Cultural Absorption; A Practical Way to Prevent Religious and Cultural Conflicts

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Religious and Cultural Conflicts of the World

Cultural and Religious conflicts[2] play destructive roles in the modern world. They are serious obstacles for any society to maintain their prolonged peace. Every culture has its own identity. As a result of actions, interactions and reactions which are taken to protect that '*identity*' from other cultural influences, cultural and religious crises appear in a great level. Sometimes, those situations represent Political features.

Though these conflicts have a history more than thousand years, today it has become dangerous as a global menace. Number of Political groups use their religions or culture for gathering geo political momentum by motivating the people against others' rights. Religious and cultural fundamentalism is one of results of this trend. We have experiences not only about Taliban who vanished the great Buddhist heritage in Afghanistan but also ISSI terrorists who try to build an Islamic state in Middle East by rejecting other cultures. Otherwise Western countries implemented dire war series against Afghanistan and Iraq in the last decade. They generalized their activities as a reaction for the terrorism and political dictators. However those destructive conflicts made uncountable bad effects on human values. Unfortunately Political, Religious and cultural sectors have been combined together and it is very difficult to distinguish from one to another. As a result of that, Political decisions are influenced by religion or cultural feelings. In addition religious and cultural activities often play a political role. This evil situation leads to improve the distrust among religious and cultural groups.

Religion, Culture & Their Identity

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[2] Conflict means to fight, contend, do battle, strive, struggle with, to engage in battle, to assault etc. See, **The Oxford English Dictionary**, Second edition, Vol.iii, ed. J. A.Simpson & E. S. C. Weiner, 1989, Oxford, Clarendon press, p.713.

There are more than hundreds of religions in the world, believed by different social groups as their salvation path.[3] Every religion was shaped by the man for the betterment of the society and life after death. Their shape may be changed but containing is mostly same with each other. The meaning of '*Religion*' is can be mentioned as follows.

1) A state of life bound by monastic vows; the condition of one who is a member of a religious order
2) A particular monastic or religious order or rule
3) Action or conduct indicating a belief in, reverence for, and desire to please, a divine ruling power; the exercise or practice of rites or observances implying this
4) A particular system of faith and worship
5) Recognition on the part of man of some higher unseen power as having control of his destiny, and as being entitled to obedience, reverence, and worship; the general mental and moral attitude resulting from this belief, with reference to its effect upon the individual or the community; personal or general acceptance of this feeling as a standard of spiritual and practical life.[4]

Culture is the most important and powerful equipment which can be seen in every ethnic groups which help to maintain the religious body on the society and continuing it. Generally '*identity*' create and foster by the culture. When a religion mixed with a social group and their culture, it is created a common identity among them. It is very sensitive matter due to human feelings, respect, rejection, agreement or disagreement. In the practical level one religion can be made different cultural identities all over the world by influence of geographical factors, regional differences, economic or political situations. Though people unsuccessful to understand it, the beauty of the world deposits on that diversity. When we consider the past more than thousand years ago, enough examples can be gathered on those guide us to get a knowledge about how our ancestors manage their religious and cultural problems safety, peacefully and strategically. This paper shows some selected examples related with Archaeological and Historical context.

Cultural Absorption and Localization

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[3] Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Chinese folk religion are five largest religious groups of the world. *en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion*

[4] **The Oxford English Dictionary**, Second edition, Vol.xiii, ed. J. A.Simpson & E. S. C. Weiner, 1989, Oxford, Clarendon press, p.569.

Generally '*absorption*' means the swallowing up or disappearance of things through their inclusion in or assimilation to something else: incorporation in something else.[5] The four examples have been taken into consideration here related with '*cultural absorption*' and '*localization*'.[6] It is important to make sure the idea about these concepts in this regard. Cultural absorption means that the process of taking something like features or activities of an external culture into another culture. It is not a total convert but applying some cultural features as it is fitted. In an absorption process early cultural activities or features can be changed or reshaped. Otherwise selected features of any culture may implement in another culture under a new context.

Localization shows a close relationship with absorption. It is very difficult to show a wide difference among those concepts. Convert of external cultural features to local features or acceptance by local culture can be seen in the process of localization. In this context similar cultural usages can be represent with different purposes, utilities or interpretations.

1. Cist Burial Tradition & Buddhist Tradition of Relic Chamber

Cist burial tradition is one of the types of Megalithic burials which can be seen since 01st millennium B.C in number of countries including India and Sri Lanka. Its material shape is very close to a stone box made by using four stone slabs with a cap stone. Remains of selected bones and some properties such as pots, beads, precious or semi-precious stones, metal, tools etc, which might have belonged to the man who passed away have been deposited inside of the cist and the cist is sealed covering by the cap stone. Though there were other burial types called *Menhir*, *Urn*, *Extended*, *Pit* and *Cairn circle* etc, *cist burial* was the most popular one in both countries. In Sri Lanka, Archaeologists have discovered more than 50 of *cist burial* sites.[7] This tradition shows pre Buddhist rituals & beliefs about the soul and the life after death.

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[5] **The Oxford English Dictionary**, Second edition, Vol.i, ed. J. A.Simpson & E. S. C. Weiner, 1989, Oxford, Clarendon press, p.52.

[6] Absorption is not a sharing. Shared culture is an another concept can be consider in another context. Some time it may be a post result of absorption.

[7] For further details about megalithic culture see, Seneviratne, S. 1984. The Archaeology of the Megalithic Black and Red ware complex in Sri Lanka, **Ancient Ceylon,** no.05, Colombo: Department of Archaeology. pp. 237-303. Seneviratne, S. & D. K. Jayaratne. 2006. A Shared Ritual Cultural Symbol; The Megalithic memorials of South India & Sri Lanka, **Alternative Archaeology**, ed. D.K. Jayaratne & others, University of Peradeniya: Department of Archaeology. pp. 01-14.

When the Buddhism flourished in Northern India in 06th Century B.C. and at the time of introducing it to Sri Lanka in 03rd Century B.C., cist burial culture was popular. As we mentioned above it depends on worshiping souls or ancestors due to fear, respect or hoping the protection and prosperity.[8] After appearance of Buddhism, these pre Buddhist practices and concepts were absorbed & converted by the culture according to Buddhist thoughts. Cist Culture did not disappear but it happened to change its early conceptual background. In the Buddhist culture, cists have been made for recline the relics of four rare persons who achieved sublime goals in their salvation path. Now, structural similarities can be seen in both cultures and relic chambers were well planned than cist burials. Conceptual context has been totally changed. Pre Buddhist burial culture have made due to the belief of life after death. But relic chambers are very difficult to consider as burials. Its utility is worshiping & commemoration of the persons who stop the life after death.

However, material culture of those two practices is very common. For an example beads made of carnelian, aget, gold & quartz, Jewelry, gold and bronze metal, bones, various kinds of potteries were found in excavating of burial sites. As a result of excavation of the *Preprawa* stupa situated in *Basti* district, Uttar Pradesh of India, gold jewelry, pearl, precious and semi-precious stones, beads made of corral & semi precious stones, mica, bronze plates have been discovered.[9] This example is very common for the most of burial and stupa sites.

These similarities show us the nature of cultural absorption. It helps to implement of a culture by getting experiences of previous cultures. Any culture cannot forward a prolonged journey by rejecting whole values belong to previous cultures.

2. Kushana Dynasty and Their Religious Freedom

'*Kushānas*' was a well-known dynasty which ruled North Western India in the 1st Century A.D. for two Centuries. They belonged to a tribe called '*Yueh-ti*' lived in Central Asia and as a result of defeating from other tribes they migrated to the East. In the middle

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[8] S. Seneviratne has discussed about the concept of life after death,See, Seneviratne, S. 1990. A Life after Death; Continuity and change in the religious symbolism of the Early Iron Age, **Perspectives in Archaeology; Leelananda prematilleke festschrift**, University of Peradeniya: Department of Archaelogy. pp. 145-152.
[9] Mitra, D. 1971. **Buddhist Monuments**, Culcutta: Sahitya Samsad.

of the 02nd century B.C. '*Yueh-ti*' tribe could captured the ruling power in Bactria.[10] The Golden Era of *Kushāna* dynasty came into existence during 1st and 02nd Century A.D. *Vashishka*, *Huvishka*, *Kanishka* and *Vāsudeva* are some of memorable rulers who expanded the boundaries of *Kushāna* dynasty unprecedentedly.

When the time of their arrival to India, there was a very sensitive religious background in North Western region. Its people worshiped at hundreds of gods originated in India and came from Greece, Rome, Persia and Babylonia. So that, if *Kushāna*s wanted to build a peaceful kingdom they happened to win the will of all kind of devotees. As well as they happened to address all hearts of belief. As a fruitful tactic to succeed this challenge *Kushāna*s motivated to produce coins with images of popular gods respected by the various cultural groups. *Vishnu*, *Shiva*, *Lakshmi* were local gods and *Vādo*, *Athsho*, *Agni* and *Māo* were Persian gods.[11] *Pharro* was the fire god and the mother god who introduced as *Nānā*, *Nāniā* and *Nānā shāo* were Sumerian gods.[12] *Helios*, the sun god represented the Greece. Not only those gods but also the Buddha, the greatest universal person, has been represented in different styles including seating and sitting postures.[13]

When we interpret *Kushāna* coins, have to raise important questions about their represents of gods. What was the purpose? Was there a benefit for them and their politics? Answer is 'yes, they had'. That was making a peaceful country and powerful dynasty. *Kushāna*s were not Hindus or Greeks but sensitive rulers who could identify the pulse of the nation. That is why they represented and paid homage to all kind of gods without any rejection. Their activity can be identified as a *cultural absorption* and a *localization* and it was supportive them for establish in the Indian society.

3) Popularity of Lord Buddha and Hindu Gods

With the expansion of Buddhism in South India, it was a severe problem for Hindus especially who were the devotees of God *Vishnu*.[14] They happened to protect *Vishnu* from the popularity of *Lord Buddha.* According to our historical knowledge,

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[10] Bactria located in North western region of Inda. Its Boundaries are the Oxus river and the Hindukush.

[11] Prematilleke, L.P. 2001. **Coins of Ancient India** (Purana Indiyawe Kasi), Institute of Sri Lankan Culture. For more details, See, Rapson, E. J. 1897. **Indian Coins**, Strassburg: Verlag Von Learl J. Trubner, p. 18; Bidyabinod, B. B. 1923. **Supplementary in the Indian Museum, Culcutta**, Vol. I, Culcutta: Superintendent government printing, pp. 22-28.

[12] Prematilleke, Ibid. 2001.

[13] This figures are considered as the oldest representations of Lord Buddha.

[14] Hindus can be categorized for two main groups as Shiva devotees and Vishnu devotees.

Hindus are dire devotees lived in a solid religious context. So that, they had to make a decision to solve the newly problem without any conflict. At last, they found an attractive solution. It was a new avatar of god *Vishnu*, the protector of the world, calling '*Buddha avatār*'.[15] Avatar is a concept which mostly use in Hinduism. Literally the term means 'a descent' and suggests the idea of a deity coming down from heaven to earth.[16]Further more due to the contest and strived for keeping popularity of god Vishnu they interpreted Lord Buddha's function with distorting by adding false hoods. According to the Kinsley,

'...As the *Buddha*, *Vishnu* acted to delude those who already deserved punishment for their bad\deeds. Deceived by the *Buddha*'s false teachings, these individuals renounced the Vedas and traditional Hinduism, thus earning punishment in hell or in inferior births. In a number of later texts, *Vishnu*'s Buddha avatāra is interpreted positively. He is said to have assumed this form in order to teach nonviolence and gentleness to the World….'[17]

So that today *Vishnu* has ten avatārs. This example says that creative people make creative solutions for serious problems having prevented growing conflicts.

After 12th Century A.D. population of Hindus in Sri Lanka increased with the arrival of migrations from Southern India time to time.[18] However, as a result of that Hinduism and Hindu gods were very popular here. Its rapid increasing was a considerable and unexpected thing and the Buddhist monks happened to make a reaction against it. During more than 2000 years Sinhalese Buddhists were very peaceful and respectable nation. Their solution was '*localization*'. They converted Hindu gods as *Buddha*'s devotees. Hindu gods including *Vishnu*, *Shiva*, *Brahma*, *Ganesha* and *Skandha* had been located top of the entrances and around the upper part of *Makara torana*. Their duty was to produce the protection and safety for devotees. So that, Hindu gods became not only Buddhists but also protectors of the Buddhism. Actually this usage is a tactic but it helps to keep the religious harmony of the society.

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[15] Actually Lord Buddha is not a avatar of any god. He was a member of Indian society who achieved his sublime goals. So tha, the concept of Buddha avatar is a distort of early Buddhist concepts.

[16] Kinsley, D. 1993. **The Encyclopedia of Religion**, ed. M. Eliade, Vol. I, New York: Macmillan Library Reference USA, p. 14.

[17] Kinsley, Op.cit, 1993, p. 15.

[18] This time space is included medieval and post medieval period of Sri Lankan history. It was a transition period of socio, economic, political and religious sectors of the Island.

4) Avalokiteshwara as a Theravada Bodhisattva

As we know there are two major branches of Buddhism Theravada and Mahayana. Several times in the past, Mahayana tradition made attempts to take root in Sri Lanka expanding their teaching using different ways. It was not a cake walk with Theravada monks and their sponsors.[19] However, some of Mahayana concepts could be developed in Theravada tradition with coexistence. Worship of *Avalokiteshwara* is the best example regarding this matter.

Avalokiteshwara, son of Lord *Amitābhaya* lived in *Sukhāvati* heaven, was very famous for healing diseases, produce protection for mariners and giving husbands for widows. He especially associated with the principle of compassion, is the most popular figure in the pan-Asian Mahayana Buddhist pantheon and has played a significant role in distinctive local traditions through out Buddhist Asia.[20] In coastal area like Weligama, Tiriyāya, Situlpahuva, Delft and Potuvil *Avalokiteshwara* worshiping had been applied.[21] Mihintale, Dambegoda, Weheragala and Abhayagiriya are some of Buddhist monasteries in which that tradition could be seen inside the country. According to the Theravada tradition, there is not a Bodhisattva called *Avalokiteshwara*, but *Maitreya*.[22] When increasing the popularity of worship of *Avalokiteshwara* due to economic and regional religious trends Theravada monks happened to give a space for him in their temples, even mihintale, the cradle of Sinhalese Buddhist culture.[23] But Theravada monks couldn't make a local identity for *Avalokiteshwara* during the middle and late Anuradhapura period. However after 12th Century A.D. at the first time of Sri Lankan history a new bodhisattva called '*Nātha*' can be identified. *Nātha* concept is the result of absorption and localization of *Avalokiteshwara* worship in a farsighted vision. In Gampola and Kandyan periods, god *Nātha* was the chief god of Sri Lanka, Even today, Nātha devala perahera marches after the Maligawe perahera and it shows the significance of god *Nātha* among other gods such as *Vishnu*, *Kataragama* and *Pattini*. Fortunately or unfortunately many of

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[19] There were only few kings who sponsored for the Mahayana. The Majority of the society specially kings and monks made their fullest support to reject and iron out the Mahayana vision.

[20] Birnbaum, R. 1993. **The Encyclopedia of Religion**, ed. M. Eliade, Vol. i, New York: Macmillan Library Reference USA, p.11.

[21] Awalokiteshvara statues and some inscriptions has been mentioned about pay homage at Awalokiteshvara have been discovered from these sites by Archaeologists.

[22] Maitreya is the famous bodhisattva in Theravada tradition and number of statues belongs to Anuradhapura period have been discovered.

[23] Trikayastawa inscription has found from Mihintale. It shows solid evidences about Mahayana concepts related with Dharmakāya, Nirmanakāya and Sambhogakāya.

people don't know the origin of god *Nātha* and his Mahayana relationship. According to the beliefs, god *Nātha* is the bodhisattva who is waiting for next enlightenment. This is a fine instance for internal *cultural absorption* and *localization*.

no	Place	medium	Circa (A.D)	Seated	Standing	Figure
1	Ambalantota	Gneiss	07		•	59B & D
2	-	Bronze	07-08		•	60C
3	-	Ungilt Bronze	07-08		•	60D
4	Timbiriveva	Dolomote marble	07-08		•	61B
5	Tiriyaya	Bronze	07-08		•	61C & D
6	Budumuttewa	Dolomite marble	07-08		•	63E-G
7	-	Bronze	07-08		•	67E
8	Dambegoda	Dolomite marble	08-09		•	68A & B
9	Sitlpahuva	Gneiss	08		•	69B
10	Mudu maha viharaya	Dolomite marble	09-10		•	70F-H
11	British museum	Bronze	09	•		77B
12	Linden museum	Bronze	09-10	•		77C
13	Polonnaruwa	Dolomite marble	09	•		77D
14	Kandy	Ungilt Bronze	09	•		78A
15	Veragala	Guilt Bronze	09-10	•		78B & C
16	Galevela	Solid Cast Bronze	09-10	•		78D & F
17	Boston museum	Ungilt Bronze	08	•		79A
18	British museum	Ungilt Bronze	09-10	•		79B
19	British museum	Ungilt Bronze	09-10	•		79C
20	Metropolitan museum	Ungilt Bronze	09	•		D & E
21	Buduruwagala	Gneiss	09-10		•	81B & C

| 22 | Weligama | Gneiss | 10-11 | | • | 82B |

Chart 01 – Some Avalokiteshwara statues have been found from Sri Lanka

(Vide, U. V. Schroeder, 1990)

No.	Place	Medium	Circa (A.D)	Seated	Standing	Figure
1	Galagama	Ironwood	13th or latter	•		123A
2	Dambulla	Dolomite marble	09-10		•	124E & F
3	Pasgama	Wood	15th or latter		•	137D
4	Vegiriya	Wood & Plaster	15	•		137E & F
5	Kurunegala	Bronze	15-16		•	140D

Chart 02 – Some , Nātha statues have been found from Sri Lanka

(Vide, U. V. Schroeder, 1990)[24]

Some Requisites for Absorption

Cultural absorption is a creative cultural process. It takes enough time for absorbing and converting external cultural features and activities. The use of absorption is the protection and continuity of relevant cultural values. *Localization* is a second step of absorption. However feelings, agreements, disagreements, respect and inter relationships of cultural groups are decisive factors for absorption. However this process can be seen between similar cultures only. It means that when two cultures are mixed together they should be included similar cultural values or feelings for sharing. If it is not so, cultural conflicts may be developed. That is the problem in Islamic world. If some cultures have not a chance and a space for sharing, *absorption* or *localization*, they have one answer to protect and expand their culture. It is 'war'.

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[24] Schroeder, U. V. 1990. **Buddhist Sculptures of Sri Lanka**, Hong Kong, Visual Dharma Publications ltd.