

THERAVADA BUDDHISM AND GENDER IN INDONESIA: A (DE)COLONIZED ENCOUNTER?

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ABSTRACT This chapter represents a revised version of a paper composed and submitted as part of the course requirements in the duration of the author's attendance of a PhD programme in Indonesia. Hence, the structure of the text reveals the thinking process, as well as the fieldwork method, in which the author devises her approach to exploring two Theravada Buddhist communities in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, from a (postcolonial) feminist perspective of her non-Western subjectivity. The latter is displayed through a genealogy of the historical conditions, hitherto academic training and wider political circumstances that informed her as an "outsider" to the Western liberal democracy, while the former is subjected to an ethnographic research designed to investigate the position of women in relation to theology, practice, and experience of Theravada Buddhist religion in contemporary Indonesia. The analysis of the collected ethnographic data renders an account of the ways in which the ethnic background, religion-related policies in Indonesia, dominant Theravada theology and institutions, as well as gender politics all combine in structuring the lines along which women in Theravada Buddhism are allowed to perform certain roles in their lived religious lives, while remaining excluded from others. The analysis of sources, however, displays how transnational feminist practices support the attempts of certain female Buddhist communities in Indonesia to win and secure the roles, such as that of *bikkhuni*, which are denied not only by the (traditional) socio-cultural gender-regulating norms, but also by the institutionalised Buddhist theology in Indonesia. In addition, age seems to play a significant role in reshaping the traditional exclusionary lines that prevent women from becoming religious leaders or institutionalised religious workers, for the informants who took part in this project, consisting of undergraduate or postgraduate students, express their belief in a more gender-balanced Theravada Buddhist theology, practice and overall politics for their future.

Key words: Theravada Buddhism, Indonesia, gender, feminism, colonialism, religion.

ABOUT THIS PAPER¹

In choosing the topic for the final paper in this course, I have been facing certain difficulties regarding not only validity of my writing on religion(s) in contemporary Indonesian context from my “outsiderness,” but also possible research methods and theoretical frameworks I was going to deploy, build, and/or rely on in the process. Since I find the whole process of writing this paper interesting and instructive for my further exploration of Buddhism(s) in Indonesia that I plan to undertake while conducting my PhD dissertation research, I deemed it necessary to leave most parts of that process visible in composing this paper. However insignificant and non-academic certain portions of the paper might appear to be at first glance, I regard them as meaningful points in my efforts to articulate and position myself towards the chosen topic in a way that would be inclusive and respectful of the voices and opinions of my informants on the one hand, and provide me with an insight into possible ways to understanding, constructing, and theorizing connection(s) between concepts and experiences of Buddhism and gender within contemporary Indonesian context on the other. In retrospect, I feel that in so doing, I was making an attempt to find a way to open an access point through which I could study Buddhism inclusively, as it is being practiced and experienced in contemporary Indonesian context, in which I am positioned as outsider.

I would like to express my gratitude to Mbak Wilis, who kindly introduced me to the Buddhist community frequenting *Vihara* Karandjati in Yogyakarta and provided me with further contacts in that and other Buddhist communities in Yogyakarta.

1. This essay represents a slightly revised version of the final paper produced as part of the requirements for the completion of the course entitled “Religion and Gender” which I attended in the Spring of 2008, during the second semester of my first academic year as a regular student at the ICRS-Yogya (Indonesia), PhD programme in religious studies. I am currently enrolled in a PhD programme at the Department of Asian Studies of The University of Sydney (Australia) and my thesis will focus on exploring the ideological and political structures informing the *Sam Poo Kong* Temple in Semarang, Central Java.

I am indebted to Willy Yandi Wijaya for sharing his knowledge and lending me books and other printed materials which I used as sources for content-analysis conducted in this paper.

I am also thankful to all the informants for their kind support and sharing their views and experiences with me. Their real names will not be used in this paper, following the request expressed by majority of them to stay anonymous.

SKETCHING A BACKDROP

Several reasons prompted me to make an attempt to compose a paper that would try to open a meaningful access point to my studying Buddhism in Indonesia from a feminist perspective. First of all, while earning my MA degree in art history in India, I focused on studying Buddhist Mahayana sculpture related to iconography of Buddha's anthropomorphic image. Thus my studies of Buddhism were from a historical perspective, providing me with no opportunity to experience Buddhism as both a living and lived religion. Consequently, I have felt ever since that such lack of perspective seriously undermined my claims of "knowing" a thing or two about Buddhism, let alone "understanding" it.

Second, I consider myself a feminist. I am aware, though, that I need to provide a context for my claiming feminism. I first learned about feminism(s) and feminist discourses from my friends studying in the USA several years after I went back to Europe from India. Discourses on identity, the self and the other, exclusion and oppression, power relations, gender as social (cultural, religious) construct, and importance of (self)criticism in both life and academia were the only mental space in which I felt I could find solace, (self)comprehension, and hope. Indeed, living in Serbia for most part of the 1990s and in the early 2000s was not an easy task for a person who could not identify herself with Serbian genocidal nationalism, Christian Orthodox fundamentalism, or live guided by ideologies and practices of xenophobia, chauvinism, racism, hatred, misogyny and homophobia, all of which shaped my social reality during the mentioned period. I found ways to engage in activism and work on projects aimed at securing rights for sexual minorities until I found the way out of Serbia again.

Thirdly, Indonesia provides an environment challenging to me for several reasons. Similar to former Yugoslavia, the country where I was born and spend most of my life until it collapsed in the bloody conflict provoked by the rise of Serbian nationalism, Indonesian society has for the most part of its history been an authoritarian one. Undoubtedly, the ideologies behind the two regimes significantly differ. Nevertheless, what I experience as similar in practice is the systemic exclusion of voices of “subalterns”² and the tight state control of identity-formation processes imposed on peoples of highly diverse ethnicities, cultures, histories, and religions. However distant and distinct the two societies are in terms of their respective histories, cultures, and geographies, I feel that “the practice of life” in Indonesia is occasionally, unexpectedly, and to a certain extent even unpleasantly similar to what I experienced while living in former Yugoslavia and, later on, Serbia. Although I am aware that my following claim might be perceived as dangerously simplistic—thus inherently inaccurate—both countries have been constituted in interaction with (against?) those societies that are often referred to as present-day liberal democracies. Serbia—the name of my current country of origin—is situated in an imaginary space of Europe’s otherness, the Balkans, to borrow Maria Todorova’s concept, and in its history has experienced a long period of colonization by the Turkish Ottoman Empire. This, in turn, provided ground for (ab)use of history in constructing discourses of “historical victimhood,” which Serbian nationalists utilized as both justification and mobilizing force for conducting ethnic cleansing of imagined Serbian territories in Croatia, Bosnia, and—most recently—Kosovo. From its postcolonial context, I find that discourses on historical victimhood are common in Indonesia, and—similarly to Serbia—used to conceal “state imperialism.”

Finally, I consider my current academic surroundings at the ICRS-Yogya³—representing a nascent attempt to institutionalize a mixture of North American-West European approaches to knowledge-production within a non-Western society—to be particularly stimulating in that it opens space for creating novel discourses in the field of inter-religious studies. Such discourses, in my

2. I borrowed the phrase from Kwok Pui-lan (2005) who borrows it from Spivak (1988).

3. Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies.

understanding, are to be reflective of the “within-without” tension engendered through interaction between a Western knowledge-production system (the “without”) and its non-Western environment (the “within”). In my opinion, the spaces that ICRS as a recently founded study-institution thus opens are those in which I can explore identity-restructuring processes affecting me both at personal and academic levels. Thus this paper could be read as my attempt to articulate these on-going processes, prompted by my being positioned as a dual outsider to both my studying and living environments, but actively engaged in interaction with my environment through my studies.

A FEW REMARKS ON PAPER STRUCTURE AND RESEARCH METHODS

This paper does not propose a novel narrative for understanding Theravada Buddhist practices, policies, and realities in Yogyakarta, let alone Indonesia, from feminist perspective(s). Neither does it offer a detailed critical discursive analysis of the resources on Buddhism(s) in Indonesia. It also fails to provide a historical account of Theravada, or any other form of Buddhism in Indonesia, just as it does not build a new theory for studying the phenomenon. Instead, I suggest that the main purpose of this paper be regarded as an attempt to obtain a brief insight into complexity and diversity of Theravada Buddhism(s) in Indonesia—understood as institutionalized religion, lived faith, and (individual and group) identity—and thereto related difficulties of reducing it to an object of academic study. The paper can also be read as an (ethnographic) account of two case-studies outlining the ways in which (two groups) of young Indonesian Theravada Buddhists inter-relate and experience relations between Theravada Buddhist teachings and practices on the one hand, and gender(ed) issues on the other.

The shortly following ethnographic account is to introduce the reader with an additional set of difficulties related to finding a non-colonizing way and respectful emic research method that would enable me to access and explore stories of “informants” towards whom I am positioned as a multiple outsider, in terms of being foreign to the experience and practice of the Theravada Buddhism, as well as the cultural and political context within which it is existent. My inner “struggle” was foremost directed to achieving as “egalitarian”

a relationship with my informants as possible. It was also intended to keep my self-critical introspection—that would (I hoped) prevent me from reading my hidden agenda (whatever it was at that moment) into their accounts—going throughout the process.

A note on theoretical framework for the research

Since the incentive to produce this text originated in the duration of my attendance of the Religion and Gender Course, I attempted to look for theoretical frameworks and possible research methods in the offered readings for the course.

The phrase “print Buddhist feminism” is deliberately evocative of Benedict Anderson’s concept of print-capitalism and its effect on the rise and spread of nationalism in both colonial/colonized and post-colonial context (Anderson 1991). Like nationalism, feminism(s) —as ideology focusing on both practices and policies through which inequalities based on engendered sexual differences are structured, and being institutionalized both via academia and activism— is not infrequently regarded in non-Western countries as having “Western origins,” and I thought it would be appropriate to search for its discursive institutionalization in Theravada Buddhism in Indonesia through searching for its traces in publications associated with various Buddhist organizations.⁴ The coinage “print Buddhism and gender” is double evocative of its “westernness,” in that it recalls Anderson’s reflections on the spread of nationalism via institutionalizing capitalism in non-Western world on the one hand, while making a direct reference to “gender” as a “Western product” of feminist scholarship (and activism) on the other.⁵ The phrase can also be understood from the central point the word “Buddhism” occupies in it, which is to imply that the interaction of the concept of and politics for gender equality with(in and without) various socio-cultural Buddhist contexts not only demands a

4. I am aware, though, that an even more relevant place to look for traces of (en)gendered discourses would be the official primary and secondary schools’ syllabi for religious education in Buddhism. Since at this point I have managed to obtain somewhat incomplete and outdated versions of such syllabi, I decided to omit them from this overview.

5. The term “gender” was introduced to Indonesian language along with feminist discourses.

reconstruction of both “Buddhism” and “gender”, but foremost proposes an ideological reconstruction of non-Western Buddhist societies along the lines of progressive liberal feminist agenda as a blueprint. In other words, it seems to me that the Western feminist agenda subjects “Buddhism”—understood as Buddhist societies, institutions, cultures, theologies, practices—to its gender-sensitive testing rather than attempting to translate “gender equality” into non-liberal progressive contexts.

Hence I found well articulated (Western) feminists’ calls for gendering Buddhist societies, theologies, practices, and institutions in South-, East-, and (particularly) South East Asia in Peach (2002) and Tsomo (2002) in particular. Indeed, in her introductory essay entitled *Women and Buddhism*, while outlining the future prospects regarding the status of women in Buddhism(s)—i.e. in different Buddhist societies and cultures around the globe—Peach concludes that currently “the status of Buddhist women in the West is generally much greater than in Asia” (Peach 2002, 71) and that “it is likely that Western Buddhists will continue to advocate for equality for women, both in Western as well as in Asian institutions” (ibid., 71-72). That the encounter of “gender” and Buddhist societies/cultures in Asia is a gendering endeavor in which standards for “inclusion” of women in Buddhist institutions, practices, and theologies are measured against progressive liberal—i.e. “Western”—feminist norms is reflected in the fact that out of three essays chosen to represent “women” and “Buddhism(s)” in the past two millennia of its development as a “world religion” of today, in the same volume Peach chose texts by two Western (i.e. North American) women (see Murcott 2002; cf. Tsomo 2002) and one by Thai non-governmental activist who herself is a non-practicing Buddhist (Khuankaew 2002).

Before I proceed with presenting the results of my fieldwork and the (brief) overview of the sources I gathered in an attempt to explore gender-related issues in Buddhism(s) in Indonesia in the next sections of this paper, I believe I need to explain how some more generalized readings influenced the course of my research and structured the content/questions that I posed during the interviews I chose to conduct. The readings taught me that gender inequalities in Buddhism depended, and still depend, upon various and varying socio-

political, cultural and historical contexts within which they were (or still are) particularized (Sharma 2005; Peach 2002; Gross and Ruether 2001). Indeed, as Sharma (2005) and Peach (2002) convincingly argue, there is no (and has never been a) monolithic, singular Buddhist religion, neither in practice nor in institutions. And although theology appears to be instrumental in perpetuating the power relations of inequality and oppression of women, efforts of (Buddhist) feminist theologians (Pui-lan 2002; Gross and Ruether 2001; Gross 1996) seem of great importance in that through their discursive practices doctrines are being reconstructed, rather than abandoned, and transformed into a tool of societal change along the gender equality lines. In other words, such critical theological (re)interpretations of doctrine (scriptures) from feminist perspective seem to be instrumental in providing ground for (gender) inclusive religious practices and institutions. Although I was initially rather critical of the “Western bias” in Khuankaew’s (2002) text already referred to above, her emphasis on the significance of the access to religious education, ordination, and leadership by women, which is to be gained by activism—as shown by her longstanding experience in the field—did raise the awareness of the importance of these issues for my research as well. Moreover, reading Khuankaew’s article special quest for “the particular,” since it contextualized Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia, I also learned about the ongoing struggle of Thai nuns to legalize ordination, which has been strongly resisted by the monks, the state, as well as the tradition, instilled a sense of urgency to establish the existence/lack of the problem of women’s ordination in Indonesia, albeit in passing, in my research.

In addition and in line with my understanding of the political importance of feminist theologies, or feminist theological reconstructions (Gross 2001; Pui-lan 2002) for recreating social realities, (re)claiming religious traditions, and exploring historical contexts within which women played important roles, I realized that the important insight to gain by the research I was about to undertake would be in recording any influence of women (mothers, aunts, grandmothers, friends, role-models) in personal theological development of my informants. I also fantasized of tracing signs of “merged” theological traditions/practices, of which those texts that outline the existence of feminine symbols in various Buddhist traditions (Murcott 2002; Tsomo 2002; Pui-lan

2002), as well as the interaction of Buddhism with “indigenous” religious traditions (Lee 2007; Pui-lan 2002) in my informants’ narratives.

In short, although none of the readings referred to or contextualized gender-related issues in current or historical Indonesian Buddhism(s), nor did they directly voice any experiences of women (or men) in the societies where Buddhism represents the majority (or at least major) religion, I used them as instructive guidelines in structuring the interviews below. Hence some of the recurring themes—such as the ordination of women, access to religious education, tradition and gender roles, and possibility of achieving *nibbana* for women—also appear in the questionnaires I deployed in conducting the interviews, of which more details will be presented in one of the following sections of this paper. In addition, due to the lack of information on women in Buddhism(s) in Indonesia, I felt I needed to design a set of questions that would refer to the current political moment and display how the minority-issues and politics in (post-New Order) Indonesia reflect in my informants’ narratives.

A BRIEF SEARCH THROUGH “PRINT BUDDHISM AND GENDER” IN THERAVADA COMMUNITIES IN YOGYAKARTA

I ran into Karma Lekshe Tsomo’s name once again, as I read an interview with her in the *Eastern Horizon Journal* (Tsomo n.d.)⁶, in which she was asked to reflect on the 9th International Conference of Buddhist Women (Sakhyadita) that was held in June 2006 in Malaysia. The head caught my attention; it

6. Majority of the readings discussed in this section were provided to me by Willy Yandi Wijaya, active contributor to numerous publications by Indonesian Theravada Buddhists in Yogyakarta (see below). The selection of the review publications was made by him, after learning that I was interested in (visibility of) gender issues in (Indonesian) Buddhism. The discussion of publication is intentionally brief, since the main focus of the paper is the fieldwork. In addition, I am uninformed as to what impact (in terms of circulation and distribution) these publications have on Indonesian Buddhist community (lay and non-lay equally), who are their major “consumers,” or in what numbers are they being published, for that matter. “Tabloid KASI” was obtained by the courtesy of my informant at the *Vihara Karandjati*.

read: “Bila wanita telah memiliki kepercayaan diri dan pengalaman, maka mereka dapat menjadi pemimpin yang berharga dalam organisasi Buddhis dan membantu mengatasi masalah social yang mendesak. Secara bertahap, mereka akan semakin berkemampuan dalam menyeimbangkan keluarga dan pekerjaan Dharma” (ibid., 7).⁷ Lekshe Tsomo’s words call for patience and persistence, and stress the importance of self-confidence and experience in women-leaders of Buddhist organization(s). Elsewhere she observes that “[f]eminisme bukannya hasil temuan Barat”⁸ (ibid., 8). After my first encounter with a lived “Buddhist feminism” in Lekshe Tsomo’s words and writings, I discovered that the discourse is vivid, diversified, and inclusive, and that it has been claimed by non-Western women, modified to fit their particular social, political, religious and cultural contexts. Apparently, discourse contextualizing “feminism in Buddhism” is present in current Indonesian context, as attested by certain Buddhist publications, as discussed below.

An informative account of the current position of *bhikkhunis* in Indonesia, as well as their struggle for achieving a legitimate status and the right to be ordained that would be acknowledged and secured at the state level, but foremost enabled through institutional and organizational support of Indonesian *bhikkhus* (Theravada monks) and other Buddhist organizations and bodies—majority of whom seem to oppose the idea and practice of female ordination—is available in the “Jurnal Perempuan” in the article entitled “Fundamentalisme Dalam Buddhis dan Penghancuran Sangha Perempuan” (Priastana 2003). This article, written by Jo Priastana, reflects on fundamentalism in Buddhism and provides a brief account of historical and institutional discrimination of *Sangha Bhikkhuni* (order of Theravada nuns), which led to its consequent extinction in Sri Lanka (12th century) and Thailand. Whereas it is claimed in the article that the revival of *Sangha Bhikkhuni* in Sri Lanka is no longer possible (ibid., 11), the author also states that situation is somewhat different in the present-day Thailand, where the struggle for legitimation of women’s monastic order,

7. “Self-confident and experienced women are able to become those invaluable leaders in the Buddhist organization who can help in overcoming urgent social problems. Gradually these women will come to be more apt in balancing their families with the work of Dharma” (Tsomo n.d., 7).

8. “feminism is not a Western invention”

and ordaining, is an ongoing phenomenon (ibid., 14-16). Was this “extinction” a sort of delegitimization and tabooing, rather than actual disappearance (at least in Thailand), due to the growing patriarchy of these respective societies in that and subsequent historical periods is an entirely different question, beyond the scope of this paper.

Be that as it may, according to Priastana, in the present-day Indonesian context this (whether real or constructed) historical discontinuity in existence of Sangha Bhikkhuni in Sri Lanka and Thailand provides grounds for impeding the official revival of women’s monastic order. Resistance to establishing Sangha Bhikkhuni Indonesia is powerful, in that it is both numerous and institutional. Thus, on page 12, the writer presents contents of a Letter issued by Sangha Theravada Indonesia on June 10, 2001. The Letter brought forward the Joint Agreement between Majelis Agama Buddha Theravada Indonesia (Indonesian Council for Theravada Buddhist Religion), Wanita Theravada Indonesia (Theravada Women’s Organization of Indonesia), and Pemuda Theravada Indonesia (Indonesian Theravada Youth Organization) in which it is stated that at the present moment, the form of Buddhist religiosity known as *bhikkhuni* does not exist anymore in those practices that are in accordance with teachings of the Vinaya school of Theravada.⁹

Another important aspect of Priastana’s article is that it voices Ayya (*Bhikkhuni*) Santini and her personal experience in getting ordained as *bhikkhuni*¹⁰, presenting the very process of her ordination as a source of controversies revolving around the disputed question of institutionalization of women’s monastic order in Theravada Buddhism in Indonesia (ibid., 13). It seems to me that it can be argued that *Bhikkhuni* Santini is growing into an icon of women’s struggle against gender-based discrimination and inequality

9. In the original: “Dalam surat Sangha Theravada Indonesia bernomor: 031/STI/VI/2001, tertanggal 10 Juni tentang Kesepakatan Bersama dengan Majelis Agama Buddha Theravada Indonesia, Wanita Theravada Indonesia, Pemuda Theravada Indonesia itu dinyatakan bahwa pada masa sekarang ini tidak terdapat lagi cara kehidupan keagamaan Buddha yang disebut bhikkhuni dalam pelaksanaan Vinaya mazhab Theravada.

10. For a biographic account of Ayya Santini’s life, including some autobiographical statements, see Anggawati (2006).

in Indonesian Buddhist community. Such discrimination is reflecting the lack of organized and massive support for women's ordination in the lay and monks' communities, and has been structured upon the "evidence" of both doctrinal and historical contestation and annihilation/disappearance of Theravada nuns in Sri Lanka, Thailand, and elsewhere¹¹. However, I noticed that apart from historical and doctrinal contestations, the norm regulating the acceptable/prevaling gender roles is also utilized to deny ordination of *bhikkhunis* as a (legitimate) spiritual career choice for woman. Namely, although it seems that the institutionalized body of the Buddhist community¹² is making attempts to widen the norm to include "active" women,¹³ there is a lack of accounts by, or about, any *bhikkhunis* in this Buddhist mainstream periodical who therefore appear invisible/non-existent in wider Buddhist communities in Indonesia.

FIELDWORK IN SHAPSHOTS...

It is a soft night with no rain, and I am excited about going to *Vihara Karangdjati* to meet people among whom I am hoping to find informants who would be willing to be interviewed. In preparing questions which I intend to raise during

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11. See also Dhammasiri (2004). The author, a bhikkhu, claims that the reasons for which the Sangha of monks rejects/does not officially acknowledge the existence and ordination of bhikkhunis anywhere in the "Theravada Buddhist world" are of constitutional, rather than discriminatory nature (ibid., 103).
 12. KASI (Konferensi Agung Sangha Indonesia), or the "High Conference of Indonesian Sangha"
 13. I gained such clue by reading the last month's "Tabloid KASI" (April 2008). There are two articles featuring women in the Buddhist religious community ("umat"). The first one (its "priority" is based on the fact that the article is announced on the front page, and it is also published on the page immediately preceding the second article) is featuring Lanny Anggawati as "a Woman-Translator of the Holy Scripture TI Pitaka" (in original: "Perempuan Penterjemah Kitab Suci TI Pitaka). Interestingly, there is a list of her published works, including her *Perempuan-perempuan Pejuang*, although the article does not refer to the *bhikkhunis* who narrate their struggle to achieve ordination in the mentioned book in any way. The second article features Ibu Violy S. Chandra, a multi-level activist of WANDANI. The article is full of appraisals of her ability to divide her time between family duties and activism, thus openly promoting family values among Indonesian Buddhist women.

conversations with prospective informants, I am guided by firm determination to establish some kind of meaningful (inter)connection between the concepts of gender, Buddhism and contemporary Indonesian society, although I am not at all certain how it should be done. I am also equipped with the vague idea of institutional and lived gender inequalities existent in (Southeast) Asian context gained from the readings on Buddhism and gender.¹⁴ The list of questions is intended to secure some structure to my conversations, and it brings up issues that I hope would get me closer to understanding how the people I would talk to experience and perceive gender relations in their religion as they live it. I chose to talk to young people, students, since I felt that my being a student might provide a sense of shared experience.

The list contained the following questions/issues: How did you become Buddhist? Which form of Buddhism¹⁵ do you follow? How were you first introduced to/gained initial knowledge of your religion¹⁶ (in terms of learning rituals and their meanings, forms of worship, and the like)? What is the difference between the roles of men and women in Buddhist religious rituals? What is your ethnicity? Who is “the head of family” in your household? According to the teachings you adhere to, is *nibbana*¹⁷ more easily attainable by men than by women? What is your view on inter-religious marriage? Is there any Buddhist teaching that you know of that states that being born as a woman implies “bad karma”? Are there any *bhikkhunis* in your *sangha*? Are they equally respected as *bhikkhus* in your community? Can a woman lead

14. The readings are discussed in the previous section of the paper.

15. I conducted all conversations in Indonesian. I used the term “aliran agama Budha” when asking this question.

16. Again, I used the term “agama.” Despite the Western origin of the term and concept of “religion,” and therein inherent cultural imperialism when applied to the non-Western context (Smith 1991), my usage of the term in the present-day Indonesian context is intentional. Since Indonesian state ideology differentiates between officially recognized “agama” (religion) and officially non-recognized belief systems known as “(aliran) kepercayaan,” I felt that the use of term “religion” would be appropriate here, in that the term is “officially restricted to those religions claiming to be monotheistic and universalist” (Picard 1996, 203). For a further discussion on political implications of the terms “agama” and “kepercayaan” in the process of identity-formation in contemporary Indonesia, see the section below.

17. Enlightenment.

a religious ceremony in your community? What is your personal attitude towards different forms of Buddhism and their coexistence in Indonesia? As a member of a minority religion, what is your perception of other (officially recognized) religions in Indonesia, and how would you characterize attitude of Buddhism towards other religions?

Before proceeding to interview the informants, I would introduce myself by stating what was the purpose of conducting the interview, the name of the course for which I would use the data gathered in interviews, where and what I was studying, and finally, my age and the country of origin. The questions were not strictly followed in order as I attempted to allow the informants to speak about the issues they regarded important. In fact, after introducing myself, I would shortly go through the questions in an attempt to outline the direction of the conversation, and would go back to them only if certain issues would be omitted in responses, which rarely happened. Consequently, during our conversations, the informants occasionally discussed issues that were not directly raised by my questions, such as their respective family religious histories, or women's access to leadership roles and religious training.

Prior to presenting the results of conversations, I believe that a few introductory remarks on the chosen format of presenting the collected data, as well as the reasons that led me to do so are in place here. First of all, the results of the conversations obtained in the past twenty days are not presented here in the form of interview, since they were not written down in that form in the first place. During the three meetings with my informants I kept notes while conversing with them. Consequently, the data presented below are based on the notes taken on the field.

Second, the talks were conducted in Indonesian language, and I have observed how certain meanings have been lost in the translating process, where my subjectivity¹⁸ shaped the meanings and information I chose to

18. What I perceive as "subjectivity" here are the changes in my self-positioning towards the informants, the topic of our conversations, as well as my self on the scale going from "ethnographer" to "outsider" and "tourist" that have been taking place ever since.

present in this paper. I feel that this insight is important in that it has led me to reflect on the original notes and, more generally, conversations with informants as also being shaped, if not dominated, by my subjectivness. I was aware that interview is foremost an inter-subjective research tool, and it was the main reason I chose to deploy this tool in the first place. However, it was only during those conversations that I started experiencing its *intra-subjective* quality as its most important asset. By this, I imply that intra-subjectiveness may facilitate introspection and self-criticism in the researcher, and consequently lead to his or her reconstructing and re-positioning. I was aware of the possibility that by being introduced to the Karangdjati community by Mbak Wilis, whose interest in gender issues and Buddhism are widely known, certain speculations about my self would be instantly generated in informants and be further brought into our conversations. I was unpleasantly surprised, however, to find out that I actually wished to control those and other preconceptions, which were constructed around my race, (imagined/expected) economic, political, and cultural background, as well as the (imagined/expected) religious affiliation (to name some of them). I was equally unpleasantly taken by the realization that most of my questions were structured around my (unconscious, but very present) intention to make informants fit into my reductionist, and rather engendered, categories. I will try to trace down the moments and ways in which such re-positioning(s) took place within me as I proceed to present the results of my fieldwork. I will also make an attempt to reflect on possible implications of the therein ensuing restructuring as while processing the gathered data.

The choice of informants whose narratives will shortly be presented was situational rather than intended, though I do perceive a common denominator that connects them – us – into a community of a kind, i.e. students. Namely, I was taken to *Vihara* Karandjati by Mbak Willis, whom I met at the doctoral program I was enrolled in (ICRS-Yogya, Gadjah Mada University), where she came to assist in a couple of lectures within the Gender and Religion Course. Since Mbak Willis herself had several years ago graduated from the MA program at the CRCS¹⁹, which shares a number of courses with the

19. Center for Religious and Cross-Cultural Studies.

ICRS-Yogya program, and as one of the rare Buddhist women in Indonesia with both an MA degree and interest in women's studies, she was assisting in lectures focusing on gender and Buddhism in Indonesia within the mentioned course. Provided her academic background, Mbak Willis was close with the organization of Buddhist students of the Gadjah Mada University (KHAMADIS²⁰), some of whose members were known to frequent *Vihara* Karandjati in order to attend services, meditation sessions and celebrations, join various activities organized by the Karandjati community, and socialize with other community members. When Mbak Willis first took me to *Vihara* Karandjati she made sure that some of her KHAMADIS friends would be there in order to introduce me to them as “an international PhD student at the Gadjah Mada University doing her research on Buddhism.” Therefrom all the informants upon whose stories the narratives below were produced were drawn from among students (or fresh graduates). The chosen informants were either members of KHAMADIS or other Buddhist student organizations in Yogya, or were friends of such members frequenting *Vihara* Karandjati and *Vihara* Vidyalyoka to attend services, meditation sessions, celebrations, lectures, join and organize activities. I am indebted to all of them for sharing their stories and time with me.

Snapshot #1: *Vihara*²¹ Karangdjati (Jalan Monjali, Yogyakarta)

My first informant is Mbak Tara. She is 21 years old and earning her undergraduate degree at the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences (Fakultas Ilmu Sosial Politik) at Gadjah Mada University. She declares herself as ethnic Javanese, but specifies that she comes from an ethnically diverse family: her father is Javanese, whereas her mother is ethnic Chinese. I explained to her what the two of us would talk about, although she had already been told by a friend that I was interested in “gender issues.” Tara recounts how she first “learned” her religion as child, being born into a Theravada Buddhist

20. See note 26 below for details regarding the organization.

21. “Vihara” or “wihara” is the common name for Buddhist communal public places of worship, although it is sometimes used to denote the Buddhist “nunnery” or “monastery”, in accordance with the original meaning of the term (Harle 1994, 48).

family in a small Central Javanese town of Wonogiri. Her mother's father was *pandita*²² in the local *vihara*, and she remembers going there with her parents on Tuesdays as the worship service in that *vihara* was held on Tuesday evenings. In the beginning, she recollects being taught how to pray, and that she first started learning about teachings of Buddhist religion(s)²³ by asking questions at home, and while attending religious ceremonies, such as Waisak. Her father's religious background is Islamic. He was born into a Muslim family, but later on in life²⁴ "converted"²⁵ to Buddhism. Tara remembers that she was told that at the beginning, her father's conversion caused problems in his family which

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22. As she explained, the term implies that the person performs both the function of "pemimpin agama" (religious leader in performing religious services ("kebaktian" in Indonesian) in *vihara*) and "pembina agama" (authority (i.e. an "elder") in religious organization). Tara's grandfather's "job post" was the Province of Central Java, and she remembers him often traveling to various and distant districts around the Province.
23. More accurately speaking, Tara—and the rest of my informants—used the expression "ajaran agama Budha," which can be translated as "Buddhist teachings or teachings of Buddhism" on the one hand, and "Buddhist doctrine or doctrine of the Buddhist religion" on the other (Echols and Shadily 1989, 7). I use the two translations alternatively throughout the paper. The plural form is to stress her acquaintance with Mahayana teachings, which she gained in her maternal uncle's home.
24. Tara was not able to remember when the exact moment of his father's official conversion to Buddhism occurred. She pointed out, however, that even before marrying her mother, her father had "discovered" Buddhism "on his own," while studying at the Faculty of Letters of the Gadjah Mada University. He told Tara that he used to read a lot about Buddhism during his student days, and that he was deeply moved by the religion's tenets. Eventually, he also became *pandita*—the fact she regards important in her subsequent religious education required, but not provided for, by the state. Since both her grandfather and father are well educated on "matters of religion," she had opportunity to learn from them, as well as to read numerous books on Buddhism available in her house.
25. What I understand under the term "conversion" here is well-defined by Aragon (2000). I could not agree more with her when she states that "I have found "conversion" to be a troublesome term because it suggests a rapid and inconvertible transformation between distinctive ideologies, when what denotes by the word often is a lengthy process of renegotiating religious ideas and behavior (ibid., 43)." It is in the sense of such "lengthy process of renegotiating religious ideas and behavior" that the term "conversion" will be used in henceforth.

was not well, if at all, accepted by his parents. They complained about their son's choice to become a member of a "minority religion," and reproached him for not converting to any one of the two officially recognized Christian religions.²⁶ However, Tara never experienced any of those issues; as far back as her memory goes, she has always been welcomed in her grandparents' home. In addition, she says that she takes part in their religious celebrations, such as Idul Fitri, except that she does not pray with them.

Tara repeatedly emphasized that throughout her elementary and secondary school education she never received official religious training, being the only Buddhist student in all the schools she attended. In Wonogiri, she attended Catholic elementary school and received religious training in that religion, which was made obligatory by the school policy for all students, regardless of their respective religion. In junior and senior high schools she was also not provided with lessons in tenets of Buddhism, but was not exempted from taking annual exams and being graded accordingly—the fact she pointed out repeatedly. In junior high school there was no religious teacher available for the Buddhist religion; in senior high school her teacher was of senior age and would rather have her go more often to *vihara* and study there instead of teaching her in class. She stated that the religious education according to student's religious affiliation is not only guaranteed, but also required by the law. Nevertheless, her situation was complicated by the fact that she was always the only Buddhist among students.

She vividly and sadly recalls that her "uniqueness" made her feel awkward, inferior to and alienated from other students, who knew too little of Buddhism, but repeatedly made fun of her religion. They used to wonder what her religion like was, and what kinds of rituals it entailed. They used to mock Tara telling her scornfully that after dying, Buddhists were cremated instead of being buried. She recalls that her response to that denigration was that it did not matter what happened to one's body after passing away, since the body was dead anyway and incapable of feeling anything. These were the

26. That is, Catholicism and Protestantism.

earliest memories from her elementary school. Although she continued to feel being perceived as “strange” because of her religion throughout junior and senior high school, the situation became less tensed when her classmates starting learning about Buddhism through *Pancasila*²⁷ education and stopped teasing her. By the end of senior high school, her lack of confidence due to the possible rejection of her religious affiliation by her surroundings was already gone. I felt Tara’s discomfort while she was remembering loneliness and isolation of her earliest school years and was relieved when she moved on to talk about her undergraduate studies.

Tara joyfully remarks that all that changed once she took up studies at her faculty.²⁸ She joined the Buddhist student organization KHAMADIS UGM.²⁹ Feelings of loneliness and strangeness have been replaced by those of pride and confidence as she not only discovered that she was not the “sole Buddhist around,” but also that her fellow-students of other religious affiliations read about and expressed their admiration of and respect for Buddhism. Some of her non-Buddhist friends, for instance, often join meditation sessions along with her. In addition, she feels that another phenomenon is responsible for this positive change in attitudes toward Buddhism from uneasiness and suspicion to acceptance and respect—the impact of media. Tara feels that in recent years³⁰, Buddhism has been increasingly represented in media, and Waisak gains annual coverage in print and electronic media. There are occasional educational footages on the tenets of Buddhism, and so the wider population in Indonesia gets the opportunity to learn about Buddhism and Buddhists.

27. Indonesian state ideology is part of the required syllabus from elementary through secondary and university level education. Kipp describes Pancasila as “Indonesia’s national philosophy: belief in the Almighty God, humanism, nationalism, democracy, and social justice” (Kipp 1993, 266).

28. Tara stresses out that while attending the first semester of her undergraduate studies, for the first time in her life she had an opportunity to receive official religious education, since Gadjah Mada University organizes religious classes for students of Buddhist religious affiliation.

29. “Keluarga Mahasiswa Buddhis Universitas Gadjah Mada” or “Family of the Buddhist Students of the Gadjah Mada University.” Henceforth: KHAMADIS.

30. She indicated the year 2000 as the starting year.

Thus ignorance and lack of information—which, in Tara’s opinion, was the main cause of suspiciousness towards and denigration of Buddhism—are gradually, but steadily, decreasing.³¹

Regarding my specifically gendered questions, Tara grounds her views both on her experience and her understanding of the Theravada Buddhist doctrine. Thus, she tells me that in her family, it is the father who is perceived as the “head of family,” though she sees that such family structure is more conditioned by culture—or “traditional Indonesian role of father as the family leader,” as she described it—than by religious teachings. However, she remembers having an aunt on her mother’s side who became *bhikkhuni* for six years and lived in Thailand before returning to Jakarta and finding a job. Apart from being exposed to other religions from her childhood provided that her surroundings were predominated either by Muslims or Catholics, Tara also learned about intra-religious variety. Her maternal uncle is a Mahayana Buddhist, and her paternal grandparents (as described above) are Muslims. From her point of view, inter-religious marriage should not be regarded as problematic—there are plenty of harmonious couples living in such marriages that she could instantly recall.

Tara sees there are no institutional³² or doctrinal impediments preventing women from becoming religious leaders, just as she dismisses that Theravada

31. Tara also remarked that in the recent years, the situation regarding the elementary and secondary school Buddhist religious education significantly improved compared to her childhood years. In addition, she mentions there is an increasing number of STABs (Sekolah Tinggi Agama Budha, or “Buddhist Colleges,” in my translation) in the country licensed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

32. Tara claims that access to religious education (PABAJJA—program for “pre-*bhikkhu* education” in my free translation) is open to both men and women. In fact, she adds that there are gender-sensitive terms for male and female novices attending such educational programs. She also indicated that although both men and women who enroll to such programs follow the same curriculum, there is certain level of segregation between the sexes in terms of using unisex classrooms and dormitories. Her explanation is that such segregation is more of ethical than religious nature—since both prospective *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis* are people who strive to leave worldliness behind them, segregation between sexes might serve, in her opinion, to help them in that it prevents conditions under which sexual desire might arise.

Buddhism teaches that being born as woman denotes “bad karma,” or that men are more likely to achieve *nibbana* than women. Still, she does not claim that such views are held by many lay Buddhists—to the contrary. Again, the fact that women rarely become *panditas* in reality is because there are both cultural and physical constraints to it. Religious leader is often compelled to travel long distances and dwell in isolated villages, which sometimes can only be accessed on foot, and that might prove to be physically exhausting for a woman. In addition, roles and duties of a religious leader presuppose such person’s physical and social mobility (“*pandita* must be active,” as she put it), whereas women are traditionally bound to their families—at least she perceives it to be so in Javanese culture to this day.

Yet, Tara remembers stories she heard in her family about female *panditas*; in fact, she recollects that “in the beginning,” when overall number of *panditas* in Java was still insufficient to serve the needs of growing Buddhist communities, it was a common phenomenon for a *pandita*’s wife to become *pandita* herself. Tara provides me with information that there are two separate national organizations for male and female Theravada *panditas*.³³ As to the religious practices of lay-people, Tara states that there is no institutionally-based segregation between sexes while attending religious service. However, she does acknowledge that women usually sit on the left side, while men occupy the right side of *vihara* during religious service. She feels that this segregation is more of “ethical” or “traditional” nature—in fact, she states that the practice is not strictly followed, since people of both sexes who come late tend to find available seats regardless of the side of *vihara*.

A few days after talking to Mbak Tara, I met my second informant, whom I call here Mas Bram, in accordance with his ethnicity (Javanese). He is 25 years old and has already graduated from the Faculty of Agriculture (Gadjah Mada University). Bram comes from Central Java (Temanggung), and was born into a Theravada Buddhist family. However, his parents were not Buddhists “by birth,” but converted to Buddhism from Islam. In Bram’s opinion, there are

33. MAGABUDDHI for male *panditas*, and WANDANI (Wanita Theravada Indonesia, or organization of “Theravada Women of Indonesia”) for female ones.

various reasons that led his parents to leave Islam on the one side, and choose to become (Theravada) Buddhists on the other. Bram thinks that all the reasons can be divided into two major groups. The group of “external conditions,” as he calls it, is related to the socio-political situation in the country during the 1960’s in general, and the 1965-1966 killings of communists in particular. The “internal conditions” are, in Bram’s words, related to his father’s “internal spiritual quest.” As members of various PKI³⁴ and PKI-affiliated organizations, both his paternal grandfather and his father³⁵ were caught up by the events leading to executions and imprisonment of the PKI members in the mid-1960’s. Bram recounts that his province was known for the overwhelming support PKI enjoyed there. Consequently, the region suffered great losses in the mentioned period—in his opinion Indonesia’s intelligentsia was eradicated during the 1965-1966 killings. His father and grandfather had both been imprisoned without getting a trial during that time, but were released a few years later. Bram says that in those days civil rights were nonexistent; his father could not continue his education while his grandfather was not allowed to teach again after release from prison. Under such circumstances, his family took up farming in order to survive.

These “external conditions” shaped and conditioned the “internal” ones, according to Bram. Since loose religious affiliations were no longer possible, his father was forced to become a devout religious person. However, since his prior religious background was what Bram termed “Islam KTP,”³⁶ meaning that rather than “observant,” he was a “nominal” Muslim, Islam was no longer a possible religious option. In addition, there was a deep political resentment towards Islam in those days in survivors of the 1965-1966 mass killings

34. Partai Komunis Indonesia, “Indonesian Communist Party.”

35. Bram’s father was an activist in a PKI’s youth organization, while his grandfather was a teacher and member of a the PGRI (Persatuan Guru Republik Indonesia, or “Teachers’ Union of Republic of Indonesia”) branch that was affiliated with PKI.

36. Kartu Tanda Penduduk – identification card of Indonesian citizens. Religious affiliation is an obligatory entry, where every citizen is to chose from the list of five (currently six) official religions: Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and (most recently) Konghucu, or “Confucianism.” Religious affiliations/belief systems other than these six are not permitted, and neither are atheism and non-religiousness.

and imprisonments, shared by members of Bram's family. Finally, although it was kept as public secret, Bram recounts that everyone knew that it was Islamic youth organizations that were behind the killings in his region. All these reasons led Bram's father to undergo a spiritual quest for a religion he could adhere to, and found that it was Theravada Buddhism that taught the truth. Indeed, Bram's father felt that Buddhism had much in common with the Javanese "traditional spirituality" and so he became a Buddhist convert, along with his wife (Bram's mother).

Bram received knowledge about the tenets of Theravada Buddhism at the local *vihara*. At home, he learned some stories, received moral admonitions, and was taught to make donations. In elementary school, Bram and other Buddhist pupils were compelled to attend classes where Islamic religion was taught, since there was no instructor for Buddhist religious education available at that time³⁷. Conversely to the elementary school, junior and senior high schools both offered religious Buddhist education, but Bram remarks that it was so only on the schools' initiative, not as part of governmental effort to provide the qualified instructors.³⁸

Bram's opinion on gender roles and religious leadership is that it should depend on one's ability to competently perform the task, not on person's sex, particularly given that he finds no doctrinal or institutional prohibition regarding the women's participation in leadership. Nevertheless, he admits that the role is mostly taken up by men. Bram feels that the reason for men's prevalence in religious leadership is foremost related to having enough time to prepare for taking up the role. It seems, according to him, that women's

37. What left a vivid memory related to his early schooldays was that he and all his classmates, majority of whom were Buddhists, were required to celebrate Islamic religious holidays, Idul Adha included, during which ritual sacrificing of animals takes place. However, the memory of having to eat slaughtered animals is a bitter one, to say the least, since Bram reminds me that this Islamic ritual is in contradiction with one of the basic tenets of Buddhist doctrine.

38. Bram notices that situation has changed henceforth; according to him, most or all schools—both elementary and secondary ones—offer classes in Buddhist religion. He finds that in his schooldays, the number of educated Buddhist instructors was insufficient.

time is mostly spent in preparing food and in other “backstage” activities necessary for organizing public religious celebrations, so that the time left at their disposal for learning the leadership role is insufficient. Likewise, Bram considers that there the number of *bhikkhus* in Indonesia is larger than number of *bhikkhunis* because of “traditional” constraints imposed on women, not because of religious restrictions.³⁹ However, he admits that most lay people hold *bhikkhus* in higher esteem than *bhikkhunis*, even though he does not share that opinion. With respect to inter-religious marriage, Bram is of opinion that there are certain risks involved, since the couple does not share the same views and beliefs, but he is not against it. He adds that according to Buddhist teachings, marriage is not obligatory for anyone, be they man or woman; likewise, obtaining *nibbana* is open to everyone equally and regardless of their sex.

There are problems related to inter-religious relations in Indonesia, in Bram’s opinion. This obvious fact is not as important as are the ways in which government proposes to solve such problems. As a member of a minority religion, Bram realizes that it is the interests of the majority religion that the government will most eagerly attempt to accommodate, and accepts this situation as “normal.” Nevertheless, he feels that inter-religious relations between various minority religions are more sensitive than it might appear at the first glance. For instance, Bram claims that the tension becomes obvious in a mixed community of Muslim, Buddhist and Protestant inhabitants. Since there are certain restrictions imposed on erecting places of worship, Bram believes that by excessive building of churches, Protestants run the risk of irritating the Muslim majority on the one hand, and make it more difficult for Buddhists to obtain building permission for erecting new *viharas* on the other.

39. Bram states that at the moment *bhikkhus* can be ordained in Indonesia since their number is sufficient to enable their ordaining, while number of *bhikkhunis* is still insufficient; consequently Indonesian *bhikkhunis* have to get ordained in other Southeast Asian Buddhist countries (usually Thailand).

Snapshot #2: Vidyasena Vihara Vidyaloka (Jalan Kenari, Gang Tanjung I No. 231, Yogyakarta)

Some ten days elapsed between my visit to *Vihara* Karangdjati and encounter with my informants at Vidyasena.⁴⁰ I first talked to the male informants: Alex (21 years old and earning his undergraduate degree at the Dutta Wacana Christian University in Yogyakarta; he is from West Kalimantan (Pontianak)), Budi (27; already earned an undergraduate degree; from East Kalimantan (Balikpapan))⁴¹, and John (22; currently earning his undergraduate degree at GMU; from North Sumatera (Medan)). All three of them are of Tionghoa ethnicity,⁴² with parents following the Konghucu “tradition,” as the young men usually referred to it, but with Buddhism in their IDs.⁴³ In addition, by becoming “solid” (as opposed to “KTP”) Buddhists, the three young men did not reject their Konghucu background; instead, they refer to it as “culture,” “rituals,” “tradition,” “honoring the ancestors,” “customs handed down from one generation to the next.” In trying to find a way to express that Konghucu-

40. I have talked with five more people at Vidyasena (three boys and two girls).

However, provided the limits of this paper in terms of its proposed length, I find that presenting the conversations one-by-one would push this paper significantly over the bounds of proposed limits. In addition, I conversed with all the boys (and, subsequently, the two girls) simultaneously, and will present the results of the conversation in the form in which they were conducted.

41. Budi was my only informant who had already graduated from university.

42. My use of the term “Tionghoa” is intentional, since it was preferred by my informants, as opposed to the term “Chinese” which, in their opinion, is used derogatorily by the non-Chinese. However, according to Alex, the situation related to the use of the term “Chinese” by ethnic non-Chinese is regarded less insulting by Tionghoa in Kalimantan than in Sumatera where, in John’s opinion, it is used in openly derogatory sense.

43. More specifically, Alex’ parents are still adhering to their Konghucu beliefs and practices, and he regards them “Budha KTP” (see above, footnote 19); Budi’s parents also follow Konghucu “tradition”, with his mother’ additional adherence to the teachings of Maitreya Buddhism, which she combines with following the Konghucu rituals; John’s parents are of Konghucu beliefs, but also follow Mahayana Buddhism. None of their parents opposed to their children’s choice to practice and live according to the teachings of Theravada Buddhism, as long as they respected the family tradition and followed certain rituals and customs related to the practice of Konghucu. Alex, Budi and John are unanimous about their parents allowing their children to freely choose the religion they wanted to follow.

ism⁴⁴ is less than religion, they used a variety of the previously mentioned terms. In addition, John explained that to follow rituals and customs of Konghucu-ism does not imply a compromise with Buddhism; in fact, he states that Buddhism does not prohibit one to pray in places of worship pertinent to any other religious tradition, as long as one keeps in mind the goal of the prayer. In John's opinion, what Konghucu people pray for in *kelenteng*⁴⁵ is some kind of personal gain, whereas Buddhists should pray for the welfare of the others. As long as one keeps these distinctions clear in mind, it does not matter where one prays. In his opinion, *kelenteng* is as good a praying place as is *Vihara*; it is the intention and content of prayer that make all the difference. Likewise, Budi stated that for him Konghucu-ism was tradition, rituals at home and visits he paid to *kelenteng* on certain days to burn incenses with his family. Konghucu-ism, in Budi's opinion, is not a strong belief since it is based on performing rituals and honoring (deified) ancestors, and has no teachings which would help the believer find his/her way when faced with difficulties in life. Similar to them, Alex remembered going to *kelenteng* with his parents to burn incenses and pray to numerous "dewas"⁴⁶ asking them for boons, but never being given any explanation for the meaning of rituals. In addition, he agrees with John and Budi that Buddhism does not reject practice of particular "cultural tradition," as he termed "Konghucu-ism."

44. The coining is intentionally introduced here in order to avoid the English term Confucianism, which is divested of cultural particularities and context within which various "Confucianisms" are practiced. The term "Konghucu-ism," in my opinion, contextualizes Confucianism within Indonesia.

45. The entry (somewhat problematically) defines "kelenteng" as "1. Chinese temple; 2. pagoda" (Echols and Shadily 1989, 273). Conversation with John, Budi, and Alex made me aware of an ongoing "objectification" of religious identity to the place of worship. "*Vihara*" is symbolic of Buddhism, just as (in John's and Budi's words), Konghucu people in Indonesia are often referred to as "orang kelenteng", or "people of *kelenteng*," meaning "those who frequent *kelenteng*."

46. "Dewa" and "dewi" are Sanskrit terms referring to divine beings ("gods" and "goddesses" of polytheistic religions) that are in Indonesian context regarded as ontologically lesser than "Tuhan", the "God" of monotheistic religions.

Alex learned how to become⁴⁷ Buddhist after coming to Yogyakarta for studies. Although he remembers that he had been provided with the religious classes in Buddhism since the junior high school, he had starting practicing Buddhism and learning its teaching in Yogyakarta. At first, he was brought to *Vihara* by friends; then he acquired books and CDs and started studying Buddhism on his own. Budi's situation is different in that when he was born there had already been an established Buddhist community in his surroundings. In addition, the public elementary school he attended offered classes in Buddhist religion by a Buddhist instructor. John attended a Catholic school, and was compelled to follow classes in that religion. Some of his Tionghoa friends who went to the same school eventually became Catholics. He deems that Catholicism attracts Konghucu people more than Protestantism does, and suggests that the reasons for it might be that in Catholicism, the "Chinese" rituals are not forbidden, whereas the Protestantism is more strict in that sense.

Alex, John and Budi agree that the people usually hold *bhikkhus* in greater respect than *bhikkhunis*. In John's view, although there is no Buddhist teaching in which it is stated that women's karma is worse than men's the majority of Buddhists believe so. In terms of segregation between sexes while attending religious service, John proposes that this regulation is intended to maintained the order and prevent the focus of the people be distracted from praying. However, he indicates that this regulation is not strictly followed, since those who come in late are allowed to sit anywhere available. He also indicates that segregation between sexes is something that can be encountered in various religious or customary practices all over Asia. Budi is aware that there is Theravada Sangha for *bhikkhus* which is official, and the one for *bhikkhunis*, which is still unofficial. Instead of offering his view, he stated that this issue is still vividly discussed within the Theravada Sangha. However, Budi and Alex informed me that in Vidyasena organization, both women and men can be (and are) elected as chairpersons.

As for their views and experiences with Buddhist teachings other than Theravada, all three are in no way hostile to the existence of these teachings,

47. "Menjadi" in Indonesian.

but prefer to adhere to the Theravada form of Buddhism. However, they all have occasionally participated in joint celebrations and services, and do not think their participation is problematic in any way.

The two young women I have spoken to subsequently are Sussy and Merry. Sussy is 20 years old, comes from Cirebon (West Java) and is earning undergraduate degree in English at Sanata Dharma University). Sussy's parents are Buddhists. She "learned" her religion both at home and at Sunday school at *vihara*. She attended a Catholic school and classes in that religion, because the school did not provide for a Buddhist religion instructor. She recounts that in the elementary school she was the only Buddhist student, and that she had a few Buddhist friends of Tionghoa descent, but she thought their Buddhism was not "solid"⁴⁸ enough, since their parents were believers of the "KTP" type. In her opinion, that is why most, if not all of those friends already converted to Catholicism. In Sussy's opinion, the reasons for their conversion was that they were influenced by Catholicism as the majority religion where she comes from on the one hand, and never had a solid religious background in Buddhist teachings on the other. Sussy tells me that her father studied teachings of Buddhism on his own, in a personal spiritual quest, which made his religiousness strong. Her mother was Catholic before marrying her father; however, after experiencing Buddhism in everyday life, and after comparing it to tenets of Catholic religion, her mother converted to Buddhism. Her grandparents are of Konghucu descent, but converted to Catholicism at certain point, combining the two belief systems in their everyday lives. Sussy does not find that Buddhism discriminates between men and women, but she also thinks that in wider community, *bhikkhus* are more respected than *bhikkhunis*. When reflecting on inter-religious marriage, Sussy says she does not want to have such marriage since situation in which two people whose basic principles, such as religious beliefs, differ are likely to experience many difficulties. Like John, Budi and Alex, she is open to occasional participation in religious services of Buddhist teachings other than Theravada. Her personal inter-religious relationships are fine, since she has many Protestant, Muslim and Catholic friends. However, she is of opinion that at the state level, Buddhism is being neglected.

48. "Kuat" is how she put it.

John, Sussy, Alex and Merry are unanimous in that they perceive they were never discriminated against on the basis of their religion solely, but rather on the basis of their ethnicity. Indeed, Merry feels that Buddhism in itself is not problematic; nevertheless, since many Tionghoa people are Buddhists, Buddhism is being equated with the Chinese ethnicity and consequently discriminated against. Thus Alex indicates that getting a license for erecting a *vihara* is quite complicated, since it is feared that this act might disturb piousness and religious services of the majority religion in the particular area.

Sussy recounts how she experienced being mocked for being Konghucu and for going to *kelenteng* to burn incenses. However, the mocking would stop after her explaining she was a Theravada Buddhist. Sussy finds that within the Sangha, *bhikkhus* are by far more numerous and more respected than *bhikkhunis*. In fact, she feels that *bhikkhunis* are almost extinct, and wonders whether it is because of the fact that *bhikkhunis* are so rarely encountered nowadays that the wider community respects them less and regards them common.⁴⁹ As for the segregation during religious service, Sussy feels it is an appropriate way of arranging a joint service for men and women, because it does not disturb anyone's spirituality at the moment of prayer.

Merry is 18 years old, she comes from Palemembang and is studying at Duta Wacana Christian University in Yogyakarta. Merry recounts that her parents are believers of the "KTP Buddhist" type, and that her mother's parents have a harmonious inter-religious marriage, without either of them converting to the other's religion. Whereas her maternal grandmother is Buddhist, grandfather is Catholic. Of their two children, one became Catholic, and the other Buddhist. Merry recalls that as a child she was sometimes taken to *kelenteng*, which her parents visited on special, but rare occasions when particular celebrations were held. As a child, Merry was taught that if asked about her religion, she should say that she was a Buddhist. She also remembers how at that time she knew nothing of that religion. Apart from *kelenteng*, in her childhood she also often went to church. Her cousin is Protestant; apart from that, her entire elementary and secondary schooling was through

49. In sense of "ordinary."

attending Protestant schools. As an undergraduate student in Yogyakarta, she is enrolled in a Protestant university.

Merry remembers how ignorant she was about Buddhism as a religion. For her, Buddhism was merely her “identity,”⁵⁰ since she had no understanding of it. However, her visits to *kelenteng* and church were also superficial. Although she used to declare herself as Buddhist from the childhood, she now thinks that her religious feelings and way of life were closer to Catholicism. In junior high school, she was compelled to attend Sunday school held at a *vihara* nearby her house for one year. It was the first time that Merry started learning about Buddhism. After that year, although she became interested in Buddhism, she would go to *vihara* only very rarely, for important celebrations. She had still not gained a deep understanding of Buddhism at that point. It was only after she came to Yogyakarta for her studies (less than a year ago) that she felt she truly wanted to start learning Buddhism. Merry consciously joined KHAMADIS in order to find an environment in which she could learn Buddhism. She says that prior to that, her environment never supported her in learning Buddhism.

Merry remarked that as a woman, she was more enthusiastic about *bikkhunis* than *bikkhus*. She also said that she wondered how it was possible for a woman to choose to follow that path. She does not think that inter-religious marriage is problematic—in fact, her grandparents have such a marriage, and it is a successful one, too. However, what she feels to be highly problematic is inter-ethnic marriage. To exemplify such situation, she recounts the problems her cousin started facing in her family when she announced she wanted to marry an Indian. His being Indian and Hindu is not regarded problematic by her cousin’s parents; but his dark skin is. Generally speaking, Merry thinks her cousin is a rather exceptional case since problems related to the inter-ethnic marriages are usually restricted to prohibiting marriage with “pribumi”⁵¹

50. Those were the exact words she used: “identitas.”

51. This rather problematic racist term (concept) is translated as “indigene, of native stock and not of immigrant blood” (Echols and Shadily 1989, 436). Alex used another term, “Melayu,” which is broadly used in Kalimantan to indicate the same ethno-religious group as the one inferred to by the term “pribumi”.

(Muslim) people. In fact, all my informants stated that it was hard, if not impossible, for them to imagine marrying a “pribumi,” since they were raised with the idea that it is not acceptable to consider marrying one. In addition, it seems that⁵² Islam became equated with “pribumi” ethnicity in a way that all the informants thought it would be impossible for them to marry a Muslim of any, including Tionghoa, ethnicity.

As our meeting was drawing to a close, John remarked that this interview surfaced the mutual “racism” between Tionghoa and “pribumi” people—at least as seen from his perspective. In his memory, racism is related to the late 1950s, when learning Mandarin language was banned by the state. Although in time John became aware that this mutual hostility between the Tionghoa and “pribumis,” which he chose to call racism, was instilled in him by his family, he also realized that he still adhered to it today. Now, however, racism towards “pribumis” is his conscious decision—a sort of warning or precaution he intends to keep vivid in his mind.

INSTEAD OF CONCLUSION: FROM SNAPSHOTS TO PUZZLE-PIECES

After writing down the conversations, the words that immediately came to my mind were the “lengthy process of renegotiating religious ideas and behavior,” as Loraine Aragon chose to describe what she understood under the term “conversion” (Aragon 2002, 43). I also felt overwhelmed with the irreducibility and ramification of all the accounts, experiences, and emotions I gained through this process. I could not—nor did I intend to—extract an image, narrative or metaphor that would fix or otherwise comprehend these personal accounts of living people under a singular framework. None of these accounts replicates the other; and yet, there are certain shared or contested underlying thoughts, common memories, familiar experiences in them. There is a (disrupted) flow of repressed memories, contested histories and beliefs, banned ideologies, denigrated practices, and denied experiences that all refract through tightened renegotiations involved in these persons’ identity-formation processes.

52. They started considering the idea only after I raised the question of marrying a “non-pribumi” Muslim.

Dwelling on the ways in which I could proceed with these vague sensations and incoherent thoughts, I also found myself pondering my personal engagement in objectifying people's lives through conducting an academic study. For whom would I write such a study? How could it possibly benefit the people whose experiences and accounts I take from in order to make a research and build a theory? What kind of theory could possibly be respectful of the "studied" in the way that it would voice, and not silence "the studied"?

As I was searching for Kwok Pui-lan's theoretical framework, I was discovering her concept of "postcolonial imagination," which she further ramified into "historical, dialogical, and diasporic" postcolonial imaginations. "To imagine," she writes, "means to discern that something is not fitting, to search for new images, and to arrive at new patterns of meaning and interpretation."⁵³ [...] I have attached more importance to the cracks, the fissures, and the openings, which refuse to be shaped into any framework, and which are often consigned to periphery. These disparate elements that staunchly refuse to follow the set pattern, the established episteme, the overall design that the mind so powerfully wants to shape, interest me because they have the potential to point to another path, to signal radically new possibilities" (Kwok Pui-lan 2002, 31).

Since, as I wrote in the beginning of the paragraph, it was exactly the "fissures, cracks and openings" that occupied my attention after having written down the conversations, reading further, I learned that what I could not express earlier in this section was well articulated by Kwok Pui-lan as "the postcolonial concerns such as hybridity, deterritorialization, and hyphenated or multiple identities" (ibid., 79). Finally, I learned that she proposes a novel theory—which she calls "the postcolonial theology of difference"—for that, I believe, can be used in my further exploration of Buddhism in Indonesia. Kwok Pui-lan's "hybrid" (to borrow her expression) theory would "attend to the transformation of religious symbols and institutions in migration, exile, diaspora, and transnationalism," as it would be broad enough to accommodate hybridized religious identities instead of excluding them. She thus argues that "[a]s people of religious faith

53. See Pui-lan (2002, 30, footnote 4).

migrate to other cultures, they often form hybridized religious identities in the new contexts, which cannot be pinned down by fixed and reified notions of “religion.” This critical inquiry would require a creative dialogue among theology, religious studies, and ethnic studies[...]” (ibid., 206). She further claims that the “[f]eminist scholars can contribute to a postcolonial theology of difference not simply by adding gender to the categories of analysis, but by placing gender within the wider intrareligious and interreligious network of cultural and religious relationships” (ibid., 207). In line with such thinking, I feel that the gender-sensitive perspectives would enable me to pay attention not only to the “voices of the subalterns,” but also to the subaltern voices.

I find that both historical and contemporary Buddhism(s) in Indonesia can be regarded as “colonial,” as well as the “colonized” phenomena. Buddhism has long become both “indigenized” religion, as it was (and still is) being brought from and sought out for in other (imaginary) realms of both Asian and Western worlds. As such, Buddhism(s) in Indonesia seem to be providing refuge for and legitimizing identities of those who, as hybridized “subalterns” were forced out of other, according to the state ideology unofficial, religious identities. However, Buddhism(s) also seem to be expelling the voices of the Buddhist subalterns. In the process of its theological reconstruction under the control of the state *Pancasila* ideology, Indonesian diverse Buddhisms are being hybridized into new theologies and practices, reflective of constant interaction with ethnic, national, as well as transnational religious ideologies. Some of the authoritarian restrictiveness and politics of exclusion, as well as the in-built patriarchy of the Thai and Sri Lankan Theravada traditions, have been claimed and even institutionalized in Indonesia Theravada Buddhism. Nevertheless, it seems that feminism(s) is also being claimed by those whose vision and experience of Buddhism is more inclusive. I believe that such observations are necessary for a research on Buddhism in Indonesia.

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54. I am indebted to my academic advisor, Ibu Farsijana Adeney-Risakotta, for providing me with this reading material.

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Teravada budizam i rod u Indoneziji: (de)kolonijalizovan susret?

Ivana PRAŽIĆ

Sažetak: Ovaj tekst predstavlja revidiran seminarski rad koji je autorka uobličila u toku pohađanja doktorskih studija u Indoneziji, zbog čega su, kako rasprava o korišćenim teorijama, tako i metodologija rada na terenu vidljivi u procesu izgradnje argumentacije. Autorka nastoji da „pomiri“ feministički pristup, sa svim svojim potencijalno „kolonijalizujućim“ efektima, s etnografskim istraživanjem grupe ispitanica i ispitanika iz dve teravadske budističke zajednice u Džogdžakarti (Centralna Java, Indonezija) po pitanju uloge žena u svakodnevnom, kao i religijski institucionalizovanom, životu u skladu s principima učenja teravadske budizma. U tom smislu, ona omogućava čitaocu/čitateljki uvid u svoj subjektivitet Drugosti u odnosu kako na kontekst Indonezije, tako i na zapadne liberalne demokratije, oslanjajući se u tom razmišljanju na istorijske i političke okolnosti koje uobličavaju njenu Drugost.

Analiza etnografskog materijala prikupljenog na terenu strukturiše narativ načina na koji etnička pripadnost, državna regulativa verskog života, kao i dominantni teološki diskurs i institucionalizovane politike teravadske budizma u Indoneziji, u kombinaciji s rodnim politikama, određuju koje uloge su za žene teravadske budističke veroispovesti prihvatljive i dostupne, a iz kojih su one isključene. S druge strane, analiza izvora omogućuje autorki da identifikuje neke od kanala putem kojih transnacionalni feminizam uspeva da pruži podršku nastojanjima pojedinih ženskih budističkih udruženja u Indoneziji da prevaziđu važeća rodna isključenja i postanu *bikkhuni*, uloga koju im osporavaju ne samo tradicionalne, dominantne teravadske budističke institucije u Indoneziji, već i širi socio-kulturološki rodni okvir.

Konačno, među zaključke istraživanja autorka ubraja i zapažanje da životno doba značajno utiče na reformulaciju rodno uslovljenog verskog života i uloga u njemu. Naime, ispitanici/ispitanice iz obe zajednice, većinom u ranim dvadesetim godinama života, smatraju da bi dominantna teološka učenja, ali i verske institucije vezano za teravadske budizam u Indoneziji, trebalo usaglasiti s principima rodne ravnopravnosti i inkluzije žena. Kako autorka teksta beleži, iz njihovih priča nameće se zaključak da je tumačenje života, pravovernosti i verskih institucija strukturisanih u skladu s principima rodne ravnopravnosti jedna od osnovnih razlika između dolazećih i starijih generacija teravadske budistkinje i budista u Indoneziji.

Ključne reči: teravada budizam, Indonezija, rod, feminizam, kolonijalizam, religija