



Dialectic nature of digital culture: theoretical analysis of evolutionary ‘digital Buddhism’ of social media debate

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ABSTRACT

Popular Buddhism is one of the key cultural aspects in present Sri Lankan society. Its main cause is the characteristics of the path of the Buddhism which it currently travels. Digital anthropology is a field that studies the complex relationships between human culture and the concept of digital. Prominently, digital is a concept based on binary numbers which means 1 and 0. This research aims to provide some insight into the behavior of digital within the social institution of religion. To accomplish these objectives the researchers utilized a Facebook page (Siri Sadaham Ashramaya) and conducted an analysis through the comments from its purposively selected post and it was based on speech act theory elaborated by J. L. Austin (1962) and John Searle (1975). The theoretical approach for this research is the first principle of digital anthropology: dialectic nature of digital culture, developed by Daniel Miller and Heather Horst. A hypothesis was applied as: modern popular Buddhism expand the dialectic nature of culture through social media that consisted of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis as Hegel and Marx stated. The results of the study proved the hypothesis and the opinions of the respective audience’s reactions and comments among the applied Facebook page, and emphasized the dialectical nature of digital culture which means the contribution to the increment of logical background of the culture. Consequently, this study suggests that the modern popular Buddhism concept evolved into a novel concept as “Digital Buddhism” and it can be defined as a new division of Sri Lankan Buddhism as proposed by Gananth Obeyesekere and Richard Gombrich during 1988s. Researchers propose a newly designed model to analyze the digital nature and the theoretical perspective of digital anthropology utilizing the nature of modern popular Buddhism.

KEYWORDS: *anthropology, digital, dialectic, popular Buddhism, culture*

1 INTRODUCTION

Culture is subject to constant change. It does not age in one generation and is passed down from generation to generation. The culture is complex. It is also not easy to understand. It is also a problematic statement that "every culture is the same." Human customs, beliefs, values, religions, myths, society, language, literature, clothing, etc. are all in the context of culture. The digital proposition is one of the most powerful and popular propositions of modern times. This paper seeks to explore modern Sri Lankan Buddhism in terms of religion and digitization, one of the key elements that fall under that culture. The carrier of physical culture and immaterial culture under discussion in cultural anthropology is the established language of any social mechanism. The digital proposition is based on the encoding of binary numbers. The binary numbers are 1 and 0. They are numbers. Numbers are the essence. Mathematics is the unsanctioned language of science (Galileo, 1623). Digital, which consists of binary numbers, is also an indirect language. If language is a carrier of a culture, digital is also a carrier of that culture from one generation to another. This paper is about another aspect of popular Buddhism that has not yet been discussed in the digitally transmitted Sri Lankan culture.

Buddhism is one of the prominent religions in the world which has been constructed through the statements of the Buddha. Buddhism is a cultural element that holds a prominent place in the Sri Lankan social machinery like no other

religion. This religion, which was developed here in a broader and better way than it was established in India, can be seen in many ways defined as a religion and a philosophy born of the wisdom of the Buddha. Whichever way it is defined, for the most part it is a religion. When considering the modern Sri Lankan society, we can clearly identify a commercialized and politicized Buddhism that has slightly departed from the true meaning of the doctrine. Mostly, the popular culture is the main factor for this condition, and the present location of Buddhism was characterized as 'popular Buddhism' by various scholars (Amarasekara, 2019). In this paper, the researchers attempt to emphasize the new dimension (Digital Buddhism) of popular Buddhism focusing on the digital behavior of Sri Lankan Buddhists through anthropological perspective by questioning a novel model to describe the first principle of digital anthropology. Main objective of this research is to build a new model utilizing digital anthropological theories with the support of linguistic approach known as speech act theory (Winograd and Flores, 1986).

1.1 Popular Buddhism and digitalization

When pondering on the concept of popular Buddhism, it can be seen that the academic works of Professor Gananath Obeyesekere and Richard Gombrich have played a significant role. Mostly they (Obeyesekere & Gombrich, 1988) indicated the changing process of Sri Lankan Buddhism through the concept of "Protestant Buddhism" in late 1800s along with the contribution of Colonel

Olcott and Anagarika Dharmapala. According to Daya Amarasekara (2019), Sri Lankan Buddhist nature was evolved basically through three phases:

- i. Protestant Buddhism
- ii. Sinhala Buddhism
- iii. Popular Buddhism

There is nothing wrong with referring to the five great debates (Pancha Maha Vāda) of 1865 as the main factor influencing the restoration of the declining Sri Lankan Buddhist identity. The arrival of Henry Steele Olcott on February 17, 1880 is the turning point of Sri Lankan Buddhism. With the formation of the Theosophical Buddhist Society, Blavatsky's knowledge of the supernatural forces she possessed, administrative and legal knowledge through Olcott's military leadership, contributed to the creation of a broad religious force. Critics pronounce that Olcott succeeded in carrying out a symbolic revolution in the Sri Lankan Buddhist way of life through the Theosophical Buddhist Association. In particular, the creation of the Buddhist flag, the creation of Buddhist question posters, the transformation of Vesak into a public holiday, the creation of Vesak hymns (Bhakthi Geetha) in keeping with the format of Christmas carols, and the introduction of Vesak greeting cards in line with Christmas greeting cards. They practiced practical Buddhism through this Protestant Buddhism. One of the main points made by the two authors here is that Olcott is merely a patron of Protestant Buddhism. The strongest follower here is Dharmapala. From the time when Olcott said that the Tooth Relic in the Temple of the Tooth in

Kandy was an animal bone until the separation of him and Dharmapala in 1900, the revised Buddhist behavior that emerged through the Sri Lankan middle class has evolved with significant landmarks to this day.

This research implies a new concept as 'Digital Buddhism' to these stages as a modern-day evolutionary progression, together with the ideas of digital anthropology. The concept of 'digital' is one of the most powerful and popular propositions of modern times, especially in a context where digitalized and immaterial cultural elements are also being used extensively during this current pandemic. It is rapidly changing many aspects of society. The digital concept affects not only the fields of education, health, communication, administration, but also religion, which directly affects human emotions. According to Campbell and Evolvi (2019), digital religion studies provide a better understanding of the digital media's impact upon culture within a broader context. Digital anthropology is one of the newest fields in cultural anthropology which studies the relationship between human culture and digital. Particularly, human digital behavior is one of the prominent sections which converges through following area. Throughout this research, we apply the digital anthropological knowledge to the modern popular Buddhism, and aims to construct a novel understanding about the digital Buddhism concept.

Mostly the ideas of Daniel Miller, Heather Horst (2012) were applied along with the tenets of digital anthropology, as they have proposed six basic principles in

digital anthropology, and to achieve the objectives of this research, we focused on the 1st principle of itself stated as, and the digital itself intensifies the dialectical nature of culture (Miller and Horst, 2012, p. 3). Under the following theoretical perspective, we utilized the speech act theory proposed by J. L. Austin. Later, John Searle brought the characteristics of the idea into much higher proportions.

Dialectic is one of the prominent concepts developed by Fredrich Hegel during 19th century. It is a set of principles rather than a method. Through dialectic thinking, we can identify three contradictions: development stages as follows:

- i. Thesis
- ii. Antithesis
- iii. Synthesis

A thesis, gives growth to its reaction; an antithesis negates the thesis; and the friction between the two being determined by means of a synthesis. According to Horst and Miller (2012) this dialectic thinking can be identified in digital culture. Digital has the capability to increase the logical nature of culture. Through this research we propose that the following dialectic nature can be discovered through social media platforms in popular Buddhism.

1.2 The speech act theory

The speech act theory reflects language as a type of action, instead of method, to communicate and express ideas. Yule (1996) points out that generally, speech acts are actions accomplished through statements. According to Austin's theory

(1962), there are three categories of action on what we say, as following.

- i. Locutionary act
- ii. Illocutionary act
- iii. Perlocutionary act

Literal meaning of what is said can be defined as locutionary act. When considering an example, "it is hot outside" refers to the temperature. Illocutionary act is the social purpose of what is said. As an example, for illocutionary act, "it is hot outside" means a request not to go outside. Perlocutionary act can be defined as the effect of what is said. Considering previous examples, if someone closes the door, it can be defined as a perlocutionary act. John Searle (1975, as quoted in Pebrianto, M, Latifani, H & Awaliyah, D 2018) took these ideas into new dimensions and proposed five major divisions of communicative functions.

- i. Declaration
- ii. Representative
- iii. Expressive
- iv. Directive
- v. Commissive

When considering the first speech act, it emphasizes the acts that change the world via their articulation. When a priest says, "I now pronounce you husband and wife", it means the declaration speech act. Representative means the acts that state what the speaker believes or not. When someone says, "Mars has aliens" it verifies the second category of the speech acts, 'representative'. Expressive means the speech acts that state and can be in the form of assertions of happiness, discomfort, likes, or disappointment. Thanking, apologizing, and welcoming

are some of the major statements that can be utilized in expressive. When considering directive, it displays the speech acts that the speaker uses to get someone else to do something. Commands, orders, invitations, advice, begging, request, and suggestions are some of the prominent statements that can be identified under this category. "Could you please pass the dish?", "don't touch my car!" are some examples for directive speech acts. In commissives, speakers commit themselves to some future actions. Promises, plans, vows, threats, offers, refusals are some statements that can be classified through it and they can be completed by the speaker alone, or by the speaker as a part of a group. "I promise, I will do that again" is an example for the commissive speech act category.

This research emphasizes that by using the 1st principle of digital anthropology, and the speech act theory, we can observe the digital behavior of popular Buddhism in social media platforms, especially in Facebook pages. This type of research can be beneficial for researchers who have specialized in cultural anthropology and multidisciplinary viewpoint studies.

2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research was based on two prominent theoretical foundations, as the

first principle of digital anthropology (dialectic nature of digital culture) which was proposed by Daniel Miller and Heather Horst, and the speech act theory of J. L. Austin and John Searle. To examine these theoretical phenomena, we used one of the significant Facebook pages which emphasizes the characteristics of modern popular Buddhism known as 'Siri Sadaham Ashramaya'. Main justification for applying this page was the widespread audience (more than 160,000) and the content of its posts. Among hundreds of posts, one post titled "Rahath bawa kiyanne tharkayak" (Arahantship is an argument) was purposively selected which engaged very much with the audience. This post attracted more than thousand reactions and more than hundred comments and shares. We did not pay attention to the posts which did not have a leading engagement with the audience, and also disregarded the reply comments. The method used in this research was descriptive qualitative. The data were examined by first collecting the comments from the respective Facebook page and then, sorting out and classifying them according to the patterns based on the speech act theory. Later, we analyzed it through the three divisions of dialectic thinking- thesis, antithesis, and synthesis- to discover the validity of the first principle in digital anthropology.

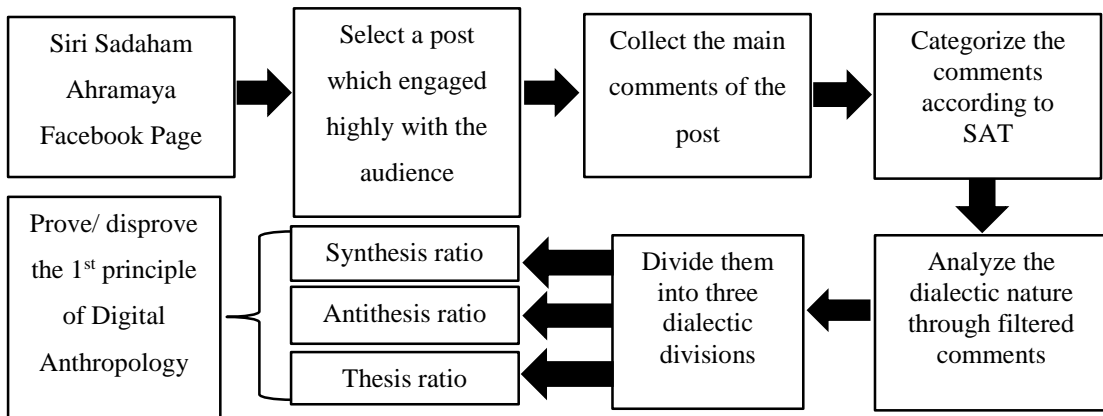


Figure 1: Research framework

3 RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Popular Buddhism is one of the significant concepts emerged under the popular culture concept. Present Sri Lankan Buddhism has been adapted according to the time and space. The social, political and cultural settings that took place at distinct periods have influenced Sri Lankan Buddhism. Walpola Rahula Thero (1956) once stated, from the time Buddhism became the state religion, it began to change. One of the major motivations for this religious transformation is the influence of politicization. Gananath and Gombrich stated (1988) about the Protestant Buddhism concept due to social change of late 18th century with the influence of Olcott and Anagarika Dharmapala. It created key modifications in Sinhalese Buddhism. Robert Redfield's (1956) two principles known as 'Great Tradition' and 'Little Tradition' have played considerable roles in this context. Gananath utilized these two notions to explain his Sinhala Buddhism model. As he explains, the great tradition is found clearly in priests, and leaders. Little tradition includes villagers and their

behaviors. When considering the present Buddhism, we can clearly discover that these two aspects were connected through digitalization. 'Siri Sadaham Ashramaya' is a classic example for the modern popular Buddhism concept.

Siri Sadaham Ashramaya is a temple situated in Bellanthara, Dehiwala, Sri Lanka. Siri Samanthabhadra Thero is the prominent figure who makes controversial statements from here which demonstrate the nature of modern popular Buddhism. When considering the digital behavior of this religious establishment, it has two social media platforms and an official website under their official name. This research was accomplished when their Facebook page came up with more than 169,884 audiences. This page is one of the most popular pages which gets updated each day with various types of posts. Generally, their every post reaches a considerable audience, as well as most of their posts engage highly with people, which can be identified from reactions, comments, shares and views of the relevant post.

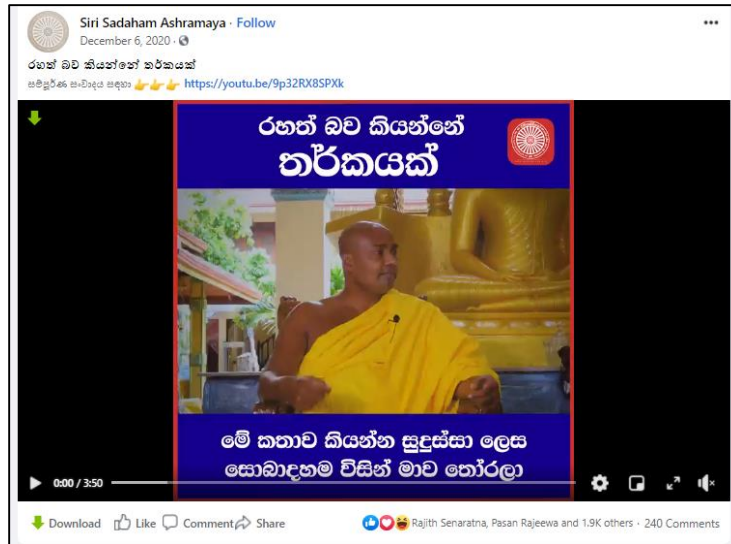


Figure 2: Selected post from the Siri Sadaham Ashramaya Facebook page (Siri Sadaham Ashramaya 2020).

Based on the above mentioned post, comments (reply comments were disregarded) were collected, and classified as speech acts as shown in table 1 below:

Table 1: speech act classification with percentages according to comments

No	Types of Speech Act	Σ	%
1	Declaration	1	1.72
2	Representatives	30	51.72
3	Expressive	10	17.24
4	Directives	14	24.13
5	Commissive	3	5.17

When considering the dialectic thinking among the comments, following types of classification were identified.

Table 2: Classification of the comments according to dialectic thinking

	Σ	%
Thesis	10	17.24
Antithesis	35	60.34
Synthesis	13	22.41

According to the data that were analyzed, high amount of representative speech acts (51.72%) were observed. Only one declaration act was found, and it was the caption of the post stated by the relevant priest. Directives, which means the statements like promises, plans, vows and threats were 24.13%. When considering the ratio of the dialectic nature through

comments, more antithesis comments were found with 35%. 17.24% of comments belonged to thesis, and 22.41 were synthesis. More antithesis statements were found among the comments of the respective post. Following table shows some examples of the comments for above mentioned categories.

Table 3: Comments which emphasize the dialectic nature.

Thesis	Antithesis	Synthesis
<p>ඔබ වහන්සේ කිසිදු ලාබ අපේක්ෂා වෙන් තොරව සියලුම සත්ත්වයාගේ යහපත පිනිසම සද්ධර්ම ය දේශනා කරයි. ඔබවහන්සේගේ දේශනා අවබෝධ වන්නේ පරාර්තකාමී සිතුවිලි බුද්ධිමත් අයට පමනි. ඉතාමත්ම සරලව බුදුන් වහන්සේ ගේ ධර්ම මාර්ගය පිලිබදව කෙරෙන විගූහයෙන් පැහැදිලි වන්නේ ස්වාභාව ධර්මයට අනුව තමාගේ සිත පිලිබදව සාකච්ඡාවකි.... වචනයේ පරිසමාපන්නියෙන්ම ක්‍රියාවෙන්ද තමාගේ ජීවිතයේ ගමන් යන ජීවමාන මුනිවරයාට නමස්කාර කරමි. 🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏</p>	<p>මේවා වාචාල මිසක් කිසිදු වටිනා කමක් නැත. මේ අයත් පවතින තත්වයට සාපේක්ෂව "කන්ට සුත්‍රයක් හදාගෙන. එව්වරයි</p>	<p>සද්ධර්මය වචනවලින් සොයන්නාට දෘෂ්ටි ගත වීමට පමණක්ම ඉතිරි වේ. යමෙක් පරම ක්ෂේමය වූ මැදුම් පිළිවෙත නමානුළ පරිපූර්ණ දැයි විමසද්දී (අවංකවීමෙන් හා විවෘත්ත වීමෙන්) තමාගේ යථාර්තය දැකිය හැක. අවබෝධයෙන් විනිශ්චය කළ හැකි.</p>

Contemplating this data, one can clearly identify the theoretical themes of SAT in posts that involve a high engagement with the audience. Anyone can clearly classify

the comments through the negative and positive point of view of them. Comments can be categorized according to the dialectic nature of them. Thesis, antithesis, and synthesis characteristics can be simply identified through the

comments, and they are useful to prove or disprove the tenets of digital anthropology.

4 CONCLUSIONS

This study was an enquiry into the contemporary Buddhism in Sri Lanka from a digital anthropological perspective, and sought to examine changes there in the context of the current digital age. The researchers proposed one of the prominent principles of digital anthropology, which was expounded by Daniel Miller and Heather Horst (2012), dialectic nature of digital culture. To prove the main hypothesis, we utilized one of the significant characteristics of modern popular Buddhism, Facebook page of Siri Sadaham temple. The researchers applied the speech act theory proposed by Austin and Searle. The results show the dialectic nature of popular Buddhism through modern social media platforms, and Speech Act Theory is a better way to analyze the comments. The researcher was able to confirm the first principle of digital anthropology by highlighting the dialectical properties of those comments. Hence, it can be concluded that modern popular Buddhism can be examined from a digital anthropological point of view. It can be described as a new form of knowledge and an exploration of a concept such as religion from a new approach in anthropology. One of the main conclusions is that there is a greater tendency for synthesis of ideas in the digital behavior of modern Buddhism. Thus, we propose this model for investigation of the other aspects of Buddhism too. It is important to note that

the use of digital anthropological knowledge as an innovative dimension for research on religion from an anthropological perspective opens unprecedented levels of research. It may be suggested that in the future, anthropological cultural studies, as well as the study of religious institutions, will lead researchers to pursue such new dimensions to preserve the holistic nature of conventional anthropology.

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