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Women Under the Bo Tree: Buddhist Nuns in Sri Lanka. By Tessa Bartholomeusz. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. Pp. xx, 284. ISBN 0-5214-6129-4 (cloth), \$59.95.

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This book represents a significant and welcome departure from most studies of “women in Buddhism” which tend to look at women’s roles, women’s capacity to attain liberation, monk’s attitudes towards women, and other such topics. In her introduction, Tessa Bartholomeusz states clearly that her book “is not about female renunciants in Buddhist Sri Lanka; it is about Buddhism from the perspectives of those women who have renounced the world” (11). Bartholomeusz maintains this emphasis throughout her work—a daunting task given the historical focus of much of the book, yet she handles her materials adroitly, with remarkable sensitivity and care. In so doing, she has provided a desperately-needed glimpse into the lives and interests of renunciant women in Buddhist Sri Lanka from the initial resurgence of female renunciation in the 1890s to the present.

Throughout its chronological survey, the book explores and develops four themes: (1) the linkage between Sinhala national identity and the promotion of female renunciation; (2) the impact of gender stereotypes upon the lives of female renunciants; (3) the influence of Westernization on the attributes and patronage of monastic centers for renunciant women; and (4) the contrast between idealized (textual) perceptions of renunciation and the realities experienced by contemporary monastics. These themes are interwoven in Bartholomeusz’s nuanced presentation of the changing vicissitudes of renunciant women and their institutions. Bartholomeusz situates those women firmly within their social, political, and religious contexts, particularly in the transformations entailed in the evolution of “Protestant Buddhism” richly documented by Gombrich and Obeyesekere (*Buddhism Transformed*, Princeton University Press, 1988).

Bartholomeusz focuses her study on three main periods in the resurgence of female renunciation: its inception in the late nineteenth century under the influence of Western Theosophists such as Dharmapāla and the Countess Miranda de Souza Canavarro; its appropriation and promotion 1920–1948 by the Colombo elite who were to become prominent politicians of post-independence Sri Lanka; its transformations in current Sri Lanka where it has been embraced by rural women. In each period, Bartholomeusz draws upon an impressive array of primary source material ranging from newspaper articles and letters, personal correspondence, and fieldwork interviews. Her study contains copious notes. We can be grateful that Bartholomeusz and Cambridge University Press have resisted the tendency to reduce notation. Her study reads well without reference to the notes, but they provide interested scholars with fascinating references.

Appropriately, Bartholomeusz begins her discussion with a brief description of the *Mahāvamsa* account of Bhikkhunī Sanghamitā’s arrival on

Sri Lanka which marked the origins of women's ordination on the island, a line of ordination which mysteriously became extinct in the twelfth century. Unlike men's ordination which similarly became defunct, but which was restored with the assistance of Burmese monks who reinstated full ordination for men, the women's order was allowed to falter. Today, women who don the ochre robes are "lay nuns"; renunciants but not fully ordained members of the sangha. In this brief chapter, Bartholomeusz lays the foundation for the whole book. Sanghamitā brought with her the slip from the Bo Tree which has become an enduring symbol of the Sri Lankan Buddhist "sacred mission: to maintain the purity of the Buddha's message and teachings in a world that is constantly changing" (14). This mission, Bartholomeusz argues, has been inextricably bound with the revival of women's renunciation.

From its inception in the late nineteenth century under the influence of Western Theosophists, the popularity and attributes of women's renunciation have fluctuated in concert with Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and a simultaneous fascination and rejection of the West. Initially promoted as a crucial component of the quest to reeducate Buddhist girls contaminated by Christian missionary activities, the early nunneries and renunciants were imbued with Christian values (59). Similarly, though the political elite in Sri Lanka promoted female renunciation to bolster their rejection of British rule, they mandated a Western style of monasticism upon the lay nuns, insisting that they were actively engaged in social work (113–19). From the outset, the resurgence of women's renunciation was marked with a dual focus on social service and lay meditation, both of which reflect recent innovations in the Buddhist tradition of Sri Lanka. Nonetheless, Bartholomeusz maintains, these transformations led to an acceptance of female renunciation as a respectable choice for women (82).

This respectability, however, was concomitant with renunciant women conforming with the stereotypes of female labor. Even today, renunciant women engage in traditional "women's work," caring for children, nursing, and teaching (see pages 118 and 154). In all the periods documented in Bartholomeusz's work, the circumstances of female renunciants have been imbued with ambiguity. Their assumption of gender stereotypes grants them respectability, but simultaneously poses questions about their monastic status: they are like male monastics, but they are also like householder women. Their promotion by Buddhist nationalists such as the Theosophists in the nineteenth century, the Colombo elite in pre-independence Ceylon, and expatriate Buddhist monks in America lends support and credibility to their religious vocation, yet, when Buddhism no longer needs active promotion, their fortunes decline (see in particular, the discussion of such waning sup-

port, 126–29). Their status is clearly subordinate to that of monks, yet they claim power and autonomy as concomitant with their decision to renounce (133–36). And, perhaps paradoxically to Westerners, they live as Buddhist renunciants, yet most would not accept full ordination even if it were possible (136–38).

It is in her treatment of these ambiguities that Bartholomeusz's strength lies. For me, the heart of the book is chapter seven in which Bartholomeusz transcribes her interviews with lay nuns. The paradoxes they describe poignantly illustrate the complexities that have pervaded Buddhist women's lives as recorded in textual and contemporary sources. Bartholomeusz is to be commended for highlighting this complexity. Her experiences with these women adds depth to her analysis, even when she treats historical sources. She has breathed life into women of the past, as is clear in the inclusion of the "Dramatis personae" which precedes the introduction (xvii–xx).

I would not, however, recommend this book for the general reader. Students should have some background in both the texts and in Sri Lankan history and geography in order to fully appreciate Bartholomeusz's contributions. Some of her analysis is also a bit superficial. For example, though her analysis of more recent historical sources is beautifully nuanced, she occasionally equates textual representations of women with "early Buddhist attitudes about women and world-renunciation" (128). Similarly, she accepts uncritically women's autobiographical statements as statements of fact, devoid of possible reconstructions and motivations. For example, on the basis of her interviews, Bartholomeusz repeatedly affirms the resistance of families towards the renunciation of their daughters, yet acknowledges that many of the lay nuns would not survive without the contributions of family (see in particular 144). Here, I at least, would like more analysis of the functions and motivations of the lay nuns' narratives.¹ These criticisms, however, are very minor. This book is an excellent resource for scholars and students and is a "must read" for anyone working on topics concerning Buddhist nuns, Sri Lankan history or ethnography, or Buddhism today.

Notes

1. Bartholomeusz might want to consult Elaine Lawless, "Rescripting Their Lives and Narratives: Spiritual Life Stories of Pentecostal Women Preachers" *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 7 (1991): 53–72 and, idem, "ōI was afraid someone like you . . . an outsider . . . would misunderstand": Negotiating Interpretive Differences Between Ethnographers and Subjects" *Journal of American Folklore* 105 (1992): 302–14.]