

Dying Demons, Rising Gods and the Rupavahini

An Essay on the Production of Identity in Sri Lanka

Paper presented at the

Symposium Heim.at tanzt

Tanzästhetiken und Körperliche Identitätspolitik

Dance Aesthetics and Identity Politics of Bodies

June 16. – 17. 2014

Concept

Gustavo Fijalkow, Maren Zimmermann

Organiser

Institut für Tanz und Bewegungskultur

Deutsche Sporthochschule Köln

Wolfgang Mey, Hamburg

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Foreword

In the aftermath of colonialism, many independent new nations faced an enormous scope of challenges, ranging from decolonizing the notions and structures of the past to shaping prospects for the future. In short: The task of state- and nation-building, and along with it, the construction of a new national identity.

The construction of a new identity in Sri Lanka was a process which was to provide the ideological ground for many decisions the political class was to take later.

In the course of this process, all kinds of artists and specialists of all disciplines, of literature, dance, theatre, music and rituals, were demanded to contribute to a new cultural mainstream.

While often it had been the aim of political strategies, for instance in India, to reconcile divergent or even opposing ethnic and cultural traditions, Sri Lanka chose a different approach in constructing a national identity.

Ceylon, this name was later changed into Sri Lanka could fall back upon a rich cultural heritage of 2500 years of history. Much of the island's history was marked by conflicts between Tamil people from South India and Sinhalese people, who had come most probably from Bengal during the first centuries B.C. While the Tamils were Hindus, Sinhalese were Buddhists. This conflict was, however, not a permanent one, the "golden age" of Lanka, as it was then called, dates back into the time of the rule of the Tamil king Elara (205 – 161 B.C.), later slain by a competing Sinhalese prince who followed him on the throne.

Yet, notwithstanding peaceful times of living together or apart, the Tamil-Sinhalese relationship, perceived and exploited as dichotomy, was chosen to provide the blueprint for the construction a national identity.

Territory, rule, religion, language, culture, and participation and access to resources were the frames, in which an overarching cultural and political identity was shaped after independence. Its roots reach back deep into history of the island.

In Sri Lanka we face today

- a linguistic nationalism
- a cultural nationalism
- a Buddhist religious nationalism, represented and carried forward by parts of the Sangha, the congregation of monks, going along with the suppression of other beliefs

- a ruthless political centralisation in Sri Lanka resulting in a political system which is not legitimated by suffrage but by the interests of clientele-systems
- a growing economic disparity.

A unified territory was a basic notion, though it had been contested between the two peoples, the legitimating of rule was linked to the possession of the sacred tooth-relic, said to be a tooth of the historic Buddha; whoever owned the tooth-relic was said to be the rightful ruler. Buddhism was to be the religion representing the state; the Sinhalese language was the language of the majority.

Sri Lanka's population consist of 70, 2 % Buddhists, 12, 6 % Hindus, 15, 4 % Tamils, 9, 7 % Muslims, and 7, 4 % Christians. These figures mirror roughly the percentage in terms of population distribution. Then there are 40.000, Burgher, descendents of interethnic marriages between Dutch, British and (usually) Sinhalese or Tamil women (Census of 2012).

The indigenous Vedda, in earlier years hunters and gatherers in the forests, account for a few hundred persons. Today all live in settlements.

On History

The kingdom of Anuradhapura

Around 500 BC, immigrants from India came to the island and developed in the course of the time an effective civilization based on wet-rice cultivation. This went along with the construction of reservoirs and dams and an impressive dagoba-architecture.

The king was the ruler of country and responsible for maintenance of the law, the welfare of his subjects, he was the chief commander of the army, and the protector of the faith. The link of the early Sinhalese ruler Devanampiya Tissa (250-210 BC) to the Emperor Asoka of India led to the introduction of Buddhism by Mahinda, the son of Asoka around 250 BC. Sangamitta, the daughter of Asoka brought a sapling of the historic Bo-tee under which the historic Buddha had reached enlightenment to Lanka.

The Anuradhapura kingdom covered the whole island during the 2nd century BC, but it frequently fought and coexisted with other dynasties on the island over the centuries, especially Tamil rulers. The boundaries between Anuradhapura and various South Indian kingdoms were frequently shifting, and Anuradhapura was also involved in conflicts in South India.

The kingdom of Anuradhapura kingdom was frequently invaded by South-Indian forces, and eventually the capital was eventually abandoned. Polonnaruwa, further southeast was made the new capital.

The Kingdom of Polonnaruwa

The Kingdom of Polonnaruwa was the second major Sinhalese kingdom of Sri Lanka. It lasted from 1055 to 1212.

Tank-culture facilitated a growing population and the production of agricultural surplus. Polonnaruwa was then one of the great Asian capitals. During this time, fights with Tamil invaders continued.

After Polonnaruwa lost its political power, Sinhalese power shifted to the southwest of the island, and between 1253 and 1400 there were another five different capitals, none of them, however, as powerful as the earlier capitals.

The powerful Tamil kingdom of Jaffna expanded to cover a huge part of the island. When Arab traveler Ibn Batuta visited Lanka in 1344, he reported that it extended south as far as Puttalam on the north-west-coast.

The Colonial Powers

The Portuguese

At the heart of the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka had been a trading port long before Arab traders arrived in the 7th century A.D. bringing with them their new Islamic faith. Gems, cinnamon, ivory and elephants were the valued items of commerce. Early Muslim settlements were founded in Jaffna and Galle.

The first Europeans who visited the island were the Portuguese. They went ashore in what is today Galle in the south of the island in 1505. The arrival of this European power in search of trade resources and trade routes, and aiming at converting the local population to Christianity, forced their competitors, the Muslims, who could rely on an international network of trade, to retreat inland to avoid persecution.

The warring Sinhalese kingdoms were unable to ward off the intruders. The Portuguese founded forts and gradually extended their control over the coastal areas in the early 16th century.

The Dutch

In 1602 the Dutch came to the island, as keen as the Portuguese on dominating the lucrative spice-resources and -traffic in the Indian Ocean.

The king of Kandy, then the capital of Lanka, made a treaty with the Dutch in 1638 to get rid of the Portuguese. The Dutch were to hand over the coastal areas the Portuguese had held to the Kandyan king. In return, the king in Kandy would grant the Dutch a monopoly over trade on the entire island. The agreement never really worked, and by 1660 the Dutch controlled the whole island except the kingdom of Kandy and it was not until 1656 that Colombo fell into their hands.

Whereas the Portuguese invaders merely extracted resources, the Dutch shaped the coastal areas according to their economic interests. The infrastructure was expanded and improved; canals were built along the west coast to transport cinnamon and

other crops. They reached from Negombo in the north-west right down south to Ambalangoda, then an important collecting place for cinnamon and other spices.

The British

The British, at that time fully engaged in establishing their rule in India, viewed initially Sri Lanka during the Napoleonic Wars in strategic terms only, and considered Trincomalee, the only deep-sea harbour in the north-east of the island as an outpost to counter the French influence in India. After the French took over the Netherlands in 1794, the pragmatic Dutch ceded Sri Lanka to the British for 'protection' in 1796. The British acted quickly, making the island a colony in 1802 and finally taking over Kandy, the old capital in the up-country in 1815. Only three years later the first unified administration of the island by a European power was established.

The British found that the hilly lands were suitable for coffee, tea and rubber cultivation. First attempts to cultivate coffee failed, a disease destroyed the plants, but by the mid-19th century, tea had become a staple product for the British market, bringing great wealth to a small number of British tea planters and merchants. The planters imported large numbers of Tamil workers as labourers from South India to work the estates; soon they made up 10% of the island's population.

Ceylon turned out to be a most profitable colony of the British Empire. Yet, like in India, the 1930 brought changes and political reforms and after World War II the British negotiated the island's dominion status. This ended with the Ceylon Independence Act of 1947, which formalised the peaceful transfer of power.

The turns

Three major turns mark the recent history of the island; they define the relationship between art and the construction of identity in Sri Lanka.

As first turn I will refer to the "Sinhala only-Bill", the second turn relates to the decision to consider Buddhism as state religion; the taking over of neo-liberal economic concepts will be the third turn to be discussed.

The First Turn. Independence and Linguistic Nationalism

In 1956, Solomon Bandaranaike was elected to power in a wave of Sinhalese nationalism. In the same year the Senate was abolished and Sinhala was established as the official language, with Tamil as a second language.

This "Sinhala Only-Bill" disenfranchised Sri Lanka's Hindu and Muslim Tamil-speaking population: with the stroke of a pen, almost 30% of the citizens were barred from government jobs and services. They had held many posts in the colonial administration and were often accused as collaborators. The Bill was of a highly disruptive power and aimed at narrowing the cultural perspective of an overarching CULTURE on the island. Although tensions had been simmering since the end of colonial rule, this decision marked the beginning of Sri Lanka's ethnic and political conflict, which was quelled in the 2009 victory over the LTTE's forces (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam)

This measure coincided with the 2500th anniversary of the Buddha's paranibbana, which provided an ideal background of the clergy's religious fervour.

The box of Pandora was opened. A mechanism was set into operation, which unfolded its destructive potential slowly and over a long time. It was fostered by political decisions, which supplemented this first move. I will follow up these decisions one by one.

In 1957 a commission was installed. It was to frame proposals how Buddhism could enhance its dominating position in the country. The Sinhalese-Tamil rift widened. In 1958 the first major riots between Sinhalese and Tamils flared up in Colombo, they were a direct result of the government's language policy.

A similar scenario played out in 1970, when a law was passed favouring Sinhalese students for admission to universities, thus reducing numbers of Tamil students.

In this ideological context the Ministry of Cultural Affairs with a "Department for Official Language Affairs" was established. The vision of the ministry meant to uplift "Sri Lankan culture in order to achieve the unique ambition of upgrading Sri Lankans to the position of spiritually developed and sensitive people."

This Ministry was to channel state patronage for literature and arts and to organise the implementation of the government's language policy. Culture, language and national policy were thus intertwined ideologically from the very beginning

Still today, the Sinhala Only- Law echoes in the current cultural developments and debates.

In 1970 Mrs. Bandaranaike of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and her three-party "anticapitalist coalition" won a landslide victory. Centralisation was on the march. The Senate was abolished on 2 October 1971 and replaced the House of Representatives with a unicameral National State Assembly.

The Second Turn. State-Religion and Nationalism

In 1978, a new constitution was adopted. In Chapter 9 the constitution decreed:

"Buddhism. The Republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place and accordingly it shall be the duty of the State to protect and foster the Buddha Sasana, while assuring to all religions the rights granted by Articles 10 and 14(1)(e)."

Buddhism received state patronage throughout the centuries, the Sangha, the congregation of monks, gained a substantial influence in the power-play of Sri Lankan history. Though priests are not considered to mix with mundane matters, they maintain a strong position in politics, often taking an ultra-nationalist stand today.

Buddhism had always a close link to the political system. When in 1972 the country adopted a new constitution, Buddhism was given the primary place as THE country's religion and enjoyed ongoing government promotion.

Buddhist priests gain an increasingly powerful role in the formation of Sinhalese identity. "Saffron terror" is the term for a rise in religious nationalism fueled by state; sponsored post-war Sinhala Buddhist triumphalism is rampant.

Media report that after the war with the LTTE was won, Buddhists have attacked dozens of mosques and churches and called for boycotts on Muslim-owned businesses and bans on headscarves and halal foods.

Buddhists mobs attacked nearly 20 mosques in 2013, according to Sri Lanka's capital police.

More than three Christian places of worship were reportedly targeted in January 2014.

Three persons were reported dead and 80 wounded after attacks of Buddhist "activists" on mosques and Muslim-owned shops in Alutgama and Beruwala in June 2014. The police remained inactive until emergency was declared in the area.

At boisterous rallies, Buddhist priests claim Muslims would recruit children, marry Buddhist women and divide the country. Allegations of Muslim religious extremism are part of the nationalist propaganda.

Nationalist Buddhist groups say their mission is to "save the Sinhala race", which makes up 74 per cent of the population. In recent years, radical nationalist groups such as *Bodu Bala Sena* (BBS, Buddhist Power Force) and *Ravana Balaya* (Ravana Power) have campaigned against religious minorities in Sri Lanka.

This sponsored and tolerated violence against minorities, be they Tamil, Christian or Muslim is part and parcel of the extension of a militant Buddhist view.

"This is a Buddhist nation, so why are they trying to call it a multicultural society?" said Galagoda Atte Gnanasara, the 37-year-old pulpit-pounding monk, one of the co-founders of such radical movements in 2012. "Not everyone can live under the umbrella of a Buddhist culture."

The clauses of the constitution concerning the position of Buddhism had yet another effect. It was but another means to curb Tamil influence and participation in politics, economy and culture. Anti-Tamil policies continued and were supported by yet another player: The then leftist Sinhalese Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front) attempted to overthrow the government in an armed rebellion in 1971. With Soviet, British, and Indian aid, the rebellion was subdued after heavy fighting. A whole generation of students was said to have been killed in the counter-insurgency actions.

The war on the Tamil Tigers (1983–2009) is, among other aspects, a long-term result of the Sinhala-Tamil-dichotomy that has directly and indirectly influenced the formation of identities in the island.

1983 communal riots took place. The Tamil community faced a backlash from Sinhalese rioters including widespread killing, the destruction of shops, homes and attacks on Tamil persons.

The death toll is believed to have been around 3000. Around 18,000 Tamil homes were destroyed, with 150,000 leaving the country, resulting in Tamil diasporas in Canada, the UK, Australia and other western countries. In a short time the Tamil intelligentsia had left the country.

Fighting with the Tamil insurgents persisted with changing successes for both the Army and the Tigers, until in May 2009 the LTTE was completely defeated.

The Third Turn. Neo-Liberalism I

“All is Business.”

By 1977 the conservative UNP was elected to power, the country was opened to neo-liberal economic policies.

The constitution was rewritten. The document of 1978 drastically altered the nature of governance in Sri Lanka, continuing a process that had begun already in the early 1970es. The previous Westminster parliamentary democracy was substituted by a new presidential system modeled after France, with a powerful chief executive. Elected members of Parliament became patrons, voters became followers.

The overarching influence of neo-liberal economic policies changed the cultural realm structurally.

Rituals and their outreaches

Rituals in Sri Lanka structure time and space. They define the relationship of humans to cosmological forces.

A wide range of rituals of different nature exists in Sri Lanka. There are, to name a few only, as performing arts, the *Maduva*, e.g. the *Gam Maduva*, *Devol Maduva* and the *Kolam Maduva*, rituals meant to worship and thank the Gods and to re-establish social balance in the community, the different *Tovil*, e.g. healing rituals for instance the *Sanni Yakuma*, *Mahasana Samayama*, *Suniyama*, *Rata Yakuma*, the *Kohomba Kankariya*, an ancient healing ritual and what is known today as *Kandyan* dances.

These rituals were and are performed at different occasions, addressing different partners in the Sinhalese cosmology.

The *Maduva*

The *Maduva* work on different levels. The *Devol-* and *Gam Maduva* knit nets and liaisons of humans to Gods, they reaffirm cosmological hierarchies and bonds, manipulate and negotiate them at the same time.

The *Kolam Maduva*, a mask-performance developed an impressive thrust to confirm and challenge reality, persons, notions and hierarchies and to transcend this reality at the same time.

A *Kolam Maduva* consists of a series of partly interconnected items, which display different aspects of history. Mask-dancers represent the *dramatis personae*: civil servants, warriors, policemen, representatives of the colonial powers (Portuguese,

Dutch, African soldiers, and the British), tricky Muslim traders and foolish Tamil persons (the latter two items are not performed today any more, as Muslim and Tamil people might feel hurt, I was told) and many characters of Sinhalese traditional stories. They enact stories of exploitation, harassment and fraud. They ridicule those who are in power.

The King Maha Sammata, the faultless ruler and the founder of the lineage of the historical Buddha comes to the scene with his wife and ministers, indicating indirectly how the human world should be ruled.

A special set of powerful *Raksha* appear to protect the world against all kinds of evil forces and at the end of a Kolam night, a *Jatakaya*, a story relating events of the Buddha's previous lives, is performed.

The performance mirrors the world as it is. Be it the behavior of the poor people, be it the behavior of representatives of colonial powers, of the police, the military, of the administration, and be it greed, lust, envy: The performance carries a message: All this is part of this world. All this is but reflections of mundane attachment. If you want to get out of the rat-race of competition, non-beneficial actions and hunting for recognition, success, sexual pleasures, other mundane pleasures and longings - let this be, follow the 8-fold path of the Buddha.

Many of these items voice bitter critique and highlight what is going wrong in society. Whereas it was obviously an easy task to ridicule traditional life in the past, it has become increasingly difficult to focus on such problems of contemporaneous life.

My friends confirmed that new Kolam items with a similar critical thrust like the old items could be written anytime today. "But then you go to jail".

In the late 1980es, when a critical and frank word in the public was highly risky indeed, one Kolam Master performed a Kolam Maduva in the University of Colombo with a new item he had written. He exposed the behavior of ministers who were ever so greedy for commission and privileges they expected to enjoy or to enhance. Immediately after the last drum beat he rushed to the airport and boarded a plane abroad.

Another *Kolam*-Master has in his performances identified, much to the delight auf the audience, the different political parties with *Raksha*. (*Raksha* are rough and cruel beings. They persecute and harass, sometimes also destroy human beings.) He had painted a *Naga-Raksha* (traditionally red in colour) in green colour referring to the colours of the conservative United National Party, a character of light blue colour he identified with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, and *Maru Raksha*, the harbinger of death, symbolized the JVP, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front).

This particular Kolam-family has a long standing reputation for fighting injustice and discrimination.

The *Tovil*

Tovil are traditional healing rituals. Many people believe that diseases are brought by demons. These demons, once mitigated in a colourful and marvelous, breathtaking ritual, would withdraw their evil influences and give the patient the chance to recover. These disease-bringing demons appear during the performance. The iconography of the masks and the costumes relate to the history of the demons and the diseases they spread.

A healing ritual consists of a series of interconnected items: First the Buddha is worshipped, then the gods are invited and requested to support the ritual and finally the demons are invited to the place. The demons would relate their fate, why they had become demons and what disease they had brought to the patient. On the promise of rich gifts they promise, reciprocating, to withdraw their evil influences and to give thus the patient the chance to recover. After this exchange of “gifts” the demons are asked politely to depart.

Much of the success of the ritual depends on the ability of the *Edura*, the ritual specialist, to “unmask” the demons and reduce their power, eventually to subdue them.

These healing rituals unfold access to hidden inner worlds, to “forbidden” and suppressed emotions. At some point in the performance flow, demons are recognised to be stupid, avaricious, ridiculous beings, only following their attachments. Once having reduced the demons to such low status, they would not frighten a person any more – provided the cause of the fright will be overcome. Has the patient understood that demons are but a projection of his or her suppressed longings, has the patient understood that his or her disease is the result of an intense attachment to mundane matters, has the patient understood that such attachment, such ungratified longings is the condition of disease, the patient has a good chance to overcome the fright of the demonic world and to overcome attachment to mundane matters. He or she can refrain from such longings, and correct wrong views on the world. This is aptly done in funny and sometimes obscene dialogues between the demon dancers and the ritual specialist.

Once, at election time, the demons promised everyone a car and a pound of meat daily in the funny dialogue with the *Edura*, imitating speeches and promises of politicians.

At a *Rata Yakuma*, a ritual designed to balance the mind of women who have problems with pregnancy, the once *Edura* addressed the men in the audience and scolded them: They should think of family planning and of the hard lot of their wives rather than hanging around and enjoying life at their cost.

Both demon dancers and Kolam dancers ridicule authorities and maintain that reality is what has to be accomplished rather than mirrored.

I remember too well the audience bursting of laughter during the performance of a *Gam Maduva* when the dancers mocked homosexuality in the monasteries.

Buddhism as state religion gave priority to the HIGH CULTURE, and the influence of the clergy and its vested interest discriminate directly and indirectly against different belief-systems and rated them as “low” and “superstitious” etc...

The *Kohomba Kankariya* and the *Kandyan* dances were, in the context of post-colonial nation building, soon promoted as “national art” of the up-country, meant to represent THE NATIONAL CULTURE.

The up-country was the stronghold of the last kings of Kandy. It was the abode of the royal culture and of a long resistance to foreign invaders. The culture of the kingdom of Kandy was considered a high culture, noble, refined and pure in spiritual terms. The Temple of the Tooth guarded the tooth-relic, what is considered a tooth of the historical Buddha. Whoever was in the possession of this relic was the rightful ruler of the island.

The population was dominated by the *Goyigama*, the caste of the farmers, which claimed the highest status in the country's caste system.

The low-country, the western and southern provinces, on the other side, was considered “low” in many perspectives. The Karava, the fisher-caste, associated with killing, occupied a low status in Sinhalese society.

Much of old Sinhalese social system had vanished there, destroyed by the onslaughts of the Portuguese, Dutch and the British. The colonial transformation of the low-country made away with older notions and forms of productions and distribution of goods, it unleashed an economic development, which did not take place in the up-country: (Of course, tea-plantations were run in the up-country, but they were worked by Tamil labourers and did not involve Sinhalese work) The plantation-system (coconut, rubber, cinnamon) soon dominated the economy of the area; money economy had soon substituted older forms of transactions. The Buddhist traditions of the low-country were considered questionable, overgrown with all sorts of superstitious beliefs and customs, with the omnipresence of beliefs in demons. The culture of the lowlanders was considered “mixed”, less refined than the culture of the up-country, money-minded, spiritually impure in a way.

The *Tovil* and *Maduva*, the most important low country rituals, were considered as past-time for the simple, superstitious, and “innocent” village folks, missing refinement and “high culture”. And worse: These arts of the low country confirm and contradict cultural and political values at the same time.

These rituals' potency of transcending reality and to develop their messages is remarkable and would not really go along with the notions of a mainstream “high culture” as represented by the up-country realm and propagated by the political class.

The Neo-Liberal Turn II

The Commercialisation of Culture

The implementation of neo-liberal economy concepts paved the way to the commercialisation of culture. While performances were formerly organised by patrons or by local notables, village committees, families or groups of families (*Maduva*) or sick persons and their families in former times, different actors, new patrons, now

entered the field: politicians, the military, the tourist industry, priests, the tv and the State

With the application of the neo-liberal ideology a thorough change in the realm of culture took place. Rituals were transformed into commodities.

Politicians and persons who want to enhance their credibility and reputation book shows to manifest their status as culturally concerned members of the society.

Military institutions and persons book “rituals” for entertainment purpose.

The tourist industry books troupes to perform dance shows of which neither the meaning nor the message would be understood by the beholder. The *Tovil*-dancers created a new mask for the stage, the *vedika pandam paliya*, an enormously aggrandised and grotesque mask from a sequence of a *Sanni Yakuma*, one of the highly sophisticated healing rituals.

Buddhist priests argue that belief in demonic forces is superstition, a *Tovil* would support such wrong beliefs, and they would not be acceptable in the world of Buddhism. Priests are forbidden by the precepts to take part or even enjoy such “impure” performances. But today, priests participate in these rituals by preparing the ground for the show with prayers, chants and admonitions to enhance the respectability of the sponsors. Healing rituals are performed on a temple grounds. Priests are patients or onlookers at healing rituals nowadays; they even don’t care to disrobe for the time of the ritual. They come in groups to enjoy Kolam performances – things unheard of in the past and for priests forbidden.

Hege Larson observed, that in the case of a ritual healing ritual booked by a conservative MP, *Pirit* chanting, the chanting of commemorative *Pali*-stanzas, a Buddhist ritual, was reported to have been of part of a booked “healing ritual”, and when the chanting had ended, the patron of the performance got the microphone and reported who had come to the show. The priest asked the people present to act in the ways that are suitable to the notions of the temple (Larson 1998:240 ff., 243).

But much of the entertainment value of a healing ritual lies in the art of dialogue between the “demons” and the *Edura*. And these dialogues are full of sexual puns and connotation, really filthy at times, the signum of the demonic worlds.

Is the ritual booked as a show, fun and the entertaining value of the ritual acts is the main purpose of performance.

The TV (*Rupavahini*, the National Television Corporation) is yet another actor in the field of mainstreaming culture. The TV transmits passages of rituals, Buddhist rituals, but also selected passages of the *Tovil* and *Maduva* performances. These passages are but short “quotations” of rituals, the context and the message of a ritual cannot be ascertained by such quotations.

Since long, dancers of various rituals are booked to perform at State Rituals.

All these agents make use of ritual performances for their own ends; a “cultural nationalism” is the result. “Everything is business” is the new cultural currency.

Mainstreaming, Cleansing, Transcendence Repealed

On the road to the mainstream, losses occur, just collateral damages.

Example: The *Kolam Maduva*

Likewise, ridiculing politicians, the government, the police, wealthy persons and their life-style would not be appropriate in the new context. Last December (2013), I attended a *Kolam Kareliya*-show in *Ambalangoda*. It was the aim of the organiser to develop the potential of the Kolam Dances. What had lasted formerly 5 nights, and during the last 50 years one night, was now reduced to a 2 1/2 hours show. The characters, even the poorest, were clad in costumes, which matched with the fashionable design and colour of the female clerks in the banks, singing was performed in the style of soap operas with long lasting, trembling musical sequences echoing a high degree of stylised emotion, unheard of in the traditional performance. The *Rupavahini* had provided the foil.

A fresh start, adjusted to the modified conventions of the public? Maybe.

Example: The *Tovil*

In order to welcome the *Tovil* and *Maduva (Kolam)* in the world of entertainment, be it the TV or at government-sponsored performances, they have to be purged off their renitence, their subversive and transcending potential, in short: they have to be cleansed: A demonic character stands for pollution, of notions of the alter world, the contrary to normality and conventions of everyday life. Much of the entertainment value of the *Tovil* is realised by witty and obscene dialogues between the demons and the chief performer, the *Edura*. My translators often refused to translate those dialogues, which the audience enjoyed enormously. Such excursions into the dark and filthy demonic realms are not tolerated in this sanitised new world of entertainment.

Few of these rituals are still performed in the same way as they used to be, fun and pun for the whole community, instruction, and exiting to look at. Yet, there is a fatal tendency. Many if not most the old masters, their education had lasted 10-15 years until they were allowed to act as ritual master, as chief *Edura*, have passed away during the last 10 years in the area where I conduct my research (*Ambalangoda* and its hinterland). The sons of the old Masters, unwilling to undergo such a tough and thorough training, have specialized on dancing and on the art of conventional dialogues in the performance. To charm a demon, one had to recite mantram, extremely powerful verses consisting of many verses for a long time; today demons are "conjured" with one line of the mantram, repeated for a certain time.

Remains the ingenuity of the ritual specialists. They have an enormous ability for spontaneity, to handle the ritual material and reality almost at their will, they enjoy to put things upside down, to challenge and change order and topple hierarchy. Yet, they are being put a leash on. Ordered and organised performances are ripped off their subversive potency; obscenities, which make much of the fun in a *Tovil* in a village round, are not allowed in a "prestigious" congregation, filthy passages would backslide upon the organisers and promoters.

I wish to dwell on this a little while. Apart from breathtaking dances (not subversive), from somersaults and fire-eating (not subversive), apart from fanciful costumes and,

at times, also masks (not subversive), apart from their lust to flirt with the forbidden and gruesome (thrilling, little subversive), one thing is being rooted up, e.g. their ability to develop the scenario of a demonic world where everything is turned upside down, an alter world with all its qualities, with breaches of conventions, of obscenities, filth, accusations of incest and betrayal, of ridiculing and unmasking power **and** to transform this thoroughly unsettled, dark and frightening world of chaos (together with the disease of the patient) into a meaningful and beneficial order. One of the messages of the *Tovil* says: chaos and demons, projections of ungratified longings and drives do exist; chaos and disorder are a part of this world, a result of attachment. These chaotic forces can be overcome or contained by adjusting the individual's view of the world.

Soon, however, the demons won't be overcome because they won't go wild any more.

Under such mainstream conditions, the message of the ritual is not important anymore, it is the entertainment value that counts. The *Edura* perform their most prominent items, the show goes on. The *Tovil* is exorcised.

Rising Gods. Shrines of Today

Powerful shrines like the *Kataragama* –shrine in the south-east of Sri Lanka, an important pilgrimage town sacred to Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and indigenous Vedda people of Sri Lanka, they attract a large and growing number of devotees since long.

People from South India also come there to worship. The town has the *Ruhunu Maha Kataragama Devalaya*, a shrine dedicated to *Skanda-Murukan*, also known as *Kataragama Deviyo*.

A new trend has come up during the last 20 years, slowly and silently. New leaders of religious cults have established their shrines in many places. They have adopted the model of the powerful shrines; *Seenigama* on the south-west coast, has grown from a very modest wayside-shrine, where devotees could worship god *Devol*, to a booming new centre of devotion.

Also in the countryside, far off from the famous centres, new shrines are cropping up, the leaders of these institutions address the gods Kataragama, Devol, and Pattini and others and promise cure and success. If it works well, the guardians and the gods receive their due donation. If the visit to the shrine and the offerings were unsuccessful, the gods didn't work well and will get nothing.

This development has many reasons. The old ritual masters speak of this development with contempt and declare the new religious leaders imposters and cheats, being only out for fast money.

The *kapua*, the guardians of the shrines, argue that more and more people are asking for their services, even in cases of sickness they would be needed to call upon the gods for help. The traditional healing rituals, it is argued, are too expensive nowadays and only few people could afford this ritual, which is considered old-fashioned and less prestigious.

This development links with my former remark of an increasing Buddhist cleansing of the hearts and minds of the people from “superstition” and “wrong beliefs” and whatever may be wrong with the people in the opinion of the clergy.

Reference

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