'Southern Art School' belonged to the period from 1800 to 1900, the artists who worked during this period were mainly considered.

Temple Artists and Ateliers in the Low Country

The temple artists in the Low Country can be identified as a new generation of painters and sculptors that was different from the community of hereditary temple artists in Sri Lanka, in particular those who worked in the Kandyan Kingdom for the *Koṭṭalbadda*². Dating of the existing artworks of ‘Southern School’ shows that they have been made after the collapse of the Kandyan monarchy and *Pātarāṭa Koṭṭalbadda* that had been patronized by the Kandyan Court. Although the traditional artisanship was confined only to a particular caste known as *Navandanna* or *Navandannō*, the caste restriction on the choice of occupation has been ignored in the maritime provinces. Consequently, many artists emerged outside of the traditional artists’ caste, schools or ateliers in the Low Country.

Karāve, *Nākati*, *Beravā*, and *Daivagñā* were some of the non-traditional castes in the Low Country that provided painters and sculptors for the monastic projects in the maritime region (Mahinda 2007: 318). For example, Dewundara Andiris who is supposed to have painted the murals at Kālaniya Raja Mahā Vihāraya in the mid-19th century belonged to the *Karāve* caste. Also, the massive *torana* gateway at Ambalangoda Sunandārāmaya has been built by the lineage of craftsmen from the *Karāve* caste from Hirevatta, Ambalangoda. Moreover, iconography of demonic figures and planetary gods in southern temples suggest that some temple artists descended from castes that engaged in exorcist ritual practices in the Low Country (Charles 2001: 16; Nandadeva 2012).

Two major reasons can be proposed to explain the causes for the emergence of temple artists outside the traditional artists’ caste, schools, or ateliers in the Low Country. The first reason was the increased demand for construction and decoration of temples in the 19th century, as the order of monks expanded quickly following the establishment of new fraternities (Malalgoda 1976: 103-104; Nandadeva 2012). This urgent demand seems to have created opportunities for those who had artistic skills, but were outside the conventional artists’ castes or had received training on art work as temple artists. The second reason was that the colonial administration did not support the perpetuation of caste-based restrictions of occupations, particularly in the maritime region. Based on oral

histories of the temples, information of descendants from the families of artists, and information found in previous studies³, it was possible to compile a list of twenty-eight temple artists in the Low Country as follows (Table 01).

i. Ahangama Dingirin	ii. J.O Silva
iii. Babilē Sittara Naidē	iv. Kaḍollallē Hīmappu
v. Bāddawattē Dinō Sittarā	vi. Kaḍollallē Uruviṭiyē Ganitayā
vii. Denipitiyē Maha Sittarā	viii. Kaḍollallē Maha Sittarā/ Krinde Ganitayagē Siriyatē Sittarā
ix. Dewundara Andiris	x. Kaḍollallē Poḍḍe Sittarā/ Garānduwē Sāndra Nākatigē Edō Sittarā/ Garānduwē Edo Sittarā
xi. Dewundara Pantingē	xii. Kaṭuwana Hāmuduruwō
xiii. Dewundara Punchappu	xiv. Kiriappu Ganinnānsē
xv. Dingiriappu Ganinnānsē	xvi. Kirindē Sīlānanda Hāmuduruwō
xvii. Divōnis	xviii. Kirindē Wadugē Sobhita Ganinnānsē
xix. Gālupiyaddē Babun	xx. Mangalatiriyē Siriyā
xxi. Garānduwē Baṭuvuṭa Sittarā	xxii. Mādiwaka Sittara Naidē
xxiii. Garānduwē Maha Sittarā	xxiv. Satarakōralayē Sittra Mudiyānsē
xxv. Hat-kōralayē Sittara Muhandiram	xxvi. Vālitara Himappu
xxvii. Dewundara Pantingē	xxviii. Vāttāwē Hāmuduruwō

Table 01: Temple Artists in the Low Country (1800-1900)

The list of names given above helps to understand the socio-political background of the temple artists in the Low Country. The town or village affiliations of their names such as Veligama, Dewundara, Garaduwa, Katuwana, Denipitiya, Mirissa, Ahangama, Devinuwara, Polwatta, and Kirinda suggest that the majority of those

artists were from highly colonized territories under the European power for centuries. This illustrates that the Low Country artists were directly exposed to the changes of the colonial socio-political milieu. Also, names of some of the artists such as Divonis, Fernando, and Silva reflect the influence of conversion. Therefore, it seems that temple artists in the maritime region were of a new generation different from traditional temple artists of Sri Lanka. A number of specific and exclusive features can be identified within their visual language, sponsorship, responses to socio-political changes, work culture, and art training.

Agency of the Low Country Temple Artists and their Visual Responses to Colonial Situation

One important characteristic of the art making process of the Low Country temple artists is they have actively responded to changes of the colonial society in which they lived. For instance, breaking the conventions of the traditional Buddhist art, these artists have radically hybridized visual elements adopted from the West into elements of local art practice, as a response to changes of 'taste' of the society. Besides visual elements, they have also combined stylistic features, techniques and materials drawn from Western Art with those of the indigenous art tradition.

Close examination reveals that the Western-local hybrid character in the Low Country Buddhist art was not simply a stylistic or technical change. This hybrid character shows that the Low Country temple artists thoughtfully altered their modes of artistic expression to suit new demands of the colonial society. Rather than maintaining a monotonous art tradition, those artists have changed their visual language responding to the taste at that time. As a result, an intriguing diversity, variability, and multiplicity entered the Buddhist art tradition in the maritime region.

It can also be identified that the Low Country artists often reformulated visual signs and pictorial codes of the Buddhist narratives to match the value systems of contemporary society. For instance, when Kandyan artists painted the royal figures in *Jātaka* stories and the life of the Buddha with costumes of the Kandyan

Court, the Low Country artists depicted the same figures in garments drawn from Europeans. Some of the selected examples in this regard are given in Table 02.

Description	Scene/ Context	Temple
Bodhisattva dressed in Western-inspired outfits	The life of the Buddha and <i>Jātaka</i> stories	Totaḡamuwa Subadrārāmaya Dodamduwa Kumara Mahā Vihāraya Veheragalla Samudragiri Vihāraya Sapugoda Śrī Mahā Vihāraya Karagampīṭiya Subōdhārāmaya Pilikuttuwa Raja Mahā Vihāraya
Goddesses with Western crowns, gowns, and belts	King Duṭugāmunu and Saddhatissa at the heaven Tāwatīṃsa	Veheragalla Samudragiri Vihāraya
Infant Siddhārtha with Western-styled infant's dress	The birth of prince Siddhartha in the life of the Buddha	Giniwālla Navamunisā Vihāraya, Dodamduwa Śailabimbārāmaya Nāḡārāma Purāṇa Vihāraya
Queen Mahāmāyā clad in Western blouse, crown, and skirt	The life of the Buddha	Pānadura Rankoth Vihāraya, Nāḡārāma Purāṇa Vihāraya
Royals dressed in Western outfits	<i>Jātaka</i> stories and the life of the Buddha	Totaḡamuwa Subadrārāmaya, Sapugoda Śrī Mahā Vihāraya
Queen Yaśodarā in a Western frock	The life of the Buddha	Karagampīṭiya Subōdhārāmaya.
Western architecture inspired palaces and mansions of kings and elites	<i>Jātaka</i> stories and the life of Buddha	Kataluwa Purwaramaya Totaḡamuwa Subadrārāmaya Dodamduwa Śailabimbārāmaya,
Western furniture and utility objects at the palaces and mansions	<i>Jātaka</i> stories and the life of the Buddha	Pānadura Rankoth Vihāraya, Kataluwa Pūrwāramaya Sapugoda Śrī Mahā Vihāraya

Western clock in the palace of King Suddhōdana	Rāhula requests for his great wealth	Karagampīṭiya Subōdhārāmaya
Western coffin in which the sacred body of the Buddha is placed	The great demise of the Buddha	Veheragalla Samudragiri Vihāraya
Western style candle stands placed around <i>Śrī Mahā Bō</i> tree	The great enlightenment of the Buddha	Pānadura Rankoth Vihāraya
Royal building with English name plaques	The great demise of the Buddha	Sapugoḍa Śrī Mahā Vihāraya

Table 02 Painted Scenes with Western Elements

It seems that Low Country artists used Western elements in a liberal manner in the illustration of Buddhist narratives, as shown in Table 02, ignoring their historical or ‘time-based’ accuracy to the context depicted. For example, from a historical perspective, the image of Queen Yaśodarā clad in a Western frock at Karagampīṭiya Subōdhārāmaya, is in appropriate. However, the artist pictured the queen in Western attire to enhance her elite appearance to match the dominant visual codes on costumes at the time. It is hard to believe that educated monks in the Low Country were unaware of this contradiction between Western elements and the historical context of Buddhist narratives. Therefore, the monks as well as the patrons possibly gave the artists considerable freedom to alter the conventional pictorial codes of Buddhist narratives.

A significant characteristic reflecting the agency of the artists is that some of the temple painters have intentionally used Western elements for inferior, subaltern or low-grade characters in the Buddhist narratives. This particular usage is against the Eurocentric ideologies that promoted the superiority of the Westerner. Some selected examples are as follows:

- i) Palanquin-bearers in the *Sivi Jātaka* at Mulgirigala Raja Mahā Vihāraya are shown wearing Western outfits with red coats and blue trousers, apparently inspired by British military uniforms (Plate 01). Palanquin-bearers occupy a lower social stratum in local caste hierarchy. Therefore, the presence of such servant-type figures in British military-looking outfits, carrying a sedan of a Buddhist king is an ironic element in terms of the colonial situation.
- ii) Some of the sinners who are suffering in hell, in the story of Mahadanasiṭu at Kataluwa Pūrwārāmaya and Toṭagamuwa Subhadrārāmaya are painted with Caucasian features and Western outfits.
- iii) Executioners in *Chulladhammapāla Jātakaya* in Kālaniya Raja Mahā Vihāraya are depicted in Western trousers and jackets (Plate 02).
- iv) In Pānadura Rankoth Vihāraya and Karagampitiya Subōdhārāmaya, images of the daughters of Māra who typically represent lust, passion, and carnal desires are shown in Western attires and with Western musical instruments.
- v) Charioteers and guards who were servants of Buddhist royals are wearing Western garments such as Western jackets, shirts, and striped trousers in the narratives of Ginivālla Navamuniṣā Vihāraya and Ātagama Sumanārāmaya.

The examples mentioned above illustrate that the temple artists did not always use Western elements to reflect superiority, power or dominance. As a subordinate social group in the colonized society, the aforesaid use of elements of the colonizer by temple artists for inferior and subaltern characters is a significant characteristic showing their agency. This usage is opposed to the Eurocentric knowledge, discourses and paradigms that were prevalent in the colonial situation.

Another characteristic showing the agency and freedom of choice of the Low Country artists is that they dared to break some conventions of the traditional Buddhist art practice. For instance, the image of Queen Victoria has been incorporated into *Sūvisi Vivaraṇa* sequences - the act of conferment of Buddhahood to the Bōdhisattva in his former births by twenty-four former Buddhas - at Polwatta Gangārāma Vihāraya (Plate 03). Moreover, the figures of European soldiers placed at the doorways, instead of guardian deities at

Pilikuttuwa Raja Mahā Vihāraya, the ceiling decorated with roses instead of lotuses at Dodamdūwa Kumāra Mahā Vihāraya and the dragon-arch decoration with roses and grapevine motifs at Kataluva Pūrvārāmaya are among other examples.

At times, some of the southern painters depicted certain subject matter that were uncommon in Buddhist religious spaces. For example, a scene depicting sexual intercourse painted by a southern artist has been seen by Leonard Wolf - a British civil servant and the famous writer - in a *Jātaka* story at Mulgirigala Raja Mahā Vihāraya during his early visits to the temple in the late 19th century. This incident was recorded by Beligalla (2003: 167) who interviewed Leonard Wolf on his second visit to Sri Lanka. Wolf has admired this manifestation as a daring representation of the reality of human life by a local artist. However, this scene cannot be seen today as it was either painted over or erased during later renovation.

Temple artists sometimes have used the coat of arms of the British colonial government for temple decorations by modifying their visual signifiers. The moulded British emblem bearing the wordings, *BUDDIST ERA 2430*, at Ambalangoda Sunanadārāmaya is one such example. Instead of the British motto, *HONI SOIT QUI MAL Y PENSE* (Evil to him who evil thinks), a new text that emphasizing Buddhist power has been integrated into this depiction (Plate 04). Moreover, in the modified emblem at Alutgama Kandē Vihāraya, the symbol of the *stūpa* is placed atop the medallion replacing the imperial crown, which is an important signifier of British imperial power. Consequently, conventional implications of the British coat of arms have been overturned, upgrading the *stūpa* into a commanding position in the composition.

By the early 20th century, the Low Country temple artists began to change their visual elements in response to new discourses that emerged in parallel to the nationalist campaign. For example, instead of European costumes and architectural backgrounds, the temple artists used visual elements inspired by Indian sources. Consequently, queens clad in Indian *saree*, princes dressed in *dhoti*, Buddhist palaces with Mogul-looking architectural features can often be seen in Buddhist murals in the early 20th century. *Thim̄birigasyāya*

*Isipatanārāma*ya in Colombo that was patronized by Padris's family, a pioneer family in Colombo who also supported the Buddhist nationalist movement, is a good example. Thus, the present discussion suggests that the Low Country temple artists actively responded to changes in society and enjoyed considerable agency in choosing visual elements in the art making process.

Impact of Monks and Patrons on Artists

Colonial writers and some temple painters have left different and contradictory accounts on the influence of monks and patrons over the art making process of the Low Country temple artists, and therefore those records have to be examined very carefully. For example, James Cordiner (1807), a colonial writer, provides a brief description on how Buddhist narratives were painted on temple walls saying that "... a painter reads the stories in Cingalese (Sinhalese) books, and then portrays the subject on the wall according to the pictures which they form in imagination" (Cordiner 1807: 111). Cordiner has not mentioned anything about the engagements of custodian monks or temple patrons. He assigned the entire responsibility of the art making process - including exploring literary sources, finding subject matter, and visualizing them on the temple walls - to the temple artists.

It seems that the discounting of the roles of the monks and the patrons by Cordiner could probably be due to one of the following two reasons. The first reason is that, as an outsider to indigenous art practice, Cordiner was unaware of the role of monks and patrons in the religious art making process. The second reason is that the monks and patrons did not play an active role in art projects as there were several fixed models developed by Kandyan artists for the image houses of the *Siam* temples. Cordiner's account shows that he observed only *Siam* temples as new fraternities had not yet established themselves in the Low Country, by that time.

Referring to the temple projects in the early 20th century, M. Sarlis (1880-1955) provides a very different account on the influence of monks and patrons over the temple projects. Sarlis was the most famous temple artist in the island during the early decades of the 20th century and he followed a painting style that was largely

inspired by characteristics of Academic Realism. He says that temple projects were often carried out according to the ideas of the custodian monks and elite patrons. As shown below, Sarlis further says that the freedom of the artists was restricted at times due to the interference of the monks and patrons.

(tr. by author. ... Murals were mostly painted according to the ideas of the custodian monks of the temple and the elite patrons. If four sculptures were designed for one temple, in the next temple, even if its image house is smaller than in the earlier location, at least nine statues have to be constructed. What our monks want is, to attract more people to visit their temple so that they can collect more donations. So, when image houses are completed with such a multitude of statues, it looks like a karol kuduwa (lit. showy and fancy-looking lantern or box). There is nothing we can do about that ... If the artist is given the freedom, he can decide on the number of images and their scales according to the space available, use traditional Sinhala colours and do the job. But the situation we are faced with is different.)

(Kalādīpa, May 15, 1953: 2)

Sarlis's statement has to be examined carefully because the creative practice of the temple artists in the early 20th century was different from that of Cordiner's time. For example, the artist's job was transformed into a salaried financial activity and some of the artists were paid well by influential elite patrons (*Kalādīpa* May 15, 1953: 2). In addition to *Siam* temples, there were a large number of new temples that belonged to new fraternities during Sarlis's time and there was competition among those fraternities to build temples and decorate them with sculptures and paintings shnbo as to attract more devotees. Hence, the monks and patrons appear to have often interfered with the artist's job to get the work done according to their wishes.

The statement of Sarlis, however, prompts us to look seriously at the roles of the monks and the patrons in religious art production. Available evidence shows that a number of monks in the Low Country have been actively involved in monastic projects in the maritime provinces, particularly after the falling of the Kandyan Kingdom. For instance, the text inscribed above the main entrance to the image

house of Kotikāgoda Raja Mahā Vihāraya in Matara is one such example, reflecting the influence of the southern monks on monastic projects. This text directly assigns the responsibility of construction of the image house to the chief monk of the temple, Ven. Valgama Kīrti Śrī Dhammānanda.

Another monk who played a leading role in temple construction in the maritime region was Ven. Mihiripānnē Dhammaratana (AD 1768-1851). This monk built several temples such as Mihiripānnē Padumārāmaya, Kaṭukurundē Purāna Vihāraya, Vēhāllē Vēluwanārāmaya, and Kalutara Kalupahana Vihāraya, and wrote some blessing poems to encourage temple artists⁵. Among the other southern monks who played key roles in temple construction were Ven. Kataluwa Gunaratana (Kataluwa Pūrvārāmaya), Ven. Vilēgoḍa Paññasāra (Ambalangōḍa Sunandārāmaya), Ven. Telikada Śrī Sōnuttara (Dodamdūwa Kumāra Mahā Vihāraya), Ven. Dodamdūwē Piyaratatanatissa (Doamduwa Śailabimbārāmaya), etc.

Sarlis's criticism on the interference of monks may not be applicable to every creative project that took place in the Low Country. As discussed in the previous section, there is ample evidence showing the freedom of choice and agency of the Low Country artists in their work culture. For example, neither educated monks nor the patrons in the Low Country, prevented artists from incorporating Western elements into Buddhist narratives although most of those elements were historically and contextually inaccurate.

A convincing example illustrating the flexibility of the Low Country monks in their relationship with temple painters and the freedom enjoyed by the painters is found among the literary works of Ven. Mihiripānnē Dhammaratana (Gunasena 1999: 411-412) One of his letters, written in the verse form, addresses the temple painters of Mihiripānnē Padumārāmaya, who went back home while the work was only halfway through. The main objective of this letter was to remind the painters to return and resume work. The content of the letter sounds like an innocent and friendly request rather than an order by a person of authority, even though the painters had neglected their responsibility to do the work on time. This reflects that this monk has dealt with the artists tolerantly although the artists have stopped work, halfway. The letter also implies that some of the

artisans were not seriously concerned about their responsibilities in monastic projects, at times.

Role of temple patrons in monastic construction is another significant matter in understanding the art making process of temple artists. The majority of the temples in the Low Country, in particular those of the new fraternities,⁶ were constructed under the support of the new elites in the maritime region, instead of royal patronage. Among those patrons, the class of *Mudaliyars* was the most influential group. *Mudalindārāmaya*⁷, which is a popular temple name in the Low Country, is a noteworthy indication reflecting impact of *Mudaliyars* on temple constructions.

The modified British coat of arms on the archway to the stupa at Kalutara Aśokārāma Mahā Vihāraya is a good example reflecting the influence of temple patrons on temple projects. In this case, the name of the patron - *Mudaliyar* J.S.F. Jayasekara Dharmasiriwardana - is inscribed both in Sinhala and in Roman script at a pivotal position of the modified emblem between the two shield supporters. At Potuṭiṭiya Vālukārāma Mahā Vihāraya, the name of the patron, Ampines Fernando, is shown in a poem inscribed below the modified British emblem on the main façade. In addition, some of the Low Country patrons have donated their personal residences to the order of monks to use as monastic buildings. Ambagapiṭiya Mūla Mahā Vihāraya (*Walawwa* of *Mudaliyar* Sahabandu), Dadalla Mahā Mudalindārāmaya (*Walawwa* of Gate-Mudaliyar A.D. Wijayagunaratne), Kīmbi-Āla Śrī Wijayawardanārāmaya (*Walawwa* of Mudaliyar Don Abraham Wijayawardane Gunasekara), Kuppiāwatta Jayasēkarārāmaya (*Walawwa* of the chief-*Mudaliyar* Arnoldes de Abrew Rajapakse Wijayasekara) are some examples⁸.

The temple patrons in the Low Country have supported the mural projects in many ways by providing painting material, money for salaries of painters, paddy-fields for use of artisans, etc. *Mudaliyar* Don David Abraham Nicholas Abeysinghe Amarasekara who provided *dorana* oil and *sādiliṅgam* for the paintings of Mihiripānnē Padumārāmaya and paddy-fields for the subsistence of its painters is one good example (Gunasena 1999: 412-415). The chief monk of the temple, Ven. Mihiripānnē Dammaratana, wrote about sixty-nine panegyrics

admiring the sponsorship of this *Mudaliyar* (Mangalasiri 1996: 18-19; Gunasena 1999: 427, 475-476). Appendix XIV.

Accordingly, this discussion suggests that the roles of the custodian monks and temple patrons in the Low Country were significant in the monastic projects. We can assume that monks and patrons might have been involved in deciding the main subject matter, location of artworks, hierarchical arrangement of selected themes, quantity of sculptures and murals, etc. Therefore, we have to look at the Buddhist art and sculpture projects in the Low Country a kind of collective activity that materialized through shared efforts of the artists, the monks and the patrons rather than a work of an isolated group. However, as discussed above, temple artists have enjoyed considerable freedom in choosing and arranging of visual elements of the selected subject matter and therefore, it became clear that the artists played a decisive role in carving out the final visual form of a monastic project although it materialized as a collective activity.

Work Culture of the Temple Artists in the Low Country

It is found that work culture of temple artists in the Low Country was different from that of the hereditary temple artists who received royal patronage of Kandyan kings. Although there was a particular unit called *Pāṭaraṭa Koṭṭalbadda* (lit. Division of Artificers Department of the Low Country) attached to the *Koṭṭalbadda* (lit. Artificers Department) in the Kandyan Court to carry out monastic projects in the maritime provinces, the artists in the British colonial era seem to be a community that did not belong to it. The dating of the existing artworks shows that they have been created after the collapse of the Kandyan kingdom and the *Koṭṭalbadda*.

The temple artists in the Low Country were compelled to work under a different situation due to changes in temple patronage. As mentioned before, those artists were often patronized by new elites in the maritime provinces, who had affiliations with the colonial government. This lay patronage was largely extended to the Low Country temples along their caste lines. For instance, *Salāgama* elites patronized the temples of the *Amarapura* fraternity while elites

of *Kāravē* caste supported the temples of the *Kalyāṇiwaṃsa* fraternity (Malalgoda 1976).

Hybridization of visual elements, styles, and techniques drawn from Western and local art traditions is another noteworthy characteristic of the work culture of Low Country artists. Concerning the stylistic hybridity, the temple artists incorporated certain Western features such as light and shade effect, linear perspective, volume of the object, and tonal effect of colours into stylized characteristics of local art forms. They have freely used those characteristics in their own ways, breaking the standards of both Western and local art traditions. Use of stylized and naturalistic features in the same scene, depicting backgrounds with contradictory vanishing points, and applying light and shade effects ignoring the direction of the light source, as we can see in the murals of Sapugoda Śrī Mahā Vihāraya, Pānadura Rankot Vihāraya, and Karagampitiya Subōdhārāmaya, are some examples.

Use of new commercial products introduced by the colonizer, for example Aspinall's enamel and Rickett's blue, along with traditional local paint material was another characteristic of the work culture of the Low Country artists. The brand name of Aspinall's enamel can be seen among the murals in Veheragalla Samudragiri Vihāraya in Matara. Use of new paint material and Western painting techniques led to the expansion of the limited colour palette of the Low Country artists into a wide range of vibrant colours.

It can also be identified that some of the temple painters were influenced by new sources of inspiration in contemporary society. Christmas cards, newspaper engravings, printed books with paintings of European artists, book illustrations, images of European commercial products, painted ceramics, painted clothing panels, and painted manuscripts are some of them. Moreover, some murals in the maritime region shows that the temple painters have been inspired by painted theatrical backdrops used in stage plays since the late 19th century⁹.

Concerning the sculptors in the Low Country, it seems that some of them were trained to work with both Western and local methods, techniques, and art forms. For instance, the figure of the unicorn, the figure of the lion, the floral motives (roses, thistles, and shamrocks), and decorative moldings in the archway to the *stupa* at Kalutara Asokārāma Mahā Vihāraya reflect the influence of Western moulding techniques and design forms. The other elements of the archway such as the traditional dragon-arch design, the stylized replica of the moon, and the figures of oriental deities show influence of local traditions. Relief sculptures on the façades of Alutgama Kandē Vihāraya and Dodamdūwa Śailabimbārāmaya are two other examples that show the training of the sculptors in Western methods.

Another noteworthy characteristic of the work culture of the Low Country artists is that some of the painters have engaged in non-religious works while doing monastic projects, at least by the latter part of the 19th century. Brohier who visited Mulgirigla temple in the early 19th century records a noteworthy evidence of such practice. Brohier (1999: 251-252) reveals that the temple artists of Mulgirigla Aluth Vihāraya were commissioned to paint an emblem of a famous cricket club in Colombo, prior to starting the monastic project. He further reveals that the temple artists incorporated some design motifs adopted from that emblem, into the temple decorations.

Emergence of the practice of signing work contracts between the artists and the custodian monks or patrons of temples is another change in the artists' work culture. This was against the practice of traditional painters and sculptors who worked on the request of the king or a provincial ruler and accepted whatever was granted to them upon completion. A document relating to a contract agreement between the painters and the custodian monk is found at Veheragalla Samudragiri Vihāraya in Matara. This agreement has been signed by two temple painters - Krindē Ganitayagē Siriyatē Sittarā and Garāṇḍuwē Sandra Nākatigē Edō Sittarā - and a monk named Ven. Rēvata. Evidence of work on contract basis and advance payments for artists is also found among the poetical works of Mihiripānṇē Dhammaratana (Gunasena 1999: 453-454).

Towards a Conclusion

This discussion suggests that the community of temple artists in the Low Country was different from the hereditary temple painters and sculptors in Sri Lanka. As the Low Country artists were exposed to changes in the colonial situation, their caste identity, social background, patrons, visual language, art training, value systems, and other attributes of the work culture were different from those of the traditional temple artists of Sri Lanka. Although the temple artists in the Low Country remained a subordinated layer under the colonial rule, at times, they have dared enough to criticize the people in power through their creative works.

As discussed above, the temple artists in the Low Country have depicted inferior, subaltern or lower-ranked characters such as sinners in Hell, executioners, servants, palanquin bearers, guards, etc., in Buddhist narratives using Western elements of the colonizer. Moreover, these artists have sometimes changed the signs of the British coat of arms by incorporating Buddhist symbols and texts. By this means, as found at Ambalangoda Sunanadārāmaya and Alutgama Kandē Vihāraya, some British emblems have been transformed into pro-Buddhist representations. In addition, the images of Queen Victoria - the empress of British colonial government- at Polwatta Gangārāma Vihāraya has been placed as a worshipper of the Buddha. Such usage is against the Western models of superiority promoted by Eurocentric knowledge. Therefore, it challenges the popular colonial notion that the colonized is somebody with no agency.

Thus, the Low Country temple artists have energetically responded to socio-political changes of the colonial society. Those artists have often hybridized visual elements, art styles and techniques adopted from both Western and local art traditions to suit the taste and demand of the contemporary society. Consequently, Buddhist monastic art in the maritime region demonstrates a wider diversity, variability and multiplicity. In most of the cases, the Low Country artists have freely hybridized Western and local art practices discarding their traditional norms and conventions. It also seems that they have enjoyed considerable freedom in choosing visual elements. Although the custodian monks and the temple patrons made a significant impact on the art making process, however, temple artists seem to have played a crucial role in visualizing

the collective ideas of all other groups in their final pictorial schemes, adopting appropriate visual signifiers, codes, and formulas.

End Notes

1. A discourse community, according to Swales (1990:21-32), is a group of people that have the same goals or purposes, and use communication (oral, written or visual) to achieve these goals. Among the common characteristics of discourse communities are a set of common public goals, mechanisms of intercommunication among members, ability to provide information and feedback, the possession of genres of communication, the acquisition of a specific lexis, and a group of members with similar levels of expertise about a subject.
2. The royal art and craft department of the kingdom of Kandy was called *Koṭṭalbadda*, and had two sections named *Uḍaraṭa Koṭṭalbadda* and *Pāṭaraṭa Koṭṭalbadda*. Some of the Kandyan kings employed artists of this department to do mural projects in the Low Country. For example, Kīrti Śrī Rājasimḡhe (AD 1747-1781) patronized Mulgirigala Raja Mahā Vihāraya, Veheragampīṭa Raja Mahā Vihāraya, and Kālaniya Raja Mahā Vihāraya. Consequently, some of the southern artists had the opportunity to practice under master artists in the Central Kandyan School. For instance, Vāṭṭāwē Hāmuduruwō and Katuwana Hāmuduruwō from the Low Country received their art training under Devaragampala Silwattāna (Dissanayake 1994: 190-191).
3. Manjusri (1977), Gunasinghe (1978), Bandaranayake (1986), Charles (1986, 2001), Dissanayake (1988), Chutiwongs, Prematillake and Silva (1990), Ulluwishewa (1993), Somathilaka (2002, 2006), and Mahinda (2007).
4. The same artist has sometimes been known by two or more names. For example, Garānduwē Āriyadāsa, an artist descending from the atelier of Garānduwē Edō, reveals that the actual name of Edō Sittara or Garānduwē

Edō (Garanduwe Edo) was Garānduwē Edōnis who was also known as Kadogallē Podde Sittarā.

5. මෙත් සිත් යුත් ව ම සිත් පිනා - දින දිනා වස් දොස් කිරීමෙන් දුරු කළ රුක් දෙමින් සිත් මිනා - මෙන මෙනා සෙත් දී රකිත් සිත්තරුන් (quoted from Gunasena 1999: 443) (tr.: With compassionate mind, dispelling all evils every day and fulfilling them with offers of the wish fulfilling tree, may the painters be protected and blessed.)

6. Contribution of the *Mudaliyars* in establishing new fraternities in the Low Country was much decisive and vital. For instance, *Mudaliyar* Sahabandu and *Mudaliyar* Wijayasriwardana were the key figures who patronized the settlement of *Amarapura*, the first new fraternity in the Low Country. The chief monk of *Ambagahapitiya Mūla Mahā Vihāraya*, Ven. Ahungalle Wimalajeewa Tissa reveals that those *Mudaliyars* supported not only the establishment of the *Amarapura* fraternity, but also the setting up of *Ambagahapitiya Mūla Mahā Vihāraya* and *Vālitara Puspārāmaya*

7. Dallala Mahā Mudalindārāmaya, Watugedara Śri Vijaya Śri Vardana Mudalindārāmaya, and Hittāṭiya Gunaratana Mudalindu Mahā Pirivena are some examples.

8. At the temple premises of Kuppiāwatta Jayasēkarārāmaya, the following inscribed statement is found:

ක්‍රි.ව. 1823 මාර්තු මස 08 වැනි දින දෝන මරියා ද සිල්වා සිරිවර්ධන ලමානැනීගේ අන්තිම කැමැත්ත පරිදි ආර්තෝල්ඩස් ද ආබ්‍රෙව් රාජපක්‍ෂ විජයසේකර මහමුදලි ස්වකීය වලව්ව පැවති මෙම ජයසේකරාරාම භූමි සඟසතු කොට 1823 දී ඔක්තෝම්බර් 25 වැනි දින පූජා කරන ලදී ...

(tr. According to the last will of lady Dona Maria de Silva Siriwardana, dated 08 March 1823, this land of Jayasekararamaya owned by chief *Mudaliyar* Arnoldes de Abrew Rajapakse Wijaysekara, where his *walawwa* (residence) was situated, is donated to the Buddhist *sangha* community, on 25 October 1823...)

9. Backdrops used in the stage plays by The Parsi Theater - a well known foreign drama troop at the time - is one such source that influenced some of the local temple painters. Also, painted theatrical backdrops embellished with romantic looking paintings were used in *Nurti* plays, some of which were based on historic Buddhist stories (Hapuarachchi 1981: 83-84). Don Bastian, Charles Dias, and John de Silva were among the popular *Nurti* producers who used such backdrops from the 1880s (*ibid.*). Some of them were supporters of the Buddhist Revival Movement in the late 19th century.

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Plates



Plate 01

Palanquin-bearers in *Sivi Jātaka*, Mulgirigala Raja Mahā Vihāraya, 19th C.



Plate 02

An executioners in Western outfits, *Chulladhammapāla Jātakaya*, Kälaniya Raja Mahā Vihāraya, Mid-19th C.



Plate 03

Queen Victoria in Veneration, Polwatta Gangārāma Vihāraya, Late 19th C.



Plate 04

Modified British coat of arms, Ambalangoda Sunanadārāmaya, Late 19th C.

