

**MUSIC AND HUMAN MOBILITY  
REDEFINING COMMUNITY IN INTERCULTURAL CONTEXT 2016**

Guest edited by Maria de São José Côrte-Real & Pedro Moreira  
“Henri Coanda” Air Force Academy Publishing House

**FOLLOWING THE PATH OF THE ANCIENTS**

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***Abstract:** Spilamberto, a little town in the middle-north of Italy, has a Sinhalese Buddhist community, formed in the last fifteen years. The heart of this community is the monk, who lives in the temple hosted in a farmhouse rented from a private. The Theravāda tradition of Sri Lanka preserves the ancient heritage of texts in Pāli language, that in modern times is only written but not spoken, so only the monks preserve the knowledge of this language, which is used to chant the set of texts of the Theravāda tradition during the rites. Nowadays, also the Buddhist community of Spilamberto continues to practice this kind of rites. Moreover, analyzing the life inside the community and the chanting performances during the rites according to an ethnomusicological perspective, I found out some interesting connections between practice and memory. Through the adaptation of the Sinhalese rites in Italy, the community rebuilds the bond with its tradition. The core of this process is the monk, who is the keeper of the memory. Despite the observation of all these practices, the community had to adapt its rites to the new socio-economical and cultural context. As a result, the spiritual life of this migrated community has become the only moment in which the Sinhalese reconnect themselves to their Sri Lankan identity.*

***Keywords:** buddhism, chanting, pāli language, Theravāda, Sinhalese community*

## **1. INTRODUCTION: BACK TO THE ORIGIN**

The community around the Maitri Vihara temple in Spilamberto, near Modena, in the middle-north of Italy is formed by all the Sinhala people of the entire region of Emilia-Romagna. The rural place re-adapted to host a Buddhist temple, the only one in the region. However, other Sinhala community is present throughout Italy creating a network between them. All these communities and temples belong to the Theravāda tradition, which is considered the ancient one. Sri Lanka is the heart of this tradition but also other countries like Thailandia, Vietnam, Burma, Laos recognize themselves in this tradition. Despite the fact that the contemporary political and social problems make us aware of other traditions (in particular Vajrayāna from Tibet or Zen/Chan from China and Japan), Theravāda tradition has a lot of temples all around the world in other Asian country as well as in european ones.

The Theravāda traditionally originates itself directly from the community of monks around the Buddha. In the following centuries after the death of the Buddha (478 B.C.) some councils called

Saṅgīti, took place in order to debate and consolidate the doctrine and the rules of life given by the enlightened one. From this process, between myth and reality, all the Buddhist traditions are born.

In the island of Sri Lanka the Buddhist doctrine arrive with the missions of Mahinda, a close relative of Asoka the famous emperor of the Maurya Empire in the Indian continent. Mahinda were well-received by Devānampiyatissa, king of the Sri Lanka from 250 b.C to 210 b.C. and in the next years some important monasteries were founded to let the Buddhist doctrine grow. The line of Buddhism in Sri Lanka is uninterrupted since the arrive of Mahinda in the island. Consequently, the role of the ancient teachings is essential for sinhala Buddhists.

## **2. CHANT, MEMORY AND IDENTITY**

**2.1 From the first council to the recitation practice.** The first council after the death of the Buddha tried to create an identity of the Buddhist community. To collect the rules for disciples and the teachings of the enlightened the memory of the monks, especially Ānanda and Upali, has been

fundamental. These two disciples, according to the tradition, had a very good memory. They reminded a large number of Buddha's discourses, and, in fact, they recited all what they can remember while the community was actively listening. The initial core of the Theravāda tradition is therefore based on the memory of the community and the identification in the oral discourses.

**2.2 The community, the rules and the monks.** The monks have to follow some important rules to deserve respect and veneration from the secular people. These rules passed down since the first council, then stratified and perhaps, they have been adapted to new contexts. However, the hinges of the lifestyle for a monk have not changed. Some rules, which are not so strict, are presents also for the secular in order to create an ethic, a way of life, a reference and then an identity. The community created by this set of things is nevertheless a macro-community. The case of Maitri Vihara is a special one, which requires a deeper analysis.

**2.3 Rites, recurrence, returns.** In a new context, far away from Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese community has to create by itself a sort of a calendar to recreate the main events of the Buddhist tradition. In the case of this community, I documented that every Sunday the group of the youngest Sinhalese goes to the temple for meetings where they can listen to some histories about Buddha or the Sinhalese Buddhist tradition, to learn some dances or songs, to discussing with the monk or create decoration for the temple during the main holy day in order to maintain alive their identity. Not only the young are involved in the activities of the temple. All the families collaborate to create events, rite and communal meals. This is far away from strict conservation: in fact the community is variegated and free from rigid boundaries. This process, connected with the identity is completely spontaneous.

The most important events are four:

-The *New Year's Eve*, celebrated between the 12 and the 15 of April. It is a secular recurrence but absorbed from the Buddhist context.

-The *Vesak* celebrated on the full moon of the month of may is the most important day of the year: during this day falls the anniversary of the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha.

-The *Poson* reminds the arrive of the Buddhism in Sri Lanka in the III sec. B.C. and it falls in the full moon of June.

-The *Kathina* is the events dedicated to the *saṅgha*, the community of monks. During this celebration, between the months of October and November, the secular community creates and donates a new *cīvara* (the dress of the monks) in order to overcome the cold months.

Generally all the celebrations delay to the adjacent week-end, in order to allow the majority of the community to be present. The will to maintain the chance of collaboration passes above the "right" day of the celebration and adapt its meanings to the new context. In fact, the week-end is the best moment to celebrate rites: especially on Sunday, the community celebrate the Pūjā (the offer to the Buddha), creating a moment of devotion and shared time.



Fig.1 Dyeing of the new *cīvara* during the *Kathina* of 2015

**2.4 Adapting the place and the recurrences.**

In order to have a social role in the city, the community created two associations: the first to promote the Buddhism in the region and the second to help every single person of Sinhalese community to keep in contact with its country.

The bounds with the territory are important. In fact, visiting Spilamberto, gives the possibility to note some Sinhala markets or little restaurant. The history of the community is strictly connected to the re-arrangement, re-adaptation of rural area. The Temple is itself a perfect example. The traditional rural house was adapted to host an hall for meetings and rites, a room with relics, artifacts and objects to receive devotes and to allow the monk's meditation and daily observance. This structure, in fact, has another role: The other role of this structure is hosting the monk. As a consequence, inside the structure there is also an apartment. It is essential to say that further bedrooms are present to let other monks spent some nights in Spilamberto's temple. This is a very common practice in the Buddhist temples and gives the possibility to create contacts with other monks and communities in Italy and abroad.

During the last 2 years the Maitri Vihara temple hosted a great number of monks from other Italian temples, and also one of the most famous monk of Sri Lanka, the Ven. Galigamuwe Gnanadeepa Thero. The association, in connection

with the community of Spilamberto and in collaboration with all other Italian communities creates a sort of “tour” and give to all Sinhala people in Italy the possibility to go and listen to sermons from one of the most important monks. Moreover, they can participate to rites and chanting practices. The ability to organize these events is applied also to everyday opportunities.

Everyone is involved in this process. Organizing a celebration like the *Vesak* implies a certain organized plan: prepare offers for the Buddha (flowers, lights, foods, drinks, incense), the meal for hundreds of people, create decoration for the temple, complex candlestick and lighting set. On occasion such as *Kathina*, the community has also to prepare the space needed for the new dress destined to the monk; they use sewing machines and, in an external place experts will paint it with the traditional red.



Fig.2 The Maitri Vihara temple

In addition to this, in everyday life the community has to collaborate by offering meals for the monk. Day by day, in fact, a family or a single volunteer gives something to eat to the Ven. Vimalaratana Thero, monk of Maitri Vihara temple. This act derives from an everyday practice of the monk: begging food during the day. This singhalese tradition, also followed by other countries of the same religion, implies the fact that monks go out of the temple with a bowl, walking down the street, and people get out from their homes to donate lunch to the local *saṅgha*.

### 3. THE MONK, HEART OF THE MEMORY

During all the rites chants and recitations of important *sutta* are inserted. A *sutta* is literally a discourse, a sermon, spoken by the Buddha in *pāli* language. These texts are inherited since the first council/as a starting point in the first council and transmitted originally in oral form. Then they were written down in the ancient Sri Lanka language. All the community knows by heart a certain amount of important texts like the *Mettāssutta*, *Mangala sutta* and many others ritual texts

(*Namaskāra*, *Tisarāṇa*, *Tiratāṇa vandanā*, *Pañcasīla*, and others). Other important texts, not necessarily known by heart, are quotations of books or anthologies, like the *Paritta*, the book of protection.



Fig.3 The community recite a *sutta* during a rite in the Vesak day of 2015

The first step to underline in order to understand this practice is that the community does not understand the *Pāli* language; as a result, here the role of the monks becomes fundamental. The monk has to guide the recitation and, if necessary, explain the contents of the *suttas*. This happens in particular after long and special *suttas*, even in important recurrences. Even though in the ordinary practice sermons are not fundamental, in other solemn or more private contexts the explanation of the meanings of some *suttas* becomes central. A *sutta* is a pretext to create a discourse which can help people in their everyday life to take important decisions, but, most effectively, it contributes to create an identity of the community which can reconnect itself to the monks identity and the ancient's knowledge giving a sense of a deep spirituality.

## 4. CHANTING STRUCTURE

**4.1 Language and rhythm.** As we said the chanted texts are one of the vehicles of the memory and identity. This possible also for the smart structure of the chant, which make possible the participation of all people inside the community.

The structure is closely connected to the *Pāli* language which gives to the recitation a perfect rhythm both in poetry and prose. *Pāli* belongs to indo-european languages and share with them a metrical conception related to the quality of each syllable. In fact, every one of them can be “light” (*lahu-*) or “heavy” (*garu-*). The poetry is basically founded on different types and conceptions of the verses which can create a defined structure with a recurrence of poetic feet. If we read a prose text we can always create a rhythmic sound. Due to their oral origins, the texts maintain – especially in the



create a skill to chant all the poetry present in the canonical texts. This practice consequently influences also the prose, where we can find the same expedients applied to the text. For example, the repetition of some rhythmic patterns, the syntax of a period or the repetition of entire section can be underlined with a lower note or simple melodic additions.

### 5. CONCLUSIONS

The idea is to maintain a bond with the original words of the Buddha, transmitted from time to time, from monk to monk, from heart to heart. The main aim is to reconnect the community to this stream, passing by the authority of the monk, creating a imaginary line, never interrupted, with their origin. Everyone, while reciting a *sutta*, can create an echo of the words of the Buddha, imagining himself as Ananda.

The role of the memory –from the monk, who can understand the language and know by heart an huge number of texts, to the entire community, which shares a common memory – builds an identity which is not closed but, on the contrary submitted to constant expansions.

Despite its contemporary written form the *Pāli* canon still has an oral function, giving the possibility to create external or spiritual inner place where everyone can be connected with the knowledge of the *Dhamma* (the doctrine of Buddha), as in the case of the *Dhammacakkapavattanasutta*, where chant makes true, once again, the words of the text, and everyone can live and share the experience.

Perhaps, it may not be a coincidence that the name of this tradition “*Theravāda*”, literally means “the path of ancients”.

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