CHARACTERISTICS OF BUDDHIST PILGRIMAGES IN SRI LANKA

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Although pilgrimages have been studied by geographers for many decades, we still are uncertain about the universality of certain basic geographic characteristics of this religious activity. It is true that Nolan (1983; 1984; forthcoming) has provided a wealth of data on Christian pilgrimages, especially in Western Europe, and several geographers have analyzed aspects of the hajj. But, there have been relatively few studies about groups in many other settings, such as the Muslims in the Philippines, the Christians in India, and the Hindus in Africa. We need to expand our collective knowledge about pilgrimages by studying them in a wide variety of cultural settings if we are to develop geographic generalizations about this distinctive form of religious behavior.

The goal of this paper is to provide more information about pilgrimages by examining three basic geographic questions as they pertain to Buddhist pilgrimages in Sri Lanka. Because answers to those questions are affected by inhering cultural conditions, this discussion commences with background information about the religious setting of Sri Lankan pilgrimages.

I. The Religious Setting

Almost 70 percent of the Sri Lankan population is Buddhist, according to the 1981 census (Table 1). Of the remainder, half is Hindu and a quarter each is Muslim and Christian. Generally the three religious groups are distinct ethnically and locationally.
Table 1: Religious Populations, Sri Lanka, 1981
Percentages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Buddhist</th>
<th>Hindu</th>
<th>Muslim</th>
<th>Christian</th>
<th>Other</th>
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<td>7.61</td>
<td>0.06</td>
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<tr>
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<td>9.9</td>
<td>11.8</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3.5</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalutara</td>
<td>84.3</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kandy</td>
<td>73.6</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matale</td>
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<td>11.6</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuwara Eliya</td>
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<td>50.3</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Galle</td>
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<td>3.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Matara</td>
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<td>2.6</td>
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<td>2.2</td>
<td>0.2#</td>
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<td>Jaffna</td>
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<td>85.0*</td>
<td>1.8#</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mannar</td>
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<td>27.2</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>42.1*</td>
<td>0.1</td>
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<td>Vavuniya</td>
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<td>68.7</td>
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<td>Mullaitivu</td>
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<tr>
<td>Batticaloa</td>
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<td>Amparai</td>
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<td>0.1</td>
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<td>Trincomalee</td>
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<td>Puttalam</td>
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<td>10.2</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td>0.1</td>
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<td>24.3</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>2.3</td>
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<td>Ratnapura</td>
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<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kegalle</td>
<td>85.2</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* = District with highest percentage per column
# = District with lowest percentage per column

Source: Sri Lankan Department of Census and Statistics, 1981
1. Distributions of Religious Groups

Not only are Buddhists the religious majority, but they are mostly members of the dominant ethnic group: the Sinhalese. Similarly, according to 1946 census data, the Sinhalese are generally Buddhists (Table 2, A). Consequently, it is not surprising that these two characteristics display a high degree of areal correlation, as measured by a rank correlation at the district scale (Table 2, B). Likewise, the distributions of ethnicity and religious affiliation by districts display a high degree of similarity (Fig. 1 and 2).

Table 2: Religious Affiliations by Ethnic Group

A. Percentages per Ethnic Group, 1946

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Group</th>
<th>Buddhist</th>
<th>Hindu</th>
<th>Muslim</th>
<th>Christian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sinhalese, Low Country</td>
<td>88</td>
<td></td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sinhalese, Kandyan</td>
<td></td>
<td>99</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Tamils, Sri Lankan</td>
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<td></td>
<td>80.6</td>
<td>16.5</td>
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<td>Tamils, Indian</td>
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<td></td>
<td>89.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moors, Sri Lankan</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moors, Indian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Malays</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>92</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Burghers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>96</td>
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</table>

B. Rank Correlation for 24 Districts, 1981

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Group</th>
<th>Buddhist</th>
<th>Hindu</th>
<th>Muslim</th>
<th>Christian</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sinhalese</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.67</td>
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<td>Tamils</td>
<td></td>
<td>.99</td>
<td></td>
<td>.62</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>.40</td>
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</table>

Sources: Sri Lankan Department of Census and Statistics, 1981, and author
Fig. 1: Ethnic Districts, 1981
Fig. 2: Religious Districts, 1981
Hindus are primarily Tamils, which includes the two groups classified as Sri Lankan Tamils and Indian Tamils (Table 2, A). The ancestors of the first group probably came to the island in the second century B.C., while those of the second category were brought into the country to work in colonial plantations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although not all Tamils are Hindus, virtually all Hindus are either Sri Lankan or Indian Tamils. The spatial distribution of Hindus, therefore, resembles the ethnic patterns of the Tamil population.

The origins of Muslims are a little more diverse. Those who were classified once as Sri Lankan Moors are descendants of Arabic traders, many of whom settled in the country during the eleventh century. Even though the so-called Indian Moors came from India, their ancestors were also Arabic traders. Other Muslims are the ethnic Malays, who are descendants of seventeenth century Javanese and nineteenth century Malayans. However, these distinctions are not made in the 1981 census; thus, the pattern of Muslim concentrations is essentially the same as that of Moors.

Ethnically, the Christians in Sri Lanka are Burghers (the Eurasian descendants from the colonial periods) and Sinhalese and Tamil who converted since the early sixteenth century. Because of this ethnic diversity, the distribution of Christians is less related to ethnicity than the other religions. Generally Christian populations tend to be concentrated along the western coast.

2. General Pilgrimage Patterns

With this rather pronounced regionalization of the religious communities, it would seem that pilgrimage places and patterns of movement would also be locationally separated. Certainly pilgrimages to foreign destinations differ because each community is attracted to places important to its own historical background. For Buddhists, the four most holy places are in the Gangetic plain where Buddha was born, attained Enlightenment, preached his first sermon, and passed away (respectively at Lumbini, Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, and Kushinagara). Pilgrimages to the major Saivite centers in south India (such as Madurai, Rameswaram, and Chidambaram) are considered obligatory for Hindus (Pathmanathan 1979, 150). Muslims who fulfill the five duties of Islam go on the hajj (to Mecca). And, the foreign pilgrimage places for Roman Catholics are Rome, Lourdes, and other famous Marian shrines in Europe.

In contrast, within Sri Lanka there is not a high degree of regionalization of pilgrimage places according to their religious associations. There is a tendency for Buddhist pilgrimage places to be in the central portion of the island, for Hindu sacred sites to be along the northern and eastern coasts, and for Christian holy places to be along the west coast; but there are numerous exceptions
to these generalities. Furthermore, some sacred places are actually the common destination for pilgrims of different religions. For example, pilgrims from all four faiths go to the mountain top called Sri Pada or Adam’s Peak. Likewise, Muslems and a few Christians, as well as the predominant Buddhists and Hindus, journey to Kataragama. Also, some Hindus, Muslems, and Buddhists join the multitude of Christian pilgrims at Kocchikade.

Obviously generalizations about the distributions of pilgrimage places lack precision because it is difficult to specify which sites properly belong in the defined set. Lacking data on pilgrimage travel and lacking an objective definition of what constitutes a “pilgrimage,” it is impossible to specify exactly which places constitute “the set” of pilgrimage places in Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, because this paper deals with aspects of Buddhist pilgrimages, an attempt is made to identify the major destinations for pilgrims who are Buddhists.

3. Buddhist Pilgrimage Places (Fig. 3)

One procedure for identifying major pilgrimage places is to look for agreement among previous enumerations. For this paper, five sources were consulted. One list, prepared by the Sri Lankan Department of Buddhist Affairs (1986), contains all the places officially designated as “sacred areas and sites” (Table 3). The other lists were obtained from the writings of DE SILVA (1980, 240 – 242), GOMBRICH (1971, 108 – 110), KEKULAWALA (1979, 54 – 63), and SIEVERS (1985, 265). As indicated by Table 3, all of the places listed by DE SILVA were also identified as important by two or more other sources; therefore, in this paper these ten places are regarded as the major pilgrimage destinations (Fig. 3). It should be noted that several sites are considered especially sacred within the Anuradhapura area; but at this map scale they are not displayed individually so the total number of pilgrimage places does not appear to sum to the “sixteen great places” or *solos mahasthana* (DE SILVA 1980; GOMBRICH 1971, 109; KEKUAWALA 1979, 61).

It is within this religious context that three questions about the geographic characteristics of Buddhist pilgrimages are posed: (1) Is the relationship between number of pilgrims to a site and the distances they travel similar to the distance decay associated with other types of nodal places? (2) Do patterns of pilgrimage movement change with time? (3) Does the nature of pilgrimage create greater social interaction among participants than assemblages at other nodal centers?
Fig. 3: Major Buddhist Pilgrimage Places
Source: See Table 3.
Table 3: Buddhist Pilgrimage Place Listed (X) by Indicated Author

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name and Location</th>
<th>B. A.</th>
<th>dS.</th>
<th>G.</th>
<th>K.</th>
<th>S.</th>
<th>No. on Fig. 3</th>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>XX*</td>
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<td>Aukana</td>
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<td>Dambulla</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Dantadhata, Kandy</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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</table>

*XX = Top category (by SIEVERS)

Sources:
B.A. = Department of Buddhist Affairs, 1986
dS. = DE SILVA, 1980
G. = GOMBRICH, 1971
K. = KEKULAWALA, 1979
S. = SIEVERS, 1985
II. The Role of Distance in Pilgrimages

The first question concerns the number of pilgrims that travel various distances. If pilgrimage behavior is similar to movement to other types of nodal places, then the relationship between the number of travelers and length of trip should display a distance decay. There are indications, however, that in certain circumstances the aggregate behavior of pilgrims may not match this fundamental geographic relationship. This is because, for some pilgrims, the purpose of travel is not merely to arrive at the sacred destination; the journey itself is an act of worship. The merits of pilgrimage are increased by enduring the sacrifices encountered over long distances, especially when accomplished on foot. Unfortunately, the extent to which such a sacrificial element affects pilgrimages in general is not known.

Does pilgrimage behavior of Buddhists in Sri Lanka contrast with that of travelers to other kinds of centers? An easy answer is unattainable because of the lack of quantitative data. Nevertheless, an answer is partly provided by examining the purpose for going on a Buddhist pilgrimage.

Basically, a Theravada Buddhist undertakes a pilgrimage as a part of what can be termed “going to worship” (vandanave yama). Worshipping involves making an offering to the Buddha at a dagoba, at a bodhi tree, and/or in a room containing a statue of the Buddha. Because a dagoba (or stupa) contains a physical relic of the Buddha, worship at such a place is felt to be equivalent to honoring the living Buddha and, therefore, especially meritorious (KEKULAWALA 1979, 44). From the Buddhist perspective, several of the holiest places in the country are the sites of ancient dagobas.

The bodhi tree also has a high level of sanctity because it is associated with the Buddha’s attaining Enlightenment. Since it is believed that the Maha Bodhi at Anuradhapura is a branch brought from the original tree at Bodh Gaya, it is especially sacred.

No temple is without a statue or image of Buddha; therefore, a temple per se tends to be less distinct and have less attraction than a dagoba or bodhi tree. Nevertheless, the famous unenclosed Samadhi in Anuradhapura and, to a lesser degree, the large Avukana statue are highly revered.

For many Buddhists, worshipping at these sacred places may require their traveling a considerable distance because major sites may not be located near their homes. The reason for making such a trip, therefore, is merely to move from the place of residence to the site where one or more sacred objects are located. Nevertheless, as stated above, such travel is called a pilgrimage because the term is equated with “going to worship.”
It is important to note that the trip itself is usually not considered part of an act of worship. And normally the route constitutes the most direct connection — in other words, not necessarily along a path regarded as a sacred way (STODDARD 1979/80; TANAKA 1977). One exception to this generalization might be the trail and flights of stairs leading to Sri Pada. Likewise, although increasing the distance or hardship of travel is not a major objective for most pilgrims to Kataragama, some regard walking the final kilometers as more meritorious than driving the entire way (CARTMAN 1957, 114). Also, when devout travelers pass the Kalutara bodhi tree, they will stop a few minutes to honor the Buddha and leave a donation; but, in contrast, local residents do not necessarily stop each time they go by the sacred site during their routine activities. This contrast implies that distance (and infrequency) does, indeed, make the occasion more special.

In spite of these situations implying some merit in sacrificial travel, generally the purpose of Buddhist pilgrimages in Sri Lanka is not to engage in a type of worship involving movement per se. Instead, the reason for travel is to arrive at the sacred destination in much the same manner as trips to other nodal places. Consequently, the aggregate flow of pilgrims undoubtedly displays the distance decay function. In fact, such a relationship has been reported for Theravada Buddhist pilgrimages elsewhere (as cited by PREUSS 1974, 166, for Thailand).

III. Changes in the Nodal Regions of Pilgrimages

If pilgrimages are regarded as similar to trips taken to other kinds of nodal centers, then another question arises: Do patterns of pilgrimage movement change with time? We know that, with changes in communication and transportation, the size and relative importance of many kinds of nodal regions and centers have undergone modifications. For example, in many regions of the world, the relative economic importance of small trade centers has declined as big cities have become more attractive. This, in turn, has altered the hierarchical relationships among trade centers and their associated nodal regions. Is the same kind of change occurring among pilgrimage sites and their holy hinterlands?

On the one hand, it can be argued that, because the sanctity of many sites is based on their historic association with the Buddha, their importance would remain constant through time. Although the total number of pilgrims attracted to various sites might increase through time (because of a larger Buddhist population and a more accessible transportation system), the relative sizes of pilgrimages to various centers would not necessarily change.
On the other hand, some places, such as Kataragama, have become increasingly popular in recent decades (WIRTZ 1966). Such changes may result partly from the reinforcing nature of attractiveness. As certain places attract more pilgrims than others, the more popular ones then may be regarded as more important and, hence, attract even greater numbers of worshippers. More extensive communication networks, as well as improved transportation facilities, would facilitate the growing popularity of special places. In other words, a differential growth of pilgrimages to various sacred places would be very similar to the uneven attractiveness of nodal centers in economic, political, and other non-religious systems.

There are indications, however, that sometimes popularity may diminish the sanctity of a place and hence its religious attractiveness. This relationship between popularity and attractiveness seems to be illustrated by the decrease in the number of pilgrims to a suddenly popular rural (mainly Christian) shrine. In the early 1970s, a Catholic shrine in the small village of Devagama began attracting increasing numbers of pilgrims; but after 1975, the sizes of pilgrimages diminished. Although he speculates about several contributing factors for this decline, STIRRAT (1979, 100) reports that the commercialization associated with the masses of pilgrims had a negative effect on some "devoted" pilgrims. They felt the popularization of the place diminished its sanctity, so they were less inclined to visit the place than previously.

To definitively answer this question about changes in pilgrimage regions would require a tremendous amount of information about origins and destinations of pilgrims for both contemporary and historical times. Such data are not available; and, therefore, conclusions based on objective measurements are also impossible.

Furthermore, even if origin-destination data were collected, the lack of a standard definition of "pilgrimage" would complicate analyses. As an illustration, consider all the persons who travel along the coastal highway southwards from Colombo and who break their journey briefly to worship at the Kalutara bodhi tree. If each such worshipping traveler is defined as a pilgrim, then undoubtedly this site has a larger religious hinterland now than 50 years ago, both in absolute numbers and in comparison with local temples. In contrast, if a definition of a pilgrim excludes persons who merely "visit" a sacred site while on a multiple-purpose trip, then the number of "true" pilgrims to the Kalutara bodhi tree may not have changed much.

In spite of an imprecise definition and the lack of quantitative data, there is a general sense that the major sacred sites in Sri Lanka now attract more pilgrims from longer distances than they did previously. This shift in flow pat-
terns results primarily from the diminished friction of distance, but it probably relates also to other factors. The increase in mass communication has popularized events that were little known in remote villages several decades ago. In addition, people now think in terms of larger units of areal organization for economic, social, and political institutions. Winslow (1982, 199), in her regional analysis of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, summarized the changes by declaring that the shift from local organizations to extra-village centers did not necessarily mean the decline of village activities; but their characteristics were altered as regional and national centers became the foci for economic and political organizations. It appears that the same kind of modifications are occurring among the nodal regions of pilgrimages.

IV. Pilgrimages as a Unifying Force

The third question raised here is this: Does the nature of pilgrimage create greater social interaction among participants than assemblages at other nodal centers? According to Turner (1973, 194), pilgrims leave the hierarchical social relationships of their structured society and enter into a normative communitas that encourages social interaction among participants. Enroute and at a sacred site, pilgrims enjoy an unstructured and undifferentiated community of equal persons.

In his study of Theravada Buddhist pilgrimages in Thailand, however, Preuss (1974) did not find such a transformation in social relations. He states (204 & 205):

In spite of the spirit of ‘brotherhood’ recognized and encouraged by shrine monks and custodians, the residues of social structure still remain ... These aspects of structure refer to status differences in the secular realm which are symbolically validated within the religious context of an assembly of Buddhist devotees ... While these groups of devotees may be temporarily united spatially (and perhaps emotionally) during the mass veneration of the sacred object, in general there is no social mixing between groups or between pilgrims of different regional and economic backgrounds.

In Sri Lanka, Winslow (1982, 193 – 199) came to a similar conclusion. She noted that participants who travel as a group may gain internal unity, but this does not apply to interaction between groups. In fact, when members of different religions go to the same site, they may experience more divisiveness — partly because of the conflict in use of the site.

One of the geographic implications of these observations is that pilgrimages may not generate any more feelings of unity and equality among participants
than, for example, hikers at a scenic spot, music-lovers at an operatic performance, or academicians at a national meeting. In other words, the social interactions of pilgrims may not be much different from those of other travelers assembled at a center because of a common interest.

It should be noted that these results come from the impressions of two Western scholars and are not based on detailed data concerning the amount and type of social relationships among pilgrims in Sri Lanka. This conclusion about the lack of greater social interaction among pilgrims than travelers to other nodal centers, therefore, should be regarded as only tentative.

V. Conclusions

The topic of pilgrimage is fascinating for geographic study because the spatial behavior of some participants does differ from many other kinds of human activities. One difference is that pilgrims in certain circumstances do not attempt to minimize distance, as assumed by the least-effort principle. Some pilgrims prefer longer and more arduous journeys rather than shorter and faster routes. Likewise, pilgrimages that resemble long circumambulations around sacred areas involve movement as a form of worship rather than merely a necessity for getting from one location to another. Thus, it is known that under certain conditions pilgrimage behavior differs from other types of movement to nodal places; and it is important that scholars of pilgrimages stress these contrasting behavioral patterns.

Nevertheless, geographers must be careful that they do not overstate differences that may not apply to all types of pilgrimages. Pilgrimage activity observed within one cultural setting may not be typical of that in other settings. Consequently, it is essential that generalizations about pilgrimages be based on numerous studies which involve a diversity of conditions.

It seems that pilgrimages by Buddhists in Sri Lanka do not differ greatly from the patterns of movement associated with other types of nodal centers. Unfortunatly this conclusion is only tentative because it is not substantiated by empirical data. Nevertheless, it does suggest information that needs to be incorporated into the growing body of knowledge about pilgrimages.

Notes

Summary

Although pilgrimages have been studied by geographers for many decades, we still are uncertain about the universality of some basic geographic characteristics of this religious activity. We need to expand our collective knowledge about pilgrimages if we are to develop geographic generalizations about this distinctive form of religious behavior. This paper adds to our pool of information by examining Buddhist pilgrimages in Sri Lanka.

Almost 70 percent of the Sri Lanka population is Buddhist, according to the 1981 census. Not only are Buddhists the religious majority, but they are mostly members of the dominant ethnic group: the Sinhalese. Thus, the distributions of ethnicity and religious affiliations display a high degree of similarity (as measured at the district level).

The ethnic and regional patterns of Hindus and Muslims are also distinct. It would seem that, with this rather pronounced regionalization of the religious communities, pilgrimage places and patterns of movement would also be locationally separated; but such is not the case. In fact, some places, such as Sri Pada (Adam’s Peak) and Kataragama, are the destinations of pilgrims from more than one religious group. The major pilgrimage places for Buddhists are shown on Fig. 3.

Within this religious context, three questions are posed: (1) Is the relationship between number of pilgrims to a site and the distances they travel similar to the distance decay associated with other types of nodal places? (2) Do patterns of pilgrimage movement change with time? (3) Does the nature of pilgrimage create greater social interaction among participants than assemblages at other nodal centers?

The lack of empirical data prevents analyses that would provide precise conclusions. Tentative answers to the first two questions are “yes” and to the last one “no”. In other words, it seems that pilgrimages by Buddhists in Sri Lanka do not differ greatly from the patterns of movement associated with other types of nodal centers.
Zusammenfassung: 
Eigenarten Buddhistischer Pilgerfahrten in Sri Lanka

Obwohl Pilgerfahrten schon seit vielen Jahrzehnten von Geographen erforscht wurden, weiß man noch sehr wenig über grundlegende geographische Besonderheiten dieser religiösen Aktivität. Wir müssen unser Wissen über Pilgerfahrten erweitern, wenn wir geographische Schlußfolgerungen über diese besondere Form religiösen Verhaltens entwickeln wollen.


Auch bei Hindus und Mohammedanern zeigen sich ethnische und regionale Besonderheiten. In Anbetracht einer ziemlich ausgeprägten regionalen Konzentration der Religionsgemeinschaften könnte man annehmen, daß ihre Pilgerorte und Pilgerfahrten auch räumlich voneinander getrennt sind; dies ist jedoch nicht der Fall. Tatsächlich sind manche Orte, wie Sri Pada (Adam’s Peak) und Kataragama, Ziele von Pilgern aus mehr als einer Religionsgruppe.

Die wichtigsten Pilgerorte sind auf Abb. 3 ersichtlich.

In diesem Zusammenhang werden drei Fragen gestellt: (1) Nimmt bei Pilgerfahrten ähnlich wie bei nichtreligiösen Reisen die Anzahl der Besucher mit zunehmender Entfernung ab? (2) Ändert sich das Muster der Pilgerfahrt im Laufe der Zeit? (3) Ruft die Fahrt zu einer Pilgerstätte stärkere soziale Kontakte zwischen den Teilnehmern hervor als dies beim Zusammentreffen von Menschen an anderen Zielorten der Fall ist?

Der Mangel an empirischen Daten erlaubt keine Analysen mit genauen Schlußfolgerungen. Die ersten beiden Fragen sind vorerst zu bejahen, die letzte Frage muß verneint werden. Mit anderen Worten, es scheint, daß sich buddhistische Pilgerfahrten im Stil nicht wesentlich von Bewegungsmustern unterscheiden, die mit Fahrten zu anderen Zielorten verbunden sind.
Bibliography


