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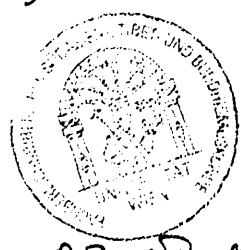

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Buddha in the Crown: Avalokiteśvara in the Buddhist Traditions of Sri Lanka, by John Clifford Holt. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991. xii + 269 pp.

Religious change through assimilation has fascinated a number of recent investigators of Sri Lankan Buddhism, for such change, it has been argued, often reflects patterns which are amenable to theoretical interpretation. In this recent contribution to the field, what is offered is an "extended case study" of the way the celebrated Mahāyāna *bodhisattva* Avalokiteśvara (whose characteristic sculptures usually carry as a distinctive iconographic attribute a *buddha* in the crown, hence the book's title), came to be incorporated into the essentially Theravāda culture of Sri Lanka's Sinhala population. Mainly historical and anthropological in approach, the present work highlights some striking phases in this process. According to its account, shedding Mahāyānist associations, Avalokiteśvara was in the course of time transfigured into the guardian deity Nātha (an abbreviation apparently of Lokeśvaranātha, one of the *bodhisattva's* alternative names), and was further changed in identity later to emerge as Metteyya (Maitreya in Sanskrit), the *buddha* of the next "world epoch" (*kappa*). In analyzing the assimilation and legitimation of the beliefs of one tradition by another thus manifested, Holt sees a notable theoretical principle at work. New religious forms, he claims, are accepted not only because they are found to be "immediately efficacious," but also because they can be given meaning ("rationalized") within the accepting tradition's grounding beliefs and *telos*. The material studied, Holt maintains, provides reasons for recognizing the existence of a shifting, interactive relationship between two Sinhala terms which are crucial in the projection of the Sri Lankan Buddhist world-view, *laukika* and *lōkōttara* (frequently defined contrastively, these terms are generally taken to mean, respectively, "worldly" and "otherworldly" concerns). Graphic support for this is identified within the long-sustained Sri Lankan iconographic traditions focused on Avalokiteśvara-Nātha: there, insists Holt, both *laukika* and *lōkōttara* orientations are equally manifested, prompted by changing social and political factors. Holt also regards the appropriation of the veneration of Avalokiteśvara (the cult of "half Asia" in some estimations) on the part of the Theravāda Buddhists of Sri Lanka as a pointer to the existence of an absorbing and pliable bent (characterized as "in-

clusivity") in their religious and cultural orientation. And, he sees instrumental value in a modern awareness of this often overlooked fact: it is, he suggests, a locally available means of justifying and promoting a greater tolerance of diversity within the island, now torn by ethnic strife.

Buddha in the Crown is organized in nine chapters, and is supported by illustrative material which serves in particular to bring into relief an array of diachronically arranged Avalokiteśvara-Nātha statuary (dated from the eighth century to recent times, and found in various parts of Sri Lanka). After identifying the theoretical issues relating to religious change which Avalokiteśvara worship as practised here poses, and also articulating his own informing perspectives on this score just noted, Holt enters into his subject proper with some elucidations on the historical and doctrinal background of the *bodhisattva*. Even the original perceptions of Avalokiteśvara, he argues, probably were coloured by theistic ideas elaborated in Hindu and other systems. Mentioned in several classic Sanskrit sources which inspired Mahāyāna belief in India and the Far East (such as the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* or "Lotus" *sūtra*), Avalokiteśvara, according to Holt, was "understood preeminently as a buddhistic hierophant of compassion and wisdom." Mahāyāna metaphysics tended to treat him as the *sambhogakāya* (the body of the eternally present *buddha*-realization), imbued with capacities of both creation and preservation. Given thus the characteristic epithets of Lokeśvara ("Lord of the World") and Lokanātha ("Protector of the World"), Avalokiteśvara has his "altruism of compassion" underscored in the seventh-century text, *Avalokiteśvara Guṇakaraṇḍavyūha sūtra* where his is, besides, ascribed the important attribute of *saṅgharatna* ("Jewel of the Saṅgha") in acknowledgement of his special concern for the grounding of *dharma* ("righteousness") everywhere. These epithets, among others, are held to point to a discernible intermingling of *laukika* and *lōkōttara* orientations in Sinhala Buddhism. The particular account of Sri Lanka's Avalokiteśvara-Nātha cult presented in this book, it is well to reiterate, places great emphasis on this: fluctuations in the relative influence of these two orientations is indeed projected as a central datum, borne out by historical and anthropological evidence alike.

To turn to some salient details of the account, Holt connects the rise of Avalokiteśvara veneration in Sri Lanka to the entrenchment (amidst the established Theravāda orthodoxy's vehement opposition) of Mahāyāna teachings in the early centuries C.E. among religious dissidents there (especially those at the Abhayagiri monastery, situated in the ancient Sri Lankan capital of Anurādhapura). He concedes that what is central to the *bodhisattva* idea is not alien to

Theravāda Buddhism. It is, for instance, noted as basic to the latter system's recountings of Gautama Buddha's previous lives, and to be admitted in certain Pāli texts, including the *Mahāvamsa* of Sri Lankan provenance, through their common acknowledgement of a "next Buddha," Metteyya. Yet the cult focused on Avalokiteśvara that emerged in parts of the island is regarded in the main as a religious innovation that went beyond accepted Theravāda doctrinal frames. Indeed, much of the "impetus" for the late medieval conflation there of "*bodhisattva*, king and god" is squarely placed outside those frames. In any event, in delving into the richly complex history of Avalokiteśvara's actual entry into the Sri Lankan religious scene, Holt identifies a northeastern location in the country (Tiriyāna) as the site for some of the earliest specimens of his statuary. Dated in the eighth century, these specimens, adorned with the meditating *dhyāni buddha* in their head gear (*jaṭāmakuṭa*), tended to establish a basic pattern for many of the later portrayals of Avalokiteśvara throughout Sri Lanka. Cross-cultural contact, it appears, was an important spur to the deepened local veneration paid to this *bodhisattva*. Influences streaming from the Pallava kingdom of South India (with which the island is shown to have maintained very close relations from the seventh to the tenth centuries), it is argued, had a major formative impact on the early development of the cult. Iconography associated with the cult of this period—as witnessed by massive rock-carved Avalokiteśvara figures found at Situlpahuva and Buduruvegala—is held to bear out this impact strongly.

What can the student of religion learn from iconography in the present context? According to Holt, as already hinted, an ascetic (*lōkōttara*) orientation was quite marked in most of the early representations of Avalokiteśvara. But a tendency to invest him with worldly (*laukika*) attributes is discerned in the late medieval Sinhala culture which evolved in the central (Kandyan) areas of Sri Lanka. Here, Holt believes, Avalokiteśvara was effectivley transformed into a "national guardian deity," Nātha Deviyo. The "strong royal resemblance" assumed by contemporary images of Nātha (still preserved in certain shrines or *devalaya* dedicated to him, such as those at Vegiriya and Pasgama) is taken as a reflection of this change. Further processes of "domestication" are noted still later. Virtually shorn of Avalokiteśvara's old ascetic features, Kandyan Nātha statuary of the eighteenth century, is held to display an even greater predominance of "royal motifs"; on the other hand, more recent icons of the deity (one at the Bellanwila temple complex near Colombo, where Nātha is portrayed as a youthful prince is regarded as typical), are actually thought to exude a "fleshy this-worldliness."

Holt does not explain Avalokiteśvara's cultic presence in Sri Lanka by iconographic evidence alone; he also cites epigraphic, historical and anthropological data, e.g., Sinhala Buddhism's evolution during the late medieval period (when the *bodhisattva*, it is argued, was incorporated into the local "socio-political cosmos," and religiously legitimated anew, thereby); and the "mythic and ritual remnants" still kept alive at the Kandy Nātha Deavalaya and in a "handful of outlying villages" located in the Kandyan cultural area. Much of the second half of the book is actually concerned with the investigation of these data. The main findings at this level deserve notice.

Avalokiteśvara's later emergence as Nātha (in the role of "a powerful national deity" and hence the "epitome of *laukika* efficacy") is taken to be a change initiated in the era of the rulers who adopted Gampola as their capital (14th to 15th centuries). Holt interprets this change to mark the operation in the main of "twin pressures": the influence, on the one hand, of "international Buddhist theories of royal legitimation" emanating from outside Sri Lanka (principally Southeast Asia, with whose Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms the island is shown to have come into various types of contact in this era, though South India also remained a general source for extra-Theravāda influence then) and, on the other, the status already acquired by Avalokiteśvara inside the country as a "boon-conferring protective regional deity" under the alias Nātha (this is traced to a general waning of the memory of his Mahāyānist antecedents among devotees). Significantly, in his new role as a god-protector Avalokiteśavara retained a special association with the sustenance of royal power. This association persisted throughout subsequent periods, reaching its "apex" in the sixteenth century under Kandyan rulers, some of whom consciously adopted symbols that projected the "image of the *bodhisattva*/king/god." Identified as unusually assimilative, the culture of the Gampola era is admiringly highlighted here as "syncretic" and "eclectic"; Holt finds the characteristics in question amply reflected in the era's religious edifices and its distinctive genre of poetry, *sandēsakāvya*. Amidst frequent invocations of Buddhicized Hindu divinities, some notable tokens of Nātha devotionalism are observed in this poetry (where, besides, Holt recognizes a coming together of the *laukika* outlook and the *lōkōttara* concern, with the preservation of the *dhamma* as important element in the latter). The cultic presence of Nātha is considered to be particularly pronounced in the life and work of Sri Rāhula, the celebrated fifteenth century Sinhala monk-writer and *sandēsa* poet. A recipient of the royal patronage of Parakramabāhu VI—the last Sinhala king to rule over a united Sri Lanka—Sri Rāhula is seen as practising a type of religious inclusivism that reflected the spirit of his age.

Nātha's present-day role in Sinhala Buddhism is examined in several later chapters of the book, which bring to the fore another source for an overall understanding of the Avalokiteśvara-Nātha cult in Sri Lanka: field studies of ritual life and myths kept alive in a few Kandyan Nātha shrines. Readably described at considerable length, the observations basic to these studies establish a notable general point: though very much diminished in popular influence and changed withal in identity and status, Nātha still commands some veneration among Sinhala Buddhists. How exactly is he perceived by devotees now? Through a particular interpretation of oral and written mythic material preserved in certain shrines, Holt contends that there is presently a "reassertion of Nātha's *bodhisattva* orientation," which was subordinated earlier when his "worldly (*laukika*) efficacy" came to be stressed. Indeed, far from being a legitimator of royal authority, he is, it is argued, increasingly looked upon as a symbol of spiritual hope—the manifestation of the "next *buddha*," Metteyya. But, notably enough, devotees are still held to credit him with a protective interest over the few rural localities where Nātha shrines have survived. These shrines are regarded by villagers as places where sacred power is concentrated, and rituals practised in them to procure the deity's help—seen as a throwback to an aspect of popular Buddhist practice in earlier times—are a focus of much attention in the book's final discussions. Considered overall, says Holt, the rituals serve to project Nātha as standing for the principles of purity, order and village power, and, true to the Avalokiteśvara heritage, an available source of *laukika* assistance as well (especially to ward off certain bodily ailments). Further evidences of Nātha devotionalism are noted in the annual religious processions (*perahära*) and festivals (*maṅgalyaya*) of the shrines of central Sri Lanka, albeit intermixed with Buddhist and other beliefs. Thus, amidst ceremonial homage to Buddha relics and symbolic rites for ensuring fertility and seasonal rainfall, Nātha's *laukika* interest is held to be very much avowed within the famous Kandy *perahära*. A parallel orientation is discerned in festivals at remote Nātha shrines. One such festival described encompasses an oral reinforcement of Avalokiteśvara's protective compassion on the part of a ritual specialist who temporarily becomes "possessed" by Nātha.

All in all, though it is basically "extracanonical," Holt credits the particular aspect of "traditional Sinhala Buddhism" he highlights in this book with considerable value. It is, in his vew, quite a contrast to the intolerant militancy of "Buddhist modernism" or "Protestant Buddhism" manifesting in the island (where, notably enough, an endeavour to seek *nibbāna* "here and now" is identified). Indeed, the

historically evolved cult that presently links Nātha and Metteyya, he finds, is more accommodating, and provides within its frames religious means for a proximate assuagement of suffering (*dukkha*), amidst a progressive striving toward ultimate spiritual fulfillment.

A noteworthy addition to the growing literature on Sinhala Buddhism, *Buddha in the Crown* serves to enlarge modern understanding of the subject in some significant ways. It of course encompasses material pertinent to a wider study of religion as well (the striking evidences of encounter and accommodation in the sphere of belief here highlighted, for instance, contain historical insights that can be brought to bear on the clarification of religious pluralism, whose theoretical basis and normative value has recently come under some scrutiny in Ninian Smart, *Religion and the Western Mind*, Albany, 1987). But more important, this investigation can be fruitfully related to several other recent interpretations of Theravāda practice in Sri Lanka. Holt's inquiry into the Avalokiteśvara-Nātha cult is obviously much broader and deeper than that incorporated into the survey of the veneration of gods in Sinhala Buddhism in Mohan Wijayaratna's *Le cult des dieux chez les bouddhistes singhalais* (Paris, 1987; pp. 71 ff., 152 ff., 256 ff.). Its treatment of religious change in Sri Lanka might usefully be juxtaposed to that presented in *Buddhism Transformed* by R. Gombrich and G. Obeysekere (Princeton, N.J., 1988). But significantly, in adducing a long history of Sinhala Buddhism's accommodation of "diverse forms of Hindu and Mahāyāna Buddhist spirituality" (the Avalokiteśvara-Nātha cult is actually taken as a "prime example" of that phenomenon), Holt also undermines a major thesis of this latter work i.e., that such syncretism is recent. In any event, though highly controversial reductive explanations are not central to *Buddha in the Crown*, its analyses and accountings are by no means always persuasive. It is, on the contrary, quite possible to challenge some of them on the basis of the positions taken in certain relevant writings both old and new (ranging from traditional Sri Lankan Pāli and Sinhala works to modern interpretative studies that deal with Theravāda practice on the island) which Holt, judging by the book's bibliography, seems to have overlooked. This contention calls for some elaborations.

It is interesting to observe that Holt's views about Avalokiteśvara's changing roles in Sinhala Buddhism, and the claim that, transfigured as Nātha, the *bodhisattva* actually emerged in the later middle ages as a "national guardian deity," are not corroborated in recent investigations into the manifestations of theistic belief in Sri Lanka's Pāli chronicles (cf. *Le Cult des dieux chez les bouddhistes singhalais*, pp. 58 ff., "Les dieux dans les chroniques"). The grounds for them might in

fact be somewhat substantially disputed if one adopts the interpretative frames for which others have argued (but Holt himself does not forthrightly entertain). In this connection, those set forth by the translator of a notable medieval Pāli text which tends to articulate the *bodhisattva* conceptions of contemporary Therāvadism, *Dasabodhisattuppattikathā* (see text ed. with trans., *The Birth Stories of the Ten Bodhisattas*, by H. Saddhatissa, London, 1975, Introduction) are very significant. Some strikingly pertinent critical ideas are to be found in the translator's excursus into "Metteyya and Ceylon" (ibid. pp. 32 ff.). Notably enough, no complicated hypothesis is advanced in this latter context to account for the emergence of Nātha or the devotion focused on Metteyya. Rather, it is suggested that, following a fading of their respective antecendents in course of time, Avalokiteśvara was "confused" with Metteyya in Sri Lanka: the Lokanātha (or Lokeśvaranātha) alias of the former, and Metteyya's identification as Metteyyanātha (or Metteyyalokanātha in some Pāli settings, cf. ibid. p. 38, which cites *Jatakāṭṭhakathā* conclusion) are indeed taken as specific factors that could perhaps have facilitated this process. This accounting, so strikingly simple (and hence appealing on grounds of "parsimony"), certainly merits attention. The demonstrable historical depth of the Sri Lankan tendency to invoke and reverence Metteyya (often as Metteyyanātha) might be counted as a further consideration in its favour. To be sure, even what is apparently one of the oldest Pāli works composed on the island, Buddharakkhita's *Jinālaṅkāra* (see text ed. with trans., *Embellishments of Buddha*, by James Gray, London, 1981; going by a postscript to the text, Gray dates Buddharakkhita's birth in 426 B.C.) carries in its conclusion an expression of an aspiration to approach the protector Metteyya and pay homage to his person before finally winning salvation (cf. verse 247: *Metteyyanātham upasankamitvā/tassattabhāvam abhipujitva/...*). In the context cited above, Saddhatissa identifies similar expressions in a wide range of subsequent Sri Lankan writings, both in Pāli and Sinhala. Uttered in the spirit of a prayerful wish, the statement of resolve, "I shall indeed hear the *dhamma* of Metteyya" (*Metteyyanāthassa sunomi dhammam*) constituted in certain instances the last reported words of dying heroic figures of local history. All in all, taking the mingling of these and other long entrenched beliefs focused on Metteyya with those relating to Avalokiteśvara as a strong possibility, Saddhatissa sees no need to postulate the subtle workings of a "religious logic" to explain the development of the Avalokiteśvara-Nātha cult in Sri Lanka. Interestingly, it is to a "confusion" of beliefs that he traces the stylistic peculiarities of Avalokiteśvara sculpture and the origins of Nātha shrines. (Though

Holt seems to have lost sight of it, "iconic confusion" resulting from a "breakdown" in the transmission of the relevant conventions is a consideration which a book he himself cites broaches in its discussion of Sinhala Buddhism's "changing pantheon"; cf. *Buddhism Transformed*, p. 30). It should be observed lastly that anyone reading the *Dasabodhisattuppattikathā* itself is likely to encounter there passages that might pose problems for some of the interpretations Holt advances. The text at I:4, for instance, portrays Metteyya as a veritable future herald of this worldly happiness (*sukha*), ensuring by his special efficacy (*ānubhāva*), among other things, freedom from sickness (or health, *arogā*) for everybody.

Was Nātha actually as focal to Sinhala Buddhism in certain periods as Holt tries to make out? This again may be disputed. Indeed, it is possible to take a different view of the eminence accorded to this deity if the reality of henotheistic attitudes is conceded. Typically, such attitudes, as F. Max Muller has shown in the course of his celebrated interpretations of Vedic religiosity, lead to showering of special laudatory attention on a particular god in a particular devotional context, even though votaries acknowledge and reverence other divinities as well. Given, as Holt himself notes, Sri Lankan Buddhists' veneration gods such as Vibhīsana, Upulvan, Saman and Skanda throughout the middle ages and later, there is room to wonder whether contemporary evidences of Nātha worship should not, after all, be traced to the operation of henotheistic attitudes. One might, however, raise more substantial critical objections to the positions taken on the above topic. Nātha devotionalism, significantly, is *not* projected as a widely influential movement in other recent studies of Sinhala Buddhism in relevant periods, but rather as a practice cultivated for the most part by *gamavāsi* monks, a sect with recognizable Mahāyānist proclivities; cf. A. H. Mirando, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka in the 17th and 18th Centuries, with Special Reference to Sinhala Sources* (*The Ceylon Historical Journal Monograph Series*, vol. 10, Dehiwala, Sri Lanka, 1985, p. 9). Mirando acknowledges that the versatile Rāhula was a member of the latter sect. Still, he insists that mainstream Sinhala Buddhism was represented in Rāhula's time by monks who identified themselves a "forest dwellers" (*vanavāsi*). Indeed, citing Vidāgama Maitrēya's *Haṁsasandēśaya* (where other gods, not Nātha, are shown to receive mention), he goes so far as to argue that dissociation from the Nātha cult was a characteristic stance of these monks. The reasons for regarding them as the real upholders and carriers of Sri Lanka's Theravāda inheritance are on the whole strong. Quite in evidence in earlier epochs (for instance, Vedeha, who authored the notable 13th-century Pāli poetical com-

position, *Samantakūṭavaṇṇanā*, calls himself an *araññavāsin; cf. In Praise of Mount Samanta*, trans. by A. N. Hazlewood, London, 1986, Introduction), the essential *vanavāsi* outlook is a continuing inspiration to the serious practice of Buddhist renunciant religiousness among Sri Lankan monks (cf. M. Carrithers, *The Forest Monks of Sri Lanka: An Anthropological and Historical Study*, Delhi, 1986). In any event, the centrality ascribed to Nātha can be impugned on other grounds too. For example, the Sinhala panegyrical work on Rāhula's patron, King Parakramabāhu VI, *Pärakumbāsirita* (see text ed. with English trans. by K. D. P. Wickremasinghe, Colombo, 1970) encompasses no focal references to Nātha.

Several of the wider interpretative positions retained in *Buddha in the Crown* also appear on occasion inadequate or misconceived. The reiterated observation that those who turned to Avalokiteśvara or Nātha for *laukika* help, sought to "assuage" *dukkha* thereby, should leave readers who are sensitive to Theravāda doctrinal perspectives quite puzzled. Is it not necessary to disavow *kamma* in particular (and hence think outside those perspectives) in order to entertain such a position? Further, in adopting it Holt seems to disregard the "broad spectrum of meanings" the Theravāda conception of suffering as projected in *dukkha* entails (cf. J. W. Boyd, "Suffering in Theravada Buddhism," in *Suffering: Indian Perspectives*, ed. by K. N. Tiwari, Delhi, 1986). Clearly, the veneration of deities cannot be a means of assuaging the more inveterate manifestations of *dukkha*—suffering associated with transience and the conditioned character of our existence (*vipariṇāma-dukkha* and *saṅkhāra dukkah* respectively in Buddhaghosa's famous typology as expounded in the *Visuddhimagga*). No doubt, the immediate pain, grief and despair from which devotees *hope* to obtain relief by such means are also forms of suffering (*dukkha-dukkha* in the above typology). But the religiousness that comes into play here is apt to be seen by Sri Lankans themselves as devotions aimed at seeking blessings (or *śāntikarma*, cf. *Religiousness in Sri Lanka*, ed. by John Ross Carter, Colombo, 1979, p. 19), not *dukkha*-assuagement. On the other hand, it is perhaps useful to take notice of the fact that the Theravāda scriptural tradition sometimes projects very different perspectives on this whole issue: in a rationalistic spirit, the *Dhammapada* (verse 186) tends to trace the motivation behind cultic religiousness simply to fear (*bhaya*). Then again, Holt's readiness to admire and even give normative scope to the assimilative fusion of Buddhist and non-Buddhist ideas from the Gampola period onwards might not be fully shared by Sri Lankan Buddhists knowledgeable about their past. For that, after all, was a time of decline and decadence in local history. (It would be pertinent to

remark that Tantric beliefs, intermingled with which Avalokiteśvara veneration in some of its aspects first infiltrated Sri Lanka earlier, have in particular been decried as a source of unwholesome influence in several studies, cf. Charles Eliot, *Hinduism and Buddhism*, London, vol. II; N. Mudiyanse, *Mahayana Monuments in Ceylon*, Colombo, 1967, p. 71). Besides, the assimilative processes witnessed then (which of course resulted in the loss or at least the compromising of the historical integrity of Theravāda Buddhism, a clearly negative development in the eyes of Sinhala Buddhist traditionalists), were not in the main inspired by reflective endeavours to harmonize different religious viewpoints. To describe those processes as "syncretic" and "eclectic" (which Holt does), therefore, hardly appears justified or proper.

There are, finally, some rather curious oversights to be noted in the book's concluding remarks. The negative evaluations of Sri Lankan "Buddhist modernism" are for the most part unexceptionable if what is meant by that term is the chauvinist extremism of the likes of K. N. Jayatilleke (cf. R. Gombrich, *Theravada Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*, London, 1988, pp. 196–197). But it is necessary to point out that practising or interpreting Buddhism with a due regard to the spirit of our time is not reprehensible, nor for that matter strictly disallowed by Buddhist doctrinal principles. Indeed, though lost on social scientific thinking still wedded to the assumption that protest or Protestantism are the only inspiring sources of recent developments in Sri Lankan Buddhism, adaptive modernism in the sense just hinted might fairly be rooted in that old idea in Buddhist apologetics, "skillful means" (*upāya*; see *Digha Nikāya*, III: 220). In any event, why should *nibbāna* "here and now" be coupled with "Buddhist modernism"? This was an anciently upheld belief, basic to the Theravāda soteriology woven around the *arahant* ideal (cf. I. B. Horner, *The Early Buddhist Theory of Man Perfected*, London, 1936, p. 42; the religious idea that comes into play in this context, it is well to add, actually has parallels in practically all spiritually-oriented Indian systems, as witnessed by their common admission of the possibility "liberating oneself while living" or becoming a *jīvanmukta*) frequently encountered in Pāli texts (see, for example, *Dhammapada* verses 89, 402 which carry the revealing phrases *loke parinibbutā* and *eva khayam*). No doubt, to "outsiders," it will seem a visionary goal. But given their religious monuments and historical-literary traditions that attest to "living *arahants*" of yore, Sri Lankans themselves are apt to take a different view of attaining *nibbāna* "here and now." There is, moreover, little reason to be dismissive about the characteristic religiousness that that belief inspires—

inner self-culture which emphasizes meditation. For it sits at the very heart of Theravāda spirituality, and when engaged in seriously, it has salutary results, both on the individual and society. Besides, it is on the whole more vital to traditional Buddhist practice in Sri Lanka than the veneration of deities (George D. Bond's recent investigations into the place of meditation in the revival of Buddhism there earlier this century brings to the fore several instructive considerations on this score; see *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka: Religious Tradition, Reinterpretation, Response*, Columbia, S.C., 1988, chap. 4, 5, 6).

Clearly, then, there is room to argue against many of the positions taken in *Buddha in the Crown*: its core interpretations in particular are sometimes open to dispute, and may fairly be countered with other accountings. Still, the new contribution to the study of religious change in Sri Lanka presented in this book fully merits attentive reading. Given its overall focus—Mahāyānism in Sri Lanka's Theravāda setting, a hitherto insufficiently examined subject—it is a source of much factual information. And even those who cannot quite agree with them are likely to find the theoretical approaches developed and applied here often both distinctive and thought-provoking.

Vijitha Rajapakse

High Religion: A Cultural and Political History of Sherpa Buddhism, by Sherry B. Ortner. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989. pp. xxi + 245.12 illustrations and 3 maps. Cloth: $35. Paper: $12.95.

Sherry Ortner knows the Sherpa area of Nepal well. She spent seventeen months there on general field-work in 1966–68; and in 1976 she helped to make a film in the area. In 1978, she published the book for which she is best known: *Sherpas Through Their Rituals* (Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press). The book reviewed here is the result of field-work carried out again by the author between January and June, 1979. It is based mainly on information collected orally in the field during that period. However, considerable use has also been made by S. B. O. of M. Oppitz, *Geschichte und Sozialordnung der Sherpa* (Innsbruck-München, 1968), translated by a nameless student (p. 231), and of the *Shar-pa'i chos-byung sngon-med tshangs-pa'i dbyu-gu* (Junbesi-Nanterre, 1971), translated into English for her by P. Pranke and C. Huntington (p. 234). Seemingly, Sherry Ortner does not read Tibetan; and she does not read Nepali (p. 207).