

LEGENDS OF SKANDA – MURUKAN

-PATRON OF ALL SECRET KNOWLEDGE AND CONVERT ACTIVITIES-



“It is not down on any map; true places never are.” – Melville

Long before history came to be recorded, people the world over have recognized the close association between food and life. Human society may be said to have its roots in the systematic sharing of food.

In Oriental culture, the sharing of food has long been considered a sacred duty. We offer cooked food to our ancestors, to the devas, to the Buddha and to monks, elders, pilgrims, as well as to family, friends, visitors and to anyone who feels hunger, including animals and unseen beings should be offered food to ensure their happiness and good will.

The Sanskrit word *annadānam* literally means the offering or sharing (*dāmma*) of food (*annam*). In every ethnic and religious community across the Indian subcontinent, no festival or ceremony is complete without *annadānam*, or at least with the distribution of *prāsadam*, the edible items offered during *puṣā*.

Theory and practice

Accordingly, the importance of food is stressed in ancient scriptures, including the Vedas, Upanisads, Dharma Sastras, Dhamma Pāda, etc. Taittiriya Upanisads declares, ‘All life force comes from food.’ (*annam vai pranāh*) and ‘Let food be produced in plenty’ (*annam bahu kurveet*). In Bhagavad Gita, Sri Krishna declares, ‘from food all beings are evolved’ (*annād bhavanti bhūūtātani*).

Even simple folk practices preserve traditions that have endured since time immemorial. Ancient peoples believed that spirits or deities may move upon the earth in human guise, and that such beings possess special powers or abilities that may help those who are open-hearted and generous towards such unusual strangers.

Hence, it is considered prudent in traditional societies to regard every stranger or sudden visitor with the utmost courtesy, respect, and hospitality-including the offering of choice food items.

Manu Dhamma Sastra’s aphorism ‘*atithih devo bhava*’ (‘regard the guest as a deity’) plainly expresses this worldwide tradition among ancient societies that deities may move upon the earth in human guise, and that one should therefore regard them with the utmost courtesy and respect.

Annadānams too are conducted with this very principle in mind, for among the hungry crowd there may also be the anonymous genuine devotee, saint or even a deva or deity. Indeed, each and every poor person is regarded in this way, as expressed in the Sanskrit saying *daridra Nārāyana* (God dwells in the poor person’).

Annadānam and Pada Yātrā

Just as the Indian subcontinent maybe said to extend from Mount Kailāsa in the far North to Kataragama in the far South (also called Dakshina Kailāsa as it is situated upon the same meridian as Mount Kaliāsa), so also the principle of *annadānam* is respected and practiced across the subcontinent.

A popular saying among Kailāsa pilgrims *Bābā Amaranātha barfāni bhukhe ko anna pyāse ko pāni* exhorts listeners to ‘offer to the hungry and water to the thirsty in the name of Lord Siva’.

Adi Sankarācharya in his stotram praising Annapūrnā, the personification of plentiful food, says:

Annapūrnā sadāpūme Sankarānvallabhe gyānvairāgya siddhyartham bhiksham dehi ca Pārvati.

Annapūrnā Devi, Goddess of Plenty, you who are Lord Shiva's eternal Consort, give us alms together with wisdom.'

Because of this universal tradition of *annadānam*, since millennia it has been possible-even common-for sadhus, pilgrims, saints and others to travel from one end of the subcontinent to the other spreading the wisdom of their respective sampradayas to the far corners of the subcontinent.

Annadānamin Sri Lanka

Unlike in India, where innumerable traditions of *pada yātrā* flourish, here in Sri Lanka there remains only one *pada yātrā* tradition (foot pilgrimage to destinations such as Sri Pāda died out in the 20th (century). The traditional Pada Yātrā from Jaffna in the far North to Katargama in the far South has for centuries been an annual affair attracting not only local pilgrims but also pilgrims from abroad, especially from India.

Arunagiri Nathar

Seven centuries ago, one of these anonymous pilgrims (for not one diary or record of a pilgrims has even been published), Arunagiri Nathar, was a great Tamil devotee of god Skanda-Murugan, who had set out visit and sing the praise of every great shrine of the God.

Less than a tenth of Arunagiri Nathar's reputed 16,000 *Tiruppukal* songs have survived. But from the few that survive, one can surmise that, like so many pilgrims before him, Arunagiri Nathar first visited Kiri Malai on the northern coast of the Jaffna peninsula where he sang *Tiruppukal*, proceeded by foot to Trincomalee where he sang at Tiru Konamalai.

Arunagiri Nathar may have said *Tiruppukal* at other shrines as well, but it was only at his destination, Katargama, that he sang the most verses, of which 14 still survive.

Arunagiri Nathar therefore was one among the traditional *pada yātrā* pilgrims of his day who annually walked for two months from Jaffna via Trincomalee to Katargama in time for the great Esala (Adi) festival.

While en route to Katargama, Arunagiri accepted *annadanam* from common villagers and, in return, and his spontaneous verses to *Tiruppukal*. The subtle spiritual influence (*āsivādam*) of *pada yātrā* is like Arunagiri Nathar, however invisible, should not be discounted or underestimated.

The *yātrā* is all carry the God's blessings with them to a lesser to greater extent, and it is principally for this aim that villagers offer *annadānam*. When one happens perchance (or by God's grace) to feed a great soul (like Arunagiri Nathar), the blessings continue to manifest for generations afterward.



Arunagiri Nāthar

Annadānam at Kataragama

In times past there have been many *annaānam* madams in Kataragama, and even today one may savour food offered freely to pilgrims and general public by Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims at Kataragama.

Just as in human society, where the lady of the house serves guests with food, so also at Kataragama it is the God's eternal consort Sri Theivayanai Amman whose madam feeds every visitor, regardless of from where they come. Because of this tradition, and because the Kataragama Esala Festival attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors annually, Sri Lanka Theivayanai Ammann Madam today is Sri Lanka's largest *annadānam* madam.

Śri Theivayanai Amman Annadanam Sabha preserves the Devasthanam's age-old tradition of serving annadanam to pilgrims from far off places. Most of the foot pilgrims to Kataragama rely upon Theivayanai Amman Devasthanam especially for their daily meals.

During the current Esala festival season, about 8,000-10,000 pilgrims daily enjoy tasty vegetarian lunches and dinners at Sri Theivayanai Amman Devasthanam in addition to tea in the mornings and evenings. Even outside of festival times, the Devasthanam continues to serve annadanam the year a round to devotees of all communities.

The Annadanam Sabha is pleased to render annandanam service to the public within the Temple premises of Sri Theivayanai Amman, the presiding deity who is Annapoorani – the Great Giver of Food. A unique feature of the annandanam is its being served the traditional way-on plantation leaves-to devotees of all communities, including service personnel.

The Annadanam Sabha is coordinated by S.T.S. Arulanathan, J.P. and A. Maduraiveeran, ably assisted by eminent persons from Colombo, Matale, Kandy, Batticaloa, Vavuniya and Trincomalee, including Messrs. Swaminathan Karuppaiah, Shanmugarajah, and T. Rajah, to mention only a few of 300 annadanam contributors. Praise is also owed to the energetic service rendered by a volunteer force of youth from all over the island led by Ramesh Babu.

Śri Theivayanai Amman Temple, Kataragama is offering *annadanam* of pure vegetarian food to the public during the Kataragama Esale Festival from 17 July flag hoisting until water-cutting on 1 August 2004.

Śri Theivayanai Amman gives yearly once darshan to devotees during Maha Perahera.

Kataragama's Role in Sri Lankan History or History is Whose Story?

Writers of history come in two varieties: those who fashion history by making it, and those who describe the process later. Here, as is so often the case, metaphor clothes the spirit or higher sense, while the literal sense services only to fix the particulars. In this, we maintain, lies the key not only to the meaningful interpretation of traditional epic histories, but also to the faithful rendition of raw events into popular history.

For **historiography** – the telling of history – is also in a sense the source of history itself. Guiding principles operate at all times.

It is well known to historians, common people, and physicists alike that one and the same event may validly conform to radically different descriptions of explanations, e.g. a 'particle' may also be viewed as a wave. Description, conforming to different perspectives, may serve different purposes more or less effectively. Seen as microcosmic examples of macrocosmic principles, even 'ordinary' incidents acquire epic grandeur, and find a place in the heart and mind of ordinary people. Exhibiting levels of meaning that go deeper than the literal or 'factual' alone, truly epic accounts not only relate traditional histories, but touch the hearts of millions as well, thereby becoming a part of the historical process itself: the dialects of history.

Clothed in language, a product of the human mind, history reflects the invisible patterns of thought and language, for which modern linguists have invented the concept of a 'deep structure' underlying the surface patterns. It is prudent for historians and others to avail themselves of advances made in related fields, however obscure the connection might at first appear. Bereft of higher – or – deeper – principles, history remains a pseudo-science, battleground for contending ideologies, and a fertile source of hatred and violence. Resting upon universal principles, unaffected by passing fashions in thought, epic accounts weave people and events together in unity transcending particular interests.

Sri Lanka, long home to a veritable rainbow of cultures, is a unique microcosm representing all of Asia in its crosscurrents of east and west, tradition and modernity. As such, Sri Lanka may serve historians admirably as a looking glass of Asian history, ancient and modern.

However for the historian whose perspective, assumptions, and methods are essentially foreign to a traditional culture, the long history of Sri Lanka remains a sealed book. Modern history let us remember, is a modern invention, whereas human intelligence is not. Every culture gives a full account of itself, one that is true to the conditions and ideals of that culture, whether it conforms to European notions of history, or not. All too often, these

moving accounts, records of great antiquity in their own rights, are dismissed by western-trained scholars as the fantasies of simple-minded people and as gross distortions of ‘the facts’.

There is certain arrogance in a mentality that allocates truth to itself and superstition only to others: more, perhaps, than European thinkers would generally care to admit. It has had a souring effect upon East-West relations from the time of the very first European imperialists right up to the present day. This deep-seated bias may be seen to have an ill defined but pervasive influence upon every aspect of relations between East and West, from the purely material sphere of trade, finance, and military affairs to the common intellectual sphere fashions are supposed to count for nothing. Even the writing of history has not escaped distortion.

This subtle – and often an\ not so subtle – antagonism on the part of what may be called the modern mentality toward the normal or traditional mentality goes back a long way, and has assumed many guises over the centuries. But it is everywhere marked by an instinctive faith in material solutions to problems of whatever sort, and a corresponding *implicit denial* of the principles, which are the support of the phenomena they so cherish and worship. The net result is a striking predisposition to quantify human affairs, as witnessed by the preponderant role that money and brute force play in the modern scheme of things.

When a culture’s own account of itself, oral or written, is not accorded its full and rightful place in that people’s history as told to them by historians, then one may justifiably surmise that this ‘history’ contains motives foreign to the culture it presumes to describe. What is more, it may be deduced that only the literal or inferior elements of the indigenous account have been accessible to the historian, all the rest escaping his attention. A mentality dedicated to quantitative solutions cannot even aspire to the faithful interpretation of the factual – symbolic accounts of cultures still operating according to qualitative principles. Since only in the orient does the traditional view still hold out against the uninvited incursions of the modern mentality, it is legitimate to speak of distinction of east from west, as of tradition from modernity. There is no greater challenge in history than this titanic struggle of mentalities.

The Story of Kataragama in the History of Sri Lanka

If Sri Lanka may be seen as a paradigm of the rest of Asia, then the legend of Kataragama may be said to fairly encapsulate the story of all Sri Lanka, even up to the present day. Such is the esteem that Sri Lankans of all backgrounds hold for Kataragama – the symbolic capital of Ruhunu as well as the spirit or protector of the place - that even the noted historian P.E. Pieris was moved to write of Kataragama that:

... Here from remote ages was worshipped the six headed twelve-armed Kanda Kumaraya, otherwise Mahasena Divyaraja, Adhipati (Lord) of the Ruhunu Rata, the

hero-god... Kataragama, say the Hindus, is his favorite adobe; in this age – the Kali Yuga – his authority extends over the entire world.

What Kataragama represents to millions of Sri Lankans is already well documented by social scientists and others. It is sufficient to remark that, from prehistoric times, Kataragama has commanded the utmost respect – even approaching fear – across lines of race and religion, such that even Christians, not to mention Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus, routinely visit remote Kataragama in large numbers. Their rites of vow fulfillment by the deity, which one may see performed en masse at festival times, stand as mute testimony to Kataragama's silent influence.

This power that Kataragama exerts over the imagination of so many has been adequately explained, but patterns do exist to a number of levels, suggesting that Kataragama represents more than just a fabulously successful jungle shrine. For the legend of Kataragama is primarily and throughout a *symbolic story* which adapts itself to a remarkably broad range of interpretations. Not only may Kataragama be described faithfully in mythological or purely symbolic terms, provided that one adheres to the body of symbolic correspondences.

Reduced to its basic framework, the Kataragama story centers around the repeated descent and exploits on earth of the solar hero; his battles with the forces of darkness; eventual triumph in the name of truth; his love for the terrestrial princes – the human soul – and alliance with her on earth, as *in principio*. Upon this symbolic framework may be woven any number of the matic variations, each depending upon the particular perspective taken. Thus, for example, the Kataragama hero is *variously described* as the first Ancestor of humanity, the servant – or even the son – of god, *Bodhisattva* or Buddha to be, an eternal youth, or general of the divine forces in their battle against the satanic forces of darkness.

One of Kataragama's unique features is that multifaceted story is not only related at the time of annual Esala festival, but *performed* as well on a majestic scale. This magnificent performance, as we have endeavored to establish in an earlier paper (unpublished), represents an initiatic tradition of *mystery plays*, one which has gracefully accommodated social change since well before the Common Era. Amidst the ravages of time, Kataragama preserve its timeless message.

Kataragama and the Framing of History

The fact that the myth of Kataragama may be framed in a variety of ways is of particular relevance to historians, for this is precisely the dilemma of historians of every age: how to interpret the histories that have already been told, and how to share with others the understanding acquired. And the issue of exceptional relevance when one considers it in the context of the aforesaid dichotomy visible in Sri Lanka and all over Asia as a European-inspired struggle to overcome tradition and modernize national economies, *all* in accordance with modes of thought originating in Europe.

Clearly, what is suggested is not a sort of historical relativism elevated into a general theory, for relativism would imply a reciprocity, which is singularly absent in the present context. Rather, it has from the beginning been an unequal struggle in which, broadly speaking, the west has brought to bear against the east the full force of what has been called its “proselytizing fury”, all for its own purely pragmatic purposes. Nowhere has the Western or modern mentality had to undergo the degree of change that it has sought to impose upon traditional cultures everywhere. The time for redress is opportune.

How the accounts of modern and traditional historians may diverge is the subject for which the following historical examples have been drawn. All center on the myth of Kataragama. Each in its own fashion demonstrates the contention of this article. Regarded in their totality, they tell a story on a scale befitting the many-faced myth of Kataragama.

Myth as History and History as Myth

Historically, Kataragama has always maintained a low profile. While this may strike some as a rationalization for the near-absence of Kataragama from history books, it should also be borne in mind that, *in principle*, the hero or god-king of Kataragama is one who achieves his aim through subterfuge, disguise, and stratagem. To wit, he is a god of wits, humanly accessible to those who apprehend his *modus operandi*. This should tell something about where he is to be found, and how.

Historical suggestions of the Kataragama myth appear in the Sri Lankan history as early as the late centuries of the pre-common Era, leaving little room for doubt about Kataragama’s antiquity which, according to oral tradition still preserved in Kataragama, predates the appearance of either Sinhalese or Tamil culture in Sri Lanka. The most notable historical example from this period is the epic struggle between two popular Sri Lankan kings, Elara and Dutugemunu.

Moderan historians, and Sinhalese chauvinists in their turn, have sought to emphasize the ethnic dimension of this episode, portraying it as the patriotic struggle of Sinhalese nationalists to expel or exterminate the Tamil inhabitants. In doing so, they have performed a great disservice to Sri Lanka; but that is not the point here.

Criticism has been leveled against these same people for conveniently overlooking the fact that King Elara, whether he was a Tamil speaker or not, was also one of Sri Lanka’s most respected monarch’s, serving a reign of forty-four years that was noted for its impartial justice and patronage of various faiths, including Buddhism. In fact, it was Elara’s unswerving dedication to justice that settled his end, for he found himself duty-bound to order the execution of his own son and their heir-apparent, who had recklessly caused the death of a cow, a capital offense in those days. Unable to abdicate without a successor, Elara’s utmost concern at his age would have been not to maintain himself on the throne at

any price, but to heal this disruption in the natural order by allowing for a just and natural succession, at the cost of his *own* life.

Considered in this context, the events that followed acquire added significance. In *Ruhunu*, young prince Duttugemunu vowed to Kataragama to fight for the justice and the cultural integrity of Sri Lanka. Symbolically, this act set in motion the epic events that were to follow. Duttugemunu was then able to raise a large army and march successfully, battlelance in hand, against the petty chieftains who stood between him and Elara by the time young prince and the old king faced each other on the field of battle, the overtones of their *symbolic encounter* would have been fully evident to both of them, if not to others as well. Duttugemunu *had* to come out victorious, just as Elara would have welcomed this opportunity to end his life in battle. Never was the outcome in doubt, as far as they were concerned.

In a sense, Elara's sacrifice was Duttugemunu's triumph, and *together* they restored the ancient symbolic order in a spectacle that was as mysterious as it was dramatic. Undoubtedly, the whole affair left a deep impressions upon Duttugemunu, not to mention Sri Lankan consciousness ever since. Out of gratitude to Kataragama, and in fulfillment of his vow, Duttugemunu decreed that hence forth and *in perpetuity* a vast grant of populated and rich land in Ruhunu would be given over to the sovereign authority of god Kataragama himself. Further, to insure that the traditional rites would also be carried forth on behalf of all posterity, he stipulated that they be partitioned into 505 ritual assignments, or roles, to be annually performed in accordance with the tradition of 'royal service', or *rajakariya*, and passed on from one generation to another in property.

Time, encroaching jungles, and successive governments have cheated Duttugemunu's intentions, but through an ingenious redundancy of tasks, the overall performance still survives today, even if scaled down by centuries of attrition, misunderstanding, and official neglect. In a sense, the king-less kingdom of Kataragama is yet extant, alive in the hearts of his subjects. What can be more low-profiled than that?

To understanding the interplay of abstract concepts and the unfolding of history, it is essential that grasp the role of what is called *Mahasammata*, or 'common agreement'. Because it was common to all, it was the called *maha*, 'great'. The agreement, or a sammata, was not a public scheme or policy, but the articulation of the common interest: it was the 'common sense' of those days. Truly effective policy, or what our contemporaries call 'power', was understood to devolve from higher principles, or *Dhamma*. The analogue in the human domain was the king - or sometimes queen - whose authority to reign depended upon adherence to dhamma. Principles reigned, rather than individual interests, so unanimity of opinion was natural.

One example of this mahasammata in Sri Lankan history is as follows. The island largely consists of what has been called a hydraulic culture, where seasonal rains must be supplemented by irrigation to assure adequate crops of rice. Large-scale irrigation requires the construction and maintenance of *wewas*, bunds for the purpose of gathering the seasonal rains for distribution as needed. These enormous irrigation works, many if which are still

functional today, were built and maintained through the institution of *rajakariya*, whereby each household agreed implicitly to give manual service to the king in return for an allotment of life-giving water.

The reign most famous for the creation of these great bunds was that of King Mahasena, whom historians assign to the third century C.E. It is noteworthy that this king should bear the name Mahasena (literally, 'who has a great army'), as it is not for military exploits that he is remembered. Rather, Mahasena was a king that he is remembered. Rather, Mahasena was a king whose inspired leadership served not only to insure the nourishment of his people, but to help forge their sense of *common identity* as well. In other words, the 'great army' he raised consisted of every man, woman and child in the kingdom, armed with a common consensus. Whatever Mahasena's personal peculiarities, he remained the living symbol of his people's *Mahasammata*. This close association of King Mahasena with the concepts of *Rajakariya* and *Mahasammata* is crucial to a genuine understanding of the traditional perspective: *Rajakariya* was *Mahasammata* in practice, the performance of which embodied timeless principles.

Ptolemy of Alexandria

The earlier reliable description from western sources of Sri Lanka, or Taprobane as it was then called, comes down to us from Ptolemy of Alexandria, famous astronomer and geographer of the second century C.E. Ptolemy is credited with such a remarkable extent and accuracy of information about Taprobane that, in one historian's words, "it has given rise to surmises as to the sources whence it could possibly been derived". Ptolemy's description of Taprobane "proves that the island had been thoroughly circumnavigated and examined by the mariners who were his informations."

That Kataragama is nowhere directly mentioned by Ptolemy is no indication that he was unaware of its existence and character. As an initiate into the traditional mysteries of the Mediterranean world, Ptolemy would have not only clearly recognized the signs of mystery performance elsewhere, but out of respect for its sanctity would have refrained from making any direct mention of the place, cf. 'Sacred is secret'. However, in keeping with the universal character of initiatic knowledge, he would have left ample hints or clues which would pass unnoticed and un-comprehended except by observers similarly acquainted with initiatic lore.

If Ptolemy was ridding, then the traces of his riddle might be expected to survive in his records for posterity. Indeed, many have been puzzled by at least one feature of Ptolemy's map of Taprobane, which unaccountably labels the then heavily populated Ruhunu area adjacent to Kataragama as "the elephants' feeding grounds". However, when one considers this anomaly in the context of Kataragama's close association in myth with elephants' – for Kataragama is also *Gajaragama*, 'The home of the elephants' Ptolemy's apparent error begins to make sense. Here 'elephant may also be understood to bear reference to the

elephant's reputation as the wisest and gentlest member of the jungle family. 'Feeding grounds' imply sanctuary and available nourishment – but for whom? Ruhunu may have also protected its four – footed elephants, but un metaphorical terms reference is understand to the itinerant 'elephants' of society, the homeless custodian of tradition.

Even more revealing is Ptolemy's curious naming of the ocean waters just off Kataragama as the 'Sea of Dionysus'. Astute observers, like Bharati (1973), have already surmised that the god Kataragama is a Dionysian deity. Ptolemy, who was certainly well-informed about the worship of Dionysus, would not have employed had name randomly, as certain of our contemporaries are inclined to believe. Geography, for Ptolemy as well as for traditional peoples everywhere, also entailed an element of higher or initiatic knowledge.

Most pointed out all of Ptolemy's oblique references to Kataragama, however, is his naming of a large rocky proturbence into the sea of Dionysus as the *dionysii promontorium*, or promontory of Dionysus. Here again, what the promontorium 'stands for' (pro-) is the mount of Dionysus, i.e., Kataragama peak, which in all likelihood was the center of Kataragama's worshipping those days. Thus, Ptolemy's intended reference was to something higher than the physical phenomenon he named.

This may appear to some as a digression from the discussion of historiography and the sources of history. But it does serve to highlight the difference between histories traditional and modern. For the former, possibilities of meaning of a higher or metaphorical order are not merely entertained as another order of reality, but as the principle of determining factor in the story of humanity, whether considered in sensible or symbolic terms. For the later, histories of a modern or western perspective, the import or message is felt to abide in the literal sense alone, disqualifying every possible interpretation of an order higher than that which can be gleaned from a systematization of facts into 'theories of history'.



European colonial powers were incessantly at war with each

The Modern conquest of Kataragama

With the landing of European forces in Ceylon in the sixteenth century, this contrast of east and west began to play itself out in dramatic fashion. As the most unabashed of western conquerors, the Portuguese had come to the east for the professed intention of saving the souls of the heathen and relieving them of excess wealth. These early European imperialists kept hearing stories of Kataragama's fabulous wealth and by the mid-seventeenth century could contain their greed and avarice no longer. What has prevented them in part for so long from satisfying their curiosity were disturbing reports that Kataragama maintained a standing army of 500 men for its defense.

So, in early 1642, one hundred and fifty intrepid Portuguese commandos, under the command of Gaspar Figueroa de Cerpe, marched on Kataragama, accompanied by two thousand native marines, or Lascarins. Captain Juan Riberio was among them, and his account of what followed merits our full attention:

When we came near the spot where they said the pagoda stood, we took a native resident close to that spot and our commander inquired from him if he knew where the pagoda was. He replied that he did, and that it was close by; he acted as our guide and led us through a hill covered with forest which was the only one in the district, and this we wandered round re-crossed many times. It was certain that the pagoda was at the top of it but I do not know what magic it possessed for out of the five guides whom we took, the first three were put to death because we thought that they were deceiving us, for they acted as if they were mad and spoke all kinds of nonsense, each one in his turn without the one knowing of the others. The last two deceived us and did exactly the same, and we were forced to turn back without even seeing the pagoda which is called catergao.



Lankan villagers fought bravely with simple weapons against the superior firepower of the British during the Great Rebellion of 1817-18

Captain Roberio may be excused for not realizing it, but his oversized looking party had fallen victim to the very kind of puzzling embarrassment that is Kataragama's hallmark. The fabulous wealth they coveted was fabulous indeed, but still it proved to be enough to fire their ingrained cupidity. For the god of Kataragama, a center of riddles and mysteries is described in myth and legend as being not only the divine strategist Skanda, but also the eternal divine child, Kumara, who is forever engaged in mysterious pranks and games like hide and seek. The spirit of Kataragama was well known and alive in the heart of every inhabitant of that region. It was this 'standing army', represented as the 505 symbolic rajakariya tasks that the literal-minded European imperialists, and modern historians in their wake, so totally failed to find. As to what the 'nonsense' was that all five native 'guides' provided to the invaders, we shall probably never know what it was. But, somehow or other, the Europeans and their allies had been tricked by the myth that is Kataragama.

The Great Rebellion of 1817 or

The Misadventures of Rump King Vilbave

By the early nineteenth century, the Kandyan Kingdom had been under stage by hostile European powers for three hundred years, and was ready to topple. In 1814, with a view to obtaining help in replacing an unpopular monarch, the Kandyan nobility invited the intervention of British forces. The predictable result, that the English refused to leave and undertook to subvert – with the very best of intentions – every major Kandyan tradition, was soon to prove unbearable to nobility and common people alike.

Most irksome of all, from the indigenous standpoint, was the eradication of the institution of kingship along with the king himself. As one contemporary Sri Lankans than a mere wielder of state power, but “as amply illustrated by the elaborate ritual and ceremonial that surrounded his person, was the sacred symbol that was believed to hold society together.” Or in even more graphic terms, as John Davy was to write in 1821. “They say that a king is so essential that without him there would be no order nor harmony, only *confusion and dissension* that would soon prove fatal to society”.

In other words, within a few short years the citizenry was cast into a mood of general oppression, anxiety, and a creeping fear that Sri Lanka, *Dhammma Deepa*, had entered the long slide onto conflict act and chaos. Caught in the grip of their own convictions, the English were unable to see that they were setting the stage for eventual counteractions.

They did not have long to wait. The Kandyan population, long accustomed to freedom and the matters that meant the most to it, lacked only the leadership to undertake a war of independence. They did not have long to wait, either. A fresh lesson in history – Kataragama-style – was about to unfold.

Apart from the fact that the rebellion ended in apparent failure – for the outcome as never military in doubt – the plot that unfolded contained all the elements of a classic Kataragama performance, whether one chooses to disregard the metaphorical dimension, or not. To begin with, The Great Rebellion of 1817-18 was neither planned nor expected by anyone living in Ceylon at the time, and took the Kandyan nobility as well as the British by *complete surprise*, a typical feature of the Kataragama legend.

Exactly what happened is difficult, if it is not impossible, to determine all its subtleties. What is known is that one Vilbave, ex-bhikkhu and unreformed rogue from the low country, suddenly appeared in Kataragama at the conclusion of the great festival in July, 1817, and announced that he had been chosen by the god of Kataragama to be King of Ceylon. Again, we are reminded that, not only is the Kataragama of legend a god of ploy who acts through surrogates or by default altogether, but the site of Kataragama is also an ancient stage for the enactment of mysteries that nobody has claimed to comprehend. Dare we presume that there was no more to it than what met the eye? Modern historians have done just that.

That such a tale-teller and underhanded character as the mythical hero of Kataragama should appear in the guise of a mendicant rogue claiming royal lineage – saying he was Doraisami, Nayakkar prince of the deposed royal family – also comes as no surprise whatsoever to connoisseurs, for Kataragama, they tell us, is the original pretender, partitioning himself out to all for the sheer joy of it all while showing himself nowhere. Piling subterfuge upon subterfuge and surfacing in the most unlikely of roles, the creative process at work Kataragama proves time and again that truth has many faces.

To make a long story short, rump king Doraisami, alias Vilbave, acquired in no time a great following and set off toward the Kandyan hill country, awarding grandiose appointments long the way even before his coronation ceremony several months later at Wellawaya. The combination of melodrama and slapstick is familiar enough to students of Kataragama. Needless to say, however, it has never found its way in to history books.

On the initiative of Vilbave, or whoever he was, the people of Uva Province – old Ruhunu – rose in revolt against the British occupation force in September 1817. The timing of it all, in a sense the very distinguishing mark of Kataragama, could hardly have been worse, at least from the European standpoint. Not only was it the beginning of the rainy season, when communication and supplies were hampered by swollen rivers, but the Great Rebellion came at a time when British forces in Ceylon were depleted and native auxiliaries in short supply. ‘King’ Vilbave could not have planned it this way, and could not have planned it better, either. True to the principles of Kataragama, is *just happened* to turn out that way, to the embarrassment of the English this time.

As long as the apparently inept pretender Vilbave was at the head of operations, things went ill for the British, and rebellion spread like wildfire. But coincidentally, as soon as the influential chief of Uva found out about Vilbave’s shady background and began to lose steam. Without a common consensus at the top, rivalries and suspicion broke out among the nobility and soon everyone sensed that the rebellion would and soon in failure. Symbolic

confirmation came in 1828 with the ‘accidental’ recovery by the British of the sacred tooth relic, which had been spirited away early by sympathetic Buddhist monks. The end was not far off: Vilbave soon faded into history, and the long slide into the modernity that Kandyans loathed was ready to begin earnest.

Vilbave entered history as “the first of series of pretenders” whose deeds “set a pattern for future pretenders”. In view of insight such as this, it is remarkable that historians have not devoted greater attention to the pattern under discussion, which may be called the ‘dee3p structure’ of Kataragama. The connection between the unfolding of history and the grand enactment of principles into myth is something that has never been properly understood. Kataragama is good place to start.

Kataragama: Then and Now

The English, unaware of the nature of the struggle they were engaged in, undertook a deliberate policy of scorched earth tactics-especially in hard-hit Uva province –and state-sponsored terrorism directed against the village population who supported the guerillas. The hardship and further resentment that followed the armed struggle to evict the foreigners can only be imagined today. Such was the desolation of the countryside right up to Kataragama following the uprising that years later Davy could with obvious pride report that:

Before we had possession of the country, Kataragam (sic) WAS GREATLY FREQUENTED. The number of pilgrims is now annually diminishing, and the buildings are going to decay. In a very few years, probably they will be level with the ground, and the traveler such, we must hope will be their fate, and the fate of every building consecrated to superstition of this very degrading and *mischievous* kind.

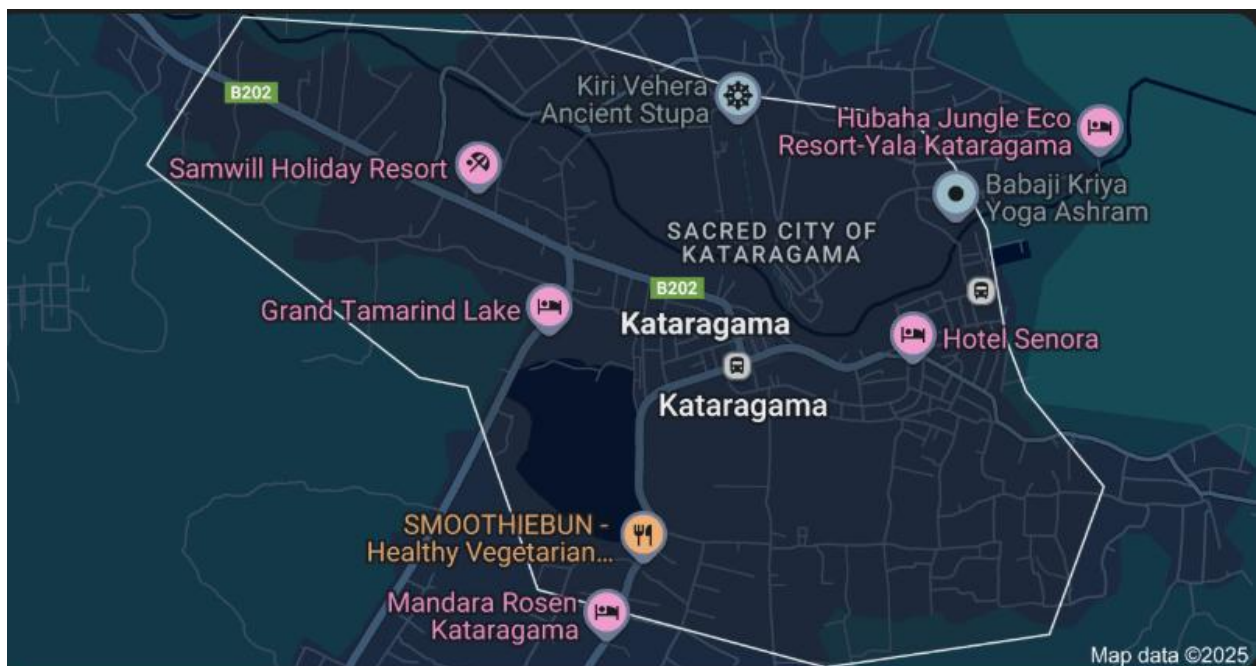
Co-opting the ancient tradition of rajakariya into a system of unpaid forced labor to construct the roads that their military and commercial interested, and approaching enormous tracts of village common lands to hand over to speculators later, the British did everything they could to dismantle the indigenous culture and replace it with something more acceptable to *them*. The fact that modern histories paint the British period as one of enlightenment and national resurgence only further suggests that history-writing itself was serving as the hand-maiden of European interests and perspectives.

In the context of what has been discussed thus far, it is most revealing to note that the worship of Kataragama in recent times has burgeoned in popularity to a remarkable extent, *co-extensive with the period since 1948 of independent nationhood*. It need hardly be added that the name period has been marked by a steady erosion of the social fiber of Sri Lankan society. New historical theories are being invented all the time to explain the course events have taken and to suggest what might follow. Indeed, as many would readily agree, there is a certain pattern to events, but it seems to defy all attempts at systematization in theory.

The principal reason for this unsatisfactory state of affairs, we suggest, is the one-sided approach that sees importance only in consideration of the sort that matter to western-

influenced historians, namely the expressions of forces pertaining to the lowest order of reality, the *quantitative* realm, denying to themselves the insights that maintained traditional civilizations in a state of homeostasis or balance in the midst of relentless change, historians must take upon themselves the responsibility for the conflict and confusion that has for so long characterized their field.

No one is suggesting that return is possible to a simpler age, or that conflict is entirely avoidable. But it is entirely possible that historians could perform a great service to Sri Lanka, if not to humanity at large, by conceding that there are also other ways of reading and writing history than the –so-called modern approaches. The lessons of Kataragama serve as a useful starting point for those having the humility and breadth of vision that such for those having the humility and breadth of vision that such an endeavor requires. Just how high the stakes may be is difficult to ascertain, but it should be self-evident by now that, as the expression goes: Time is short, and the work is vast.



Survey Department map of Kataragama.

Kataragama's Holistic Orientation:

An example of Oriental Cosmography

The jungle shrine of Kataragama in southeastern Sri Lanka has long been a place of special interest to research scholars. For far longer, however, it has also been the object of determined scrutiny by yogis, mystics and savants of the traditional sciences who came from India and even further to practice and refine their arcane knowledge. The ongoing process has

been continuing for uncounted centuries, resulting in an enormous body of esoteric lore that is only now coming to light.

During this vast span of time, Kataragama has repeatedly risen to prominence as a religious shrine and jungle deity by the same name, only to recede once again into sleepy obscurity. Even today, we are witnessing what is possibly the greatest revival in history of Kataragama both as an object of veneration and center of cultic practice for participants from many diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds.

At the same time, there has been little modern research into Kataragama apart from narrow studies of its very recent economic and sociological transformations. This unbalanced state of research affairs has in turn left the field wide open for charlatans and pseudo-scholars to reap a rich harvest in pursuance of their own self-centered objectives. The need of the hour is for informed analysis rather than hollow piety, for objectivity rather than partisan hypocrisy.

Clearly, an urgent need exists for a fresh approach to Kataragama that concedes a mutual basis for all peoples and points of view, particularly those of longstanding connection with Kataragama over the centuries. If modern scholars can learn much from Kataragama, then it is equally true that everyone's understanding of Kataragama also stands to gain by the application of modern analytical methods to the body of traditional lore. This book is one such attempt to survey just a few of the modern techniques that have already served to shed new light on some of Kataragama's remarkable traditions, with special attention to its cosmography, the picture drawn of its place in an ordered universe of discourse.

Most of these 'modern research methods' are little more than applications of old-fashioned common sense in new ways. For example, for as long as anyone knows, the people who have come to Kataragama to learn something, whether for points in Sri Lanka or abroad, have always come in the role of supplicants, pilgrims, or devotees. Participation or experience, they learn, is still the best teacher apart from god Kataragama himself who, we are told, is the only real teacher there anyway. Such was the fear of people for god Kataragama that none would dare to make pronouncements about the nature of Kataragama without first receiving the god's permission to convey his message to others. Such fear is no longer as pervasive as before, but it is still advisable for scholars and others to exercise prudence before rushing in where even angels fear to tread.

Similarly, it is reasonable to assume that religious traditions are best studied and understood on their own terms. The leading theologians of East and west have been those who *believe* in that which they are also endeavoring to understand better. There is a notion persistent in certain academic quarters, however, that participation (Sanskrit: *bhakti*) in an oriental tradition actually somehow disqualifies participants from accurately describing the tradition they set out to understand. We believe this is a mistaken notion that ought to be laid to rest once and for all.

In short, it is our conviction based upon years of specialized study that a holistic tradition such as that of Kataragama is best understood in equally holistic terms. By 'holistic' is meant here 'encompassing the entire field of implicit possibilities'. Above all, Kataragama is a state

of grace (Tamil: *arul*) manifested on earth that many people have experienced in equally many ways. To encompass all this one needs an approach that is as the holistic tradition under study.

To order to achieve this ideal it is imperative that some attempt be made to integrate modern and traditional methodologies. Ironically, however, the last modern holdouts of obsolete colonial attitudes have been among modern researchers themselves, who still regard with scorn and disdain the techniques and findings of their humbler oriental counterparts who faithfully seek to preserve traditional schools of thought. I believe that a more complete understanding of Kataragama will emerge only when these two extremes are reconciled. For this a holistic approach is required, one that sees Kataragama as a vital functioning whole composed of many functional aspects.

If holistic integration is one important tool for understanding Kataragama, then *synchronic analysis* is another. Its opposite, diachronic analysis or the analysis of changes over the course of time, has been well-developed in the west where change has always received more attention than in the East where concern centers upon the Changeless or ‘synchronic’ identity underlying changeable appearances that change in the course of time.

Synchronic analysis, on the other hand, has been well developed here in the eastern world over the course of centuries. Examples are the Samkhya analytical system of classical Hindu metaphysics and the *paticca Samuppada* or twelve-fold nexus of dependent original postulated by Lord Gautama Buddha.

Synchronic analysis, which finds particularly effective application in literary and dramatic criticism, has only begun to find application in exploring Kataragama’s convoluted ‘deep structure’. It is an especially favorable tool for the study of states of pure *being*, something that is generally a matter of little concern in the study of various states of becoming or temporal causation that is the usual focus of most modern research. However, typically Oriental synchronic analysis may be. Its special suitability to the study of Kataragama is only to be expected.

The third modern analytical tool for the advanced study of ancient religious traditions such those of Kataragams is known as *Structural analysis*. Basically, structural analysis is the identification of patterns and process of interaction between elements of a whole whereby the whole itself can be better understood. Linguistics, anthropology, and literary criticism are only three of the applications where structural analysis has proved to be especially fruitful. But anywhere patterns or structures are found analysis generally follows, and such is the case with the study of geophysics, astronomy, pure mathematics and almost every other modern science.

Because Kataragama is not only an oral story tradition that can be analyzed in literary terms but also a unique geographical setting and also a dynamic cultural phenomenon and object of great potential for in-depth anthropological study as well, the technique of structural analysis, when applied holistically, can yield extraordinary results of potential benefit to scholars and laity alike. Just how deeply the mystery that is Kataragama can be studied using structural

analysis remains to be seen. But it should already be evident that significant discoveries may be expected. I should add here that any significant discoveries in Kataragama, traditionally speaking, come only with the guidance and cooperation of god Kataragama himself, who is said to be the *Gurunathan* or chief among all teachers.

Just briefly, a few of the findings in Kataragama that have come to light in recent years maybe summarized as follows:

In terms of dramatic performance, structural evidence continues to mount suggesting the survival in Kataragama of a living tradition of initiatory mystery rites in dramatic form. The passion or mystery play of Kataragama, it would appear, structurally parallels two analogous themes of *ricorsoor* return, namely the mystery of the sun's return to rise again in the east following its descent and disappearance each day in the west, and the even more mysterious return of the mythical solar hero person in the sun talaivan/bodhisattva familiar or peoples the whole world over.

Significantly, this magnificent paradigm of traditional holistic vision, replete with images of its ancient Gnostic sources, timeless traditional wisdom, has until now passed all but unnoticed by generations of Western-trained scholars. But it has yielded easily and naturally to the more sympathetic approach of participation. This alone should provide cause for reflection by scholars and others.

Strictly speaking, the entire mystery performance embodied in Kataragama's annual fortnight-long festivity is an invocation in word and gesture, an appeal or reminder directed to the person in the Sun for him to return and keep his primordial promise illuminate the world for the benefit of all humanity and life on earth. If so, this is truly an awesome theme and one that deserves careful consideration. Abusive praise and ironic reversal are only two of the subtle techniques still employed in this ancient dramatic tradition to convey timeless truths expressive of the entire classical *rasa* theory of traditional dramatic criticism. But this should not be taken to mean that there are not other techniques as well, for Kataragama is well known to be full of hidden surprises.

Similarly, in terms of linguistic analysis, Kataragams is also closely associated with an ongoing tradition of etymological exegesis, word-ply including multi-lingual puns, and communication of hidden patterns of meaning through *sandha bhasa*, the 'twilight language' of multiple dual intentions. This tradition of *double entendre*, if simultaneously sacred profound and profane utterances/reference risqué connotations, is epitomized in the Sanskrit etymology of the alternative *Katir-kama* where the brilliance of *katir* of Kataragama is blanced by the dark intrigue of *kama* or erotic passion. It is wrong to say that Kataragama embraces one and rejects the other. The story is about *both*.

Indeed, it is no exaggeration to point out that whenever there is talk of scandal this god's name comes up at once immediately, for 'scandal' (literally, 'that which one cannot leap over') and Skanda ('the Leaper') both derive from the same Indo-European verbal root *skand* of Greek *skandalon*, 'snare' meaning 'to leap or spurt'. In the canonical Atharva Veda this same scandalous god is repeatedly called *dhurta*, which can only translate as 'rogue'.

Mention could also be made of the special study and application of *mantra* that is well-known to take place in Kataragama, or of the child-god's reputed superiority over even Lord Shiva himself in analyzing the mystical seed-syllable 'om'. Of greater relevance, I believe, is the fact of Kataragama's being situated on a linguistic border where misunderstandings often produce fresh insights concerning the human condition. Historically this has been a major source of inspiration over the centuries for Kataragama's ongoing artistic traditions.

For most people today, however, dramatic theory and linguistic analysis are sheer abstractions. But with modern tools like synchronic analysis researchers are also able to make surprising findings just by looking at Kataragama's geographical layout and comparing that which anyone can visit and see with the stories and legends that anyone can listen to and hear.

Indeed, Kataragama's traditional or sacred geography, as analyzed and understood using the methods just outlined, is precisely the topic and for which this discussion of the question of methodology is essential. Hence let us now turn our attention to questions of the traditional geography of Kataragama. Considering the preeminent role of cosmology in the Kataragama story, I believe it can be further shown that Kataragama even in the present day and age represents a classic example of traditional oriental cosmography, a mapping of the cosmos. The importance of holistic thinking should become clear to all who follow it.

We shall let us now consider the place, the story, and the god of Kataragama in terms of holistic integration analysis. All three of these are very elegantly represented in the abstract geometrical figure of the *sadkona yantra*, which is believed to be the central focus of veneration, worship, prayers and ritual at the great shrine of Kataragama. I say 'believed' because the mysterious object, whatever it may be, is never once even for a moment displayed but remains concealed within a small casket which itself is kept hidden from public view by a number of veils or screens. But even if there were nothing in it at all, this is the story as tradition preserves.

The *sadkona yantra* or hexagram is considered to be identical to god Skanda or Kumara Swami. Both, after all, have six faces in as many directions, as indicated by his ancient name *Sanmukha* or *Arumukam* (Tamil), the Six-Faced one.

According to the oral tradition itself, still preserved here in Sri Lanka, the *Sanmukha* or *sadkona yantra* is formed or generated by the union of two simple equilateral triangles, the upward-pointing triangle representing the *Shiva tattva* or Father Principle and the downward-pointing triangle representing its reflection *Prakrti*, the Mother Principle. When these two principles of Light and Dark, Spirit and Matter, Katir-Logos and Kama-Eros are in balanced union, that life arises which is a combination of the two. This incarnation of Spirit into matter is the Holy Child, the Kumara.

In simple geometric terms, the Kumarasambhava or genesis of the Divine Child may be represented as follows:

Furthermore, the oral tradition of Kataragama does not stop here but goes on to point out that the six-pointed star thus generated in plane geometric flat, two-dimensional space is in turn the representation of a three-dimensional cross matrix generated in solid geometric space consisting of six rays issuing in the six cardinal directions including zenith and nadir.

It is worth printing out here that in this process just mentioned two simple figures of two-dimensional space are combined to suggest the introduction of additional higher dimension of the three-dimensional space that all of us actually live and breathe in. This third axis or higher dimension, furthermore, is none other than the *axis mundi* or vertical solar ray that shines upon the dark primordial waters, or in other words, grace descending upon matter. Hence, the *Sanmukhaor sadkona yantra* both ideally represent the descent of grace in one direction or passage into another higher dimension of being in the other direction. Coincidentally, oral tradition to this day maintains that the entire geographical Kataragama is a magical labyrinth wherein devas, yakkas, siddhas and others move at will between various *lokas* or levels of existence. Certainly there are thousands today who gladly testify to the free availability in Kataragama of divine power and grace. Until now, no satisfactory hypothesis scientific explanation has yet been offered, but this is not to say that one is not possible.

In yogic terms, it is explained that three-dimensional cross pinpoints the center or heart of the manifested world, the point from which all creative activity goes forth proceeds. This point, the oral tradition tells us, is always here and now (Tamil: *ippoinke*). It is found, in other words, deep within us or else nowhere non-existent at all. Most people, of course, find nowhere to be nowhere.

This point situated at the center of space and time - here and now - is also said to be the set of consciousness, the royal throne where Lord Skanda, Guha the hidden mysterious One, lies hiding as the one and only Enjoyer. It is here from this superb vantage point, of course, that he reads our every thought and witnesses every action of the cosmic drama that is his play. And he sees in all directions at once, which is to say that he sees everything. His connection with the *axis mundi* or world axis now begins to be more evident.

When we turn from the *microcosmic* perspective just outlined to the macrocosmic perspective that encompassing the entirety of space and time, the story is equally intriguing. For when we look at Kataragama geographically as a place on the earth's surface, we discover what every swami in Kataragama knows – that the geographical Kataragama lies upon the same North-South meridian of longitude as Mount Kailāsa, far to the north in Tibet. Kailāsa, the source of four major river systems, it justifiably regarded by many of the people of Asia as being the earthly analogue of the mythological word axis, called Mount Meru by Buddhists and a host of other names.

In terms of the Kataragama legend, Mount Kailāsa represents the heavenly throne of god Kataragama's terrific Father-God Shiva when a great demon or asura appears on earth, threatening the maintenance of harmony and justice and striking with terror not only humanity but even the angelic hosts as well, the gods and sages as a group implore the Most High God Shiva to engender a warrior son who can defeat this demon and restore the rule of

Dhamma, Justice. To do so it is not enough for the great God to remain sunk deep in the non-dual inactivity of *samādhi*, but he must emerge through the arousal of *kama*, sexual passion, to enter into union with the Daughter of the Mountain, *Parvati*. The conception of the Kumara or Tender Little Prince, however, is immaculate; he appears from his heavenly father's wisdom eye as a brilliant burst of light that divides into six rays or sparks. All six together descend from heaven to earth, eventually falling to rest upon the water of *sarvana* or stand of reeds. A burst of light, he falls upon the primordial Waters, not unlike the biblical prophet Moses, he is discovered among the reeds by six maidens, the *krttikas* or Pleiades, who become his foster mothers.

To make a long story short, the prodigal child's sense of justice is pricked one day when he feels he has been cheated by his own brother with connivance of both parents and Narada, the divine minstrel and mischief-maker. He leaves off his identity as Bala Kumara and assumes the identity of Kumara Swami, the *anti* or itinerant beggar, and heads south from his parental mountain home on Mount Kailāsa down through India and eventually all the way to Kataragama. According to local tradition, the young god's further exploits in love and war all take place in Kataragama. What is most interesting is that this whole legendary scenario takes place not just once in historical time but over and over in *principio* with progressive variations. Indeed, god Kataragama is seriously reputed to be alive and well despite doubts to the contrary in less traditional quarters of Sri Lanka. For example, when Murukan comes searching for Valli in Kataragama, he finds she has already made a vow to marry only him.

Typically, a major clue to his identity is his association with the shaft that he holds in his hand. This shaft, which could be a hunter-warrior's spear, a king's scepter, a magician's wand, a religious mendicant's staff, and old man's walking cane stick or any other such accessory to the classical disguises of god Kataragama-Skanda precisely represents the vertical shaft of light from heaven that is both the world axis and the channel of divine power and grace. For he is *Śaktidhāra*, the *dhāra* or holder of *Śakti*, a word that in Sanskrit may mean 'ability', 'power', 'feminine consort', or 'spear', depending upon the context. God Kataragama, of course, holds all of these. Here again one sees the tradition's linguistic basis.

As we have just seen, Kataragama-Skanda's abstract geometrical representation as a six-pointed star or three-dimensional cross also suggests the presence introduction of a vertical shaft or axis. This vertical axis is further understood to be analogous to the *axis mundi*, whether understood interpreted as the earth's North-South axis or as the mythical world axis, represented by the empty hub or center of the Dharmacakra. The apparent emptiness and inactivity of the hub or axis belie its commanding position at the center of all the activity that takes place around it. Similarly, god Skanda is said to occupy, unseen a commanding position from where he watches all and yet remains unnoticed, invisible as it were, and virtually non-existent.

Indeed, this connection of god Skanda with Dharmacakra. In this sense, he is the Prime Unmoved mover. Additionally there is a complicated structural web of associations connecting the romance of Skanda with that of Alexander the Great; both names, for

example, are transcribed into Arabic as *al-Sikandar*. But this would lead too far afield and is the subject for a separate study.

In view of these observations, it should come as a surprise to no one that considerations of geography, or rather cosmography, play an essential role in any holistic study of Kataragama. Traditional or sacred geography was and remains a qualitative science as contrasted opposed to the quantitative science that passes by the same name today. For ancient geographers geographical places and directions were not all equal, but each point on the compass and each place on the earth's surface had its own peculiar qualities that could be analyzed as part of a general theory of cosmography, the mapping and description the ordered universe. North, for example, is associated with life, magic, teachers and kings while south is associated with chaos, death, and judgment for it is the realm of Yama, the Judge of the Dead.

Ancient geographers such as Ptolemy of Alexandria were not unaware of Kataragama's special properties, either for in his remarkably accurate map of Taprobane Ptolemy informs future generations that somewhere in the close near vicinity of Kataragama today there lies a place he calls the *Dionsy seu Bacchi oppidum* (Latin: 'town of Bacchus or Dionysus'). For this extraordinary identification, Ptolemy or his seafaring informants must have been able to recognize some uncanny similarities between Kataragama as it was some two thousand years ago and the rituals of the cult of Dionysus, the Asian god of drama, ecstatic possession, and wild torchlit processions whose mysteries or dramatic festivals were still being celebrated annually.

On the other hand, Sri Lankan iconography and during their lifetimes oral tradition still preserves familiarity with the essential elements of classical cosmography. It is widely known in yogic circles, for example, that Kataragama the 'Southern Kailāsa lies directly south of Mount Kailāsa at the last inhabitable place before the chaotic waters of Yama southern realm. It has also been noted that in this God-given configuration whereby Kataragama, Mount Kailāsa, the earth's north pole and the pole star all lie neatly in line, the resulting North-South alignment is not only an analogue to the external *axis mundi* but also to the *Susumna nadi* or central internal column that is visualized in certain yogic practices.

In this classical example of holistic cosmography, the practitioner or *sadhaka* regards the world that is within (Tamil: *ulla*) and the outward world (Tamil: *veli*) as being reflections of each other. God Kataragama, for example, is found deep within us and he is also found there in the Kataragama jungle as well. Small wonder, then, that participants in this tradition so often swear that the best way to find Kataragama is to be in Kataragama.

In this tantric visualization, Kailāsa the indescribable heaven of non-dual self-identity, is envisioned imagined as being situated at the top of a great vertical shaft with Kataragama lying at the shaft's base on earth. Here Kataragama is analogized to the *muladhāra cakra*, the gateway to heaven as it were and starting point for the ascent part of the practitioner's mystical journey. There are understood to be other *cakras* or stations of the mystical journey from Kataragama to Kailāsa and back again. All these further illustrate the character of the

vertical shaft as a unique single axis connecting the multiple *cakras* or *lokas*, levels worlds of experience.

It should therefore also not surprise anyone that the geographical place Kataragama to this day is said to be full of secret hiding places and passageways to other worlds, including the highest heaven or Kailāsa. These mysterious gateways, the oral tradition maintains, cannot only transport a person from our Kataragama to other world's parallel to Kataragama in parallel worlds', but may also serve as two-way doors for devas and other spirits of parallel worlds to gain entry into ours to return back.

As fantastic as all of this may sound to modern ears, it nevertheless is in perfect concordance with the body of traditional knowledge that comes down to us as a living oral tradition. And what is more, it also bears remarkable similarity to parallel universe theory as it has been developed and expressed lately in terms of quantum mechanics and the search for a general unified field theory. But if there is any truth to these stories – and Kataragama after all is a tradition of seeking out the truth then it is entirely credible that research into sciences both modern and traditional may someday be able to tell us a great deal more about the nature make-up of the universe.

But the return to an account of Kataragama's holistic cosmographical orientation, one has finally to look just a bit closely at the configuration or disposition alignment of shrines as they actually exist in Kataragama now. Just as Kataragama devotees analogize their six-faced Lord Sanmukha to the six-faced *yantra* or abstract geometric figure that is brought about in procession on the back of an elephant at festival times, so likewise this seed symbol homologizes itself with the surrounding features in such a way what a cosmographical field is dawn or suggested. This cosmographical field may be reckoned to center upon the *Ruhunu Maha Kataragama Devalaya* wherein the great god Kataragama Sanmukha himself, as represented by the six-faced *yantra* so suggestive of the whole story, is said to rule unseen and with absolute fairness the entire kingdom or domain that is his. How he does so is a very deep mystery indeed.

In other words, the whole of geographical Kataragama is reckoned by the living oral tradition to be one vast *yantra*, a magical field or dramatic stage whereon god Skanda Kumara's play or circus, his *vilaiyatal*, is said to never end but continues to this day. This is also why events in Kataragama are not only what they seem to be – and surely are – but are something else as well, something very marvelous and mysterious to behold those who see it.

Situated at the heart of this powerful magical field, at center stage, is Murukan or Sanmukha or Kataragama himself, the *saktidhāra* or holder or the magical vertical shaft, the *axis mundi* around which the whole show or world revolves. Here at the center the image of the image-dimensional cross presents itself in several ways, one of which is the venerated casket said to contain the sadkona yantra that is identified with the six-faced Lord himself. Another is the *mandala*-like construction of the Mahadevale itself, a simple single-storied structure which according to local lore, actually consists of seven levels or multiple stories both above and below the ground level of the structure where one enters.

Yet another example of veneration toward the vertical world axis is the survival to this day of the very archaic cult of tree worship in Kataragama. Like the ritual of the Christmas of Santa Claus/Father Xmas tree that was grafted onto Christianity from older pagan sources, the ritual of the *bodi puja* is far older than Buddhism itself. Prior to the introduction of Buddhism and Brahmanism to the island, Kataragama was the home of a dreaded aboriginal hill spirit, *Kanda Yakka*, who, according to some sources, was a *yaksa* or tree spirit.

As a living symbol of the vertical shaft or world axis, often also reckoned to be the divine Tree of Life, the sacred tree is not only associated with life, fruitfulness, and fertility, but also with the welling up of strength, beauty, and wisdom as well from deep down within. The Islamic tradition that associates Kataragama with al-Khadir and the Fountain of Life is another expression of this same theme.

As an analogue to vertical axis of the three-dimensional cross, one might expect the sacred tree to be found close to the Mahadevale at the heart of Kataragama's cosmographical map. And this is exactly the case, for both of the sacred papal trees are closely situated so that the Mahadevale lies shaded by under them. The ancient origin of this form of tree worship is amply illustrated in that an integral part of the once-weekly *bodhi puja* is the offering of water to the tree spirit and wild game to the god of the hunt by the *kapuralas* and *ammass* who perform it. In historical or diachronic terms, this could represent some of the very earliest strata of a living story that is still unfolding to this day.

Also suggestive of the vertical world axis, spiritual awakening, and shamanic flight, and indeed a whole cosmographical map vision of the universe in itself, is Kiri Vihera. This elegant three-dimensional model of the universe as traditionally understood appears as the massive *stupa* or symbolic reliquary situated some five hundred meters *due north of the sanctum sanctorum*. *It is here at Kiri Vehera that veneration* toward the Buddha, Dhamma, and His Sangha community of beggars of bhikkhus focuses.

Sinhalese Buddhist tradition maintains that the historical Buddha and a large party of *arahats* were able to travel by mysterious means – in the twinkling of an eye – from Magadha in Northern India to this spot in Lanka. In other words, through the spoken word the Buddha transported his astute listeners to Kataragama where a just king was said to be ruling. That King was called *Mahasena*, the one “Who Has a Great Army”, another ancient name of the wargod Skanda, the Leaper or Attacker, Murukan regarded as bodhisattva-king Kataragama.

The Buddha, it is said, delivered a marvelous discourse about Dhamma. Justice, on this spot to a bodhisattva-king *Mahasena* who was himself a paragon of ideal kingship. Diachronically analyzed in terms of historical or chronological time, it all appears most unlikely or questionable at best whether all this ever really happened in the way that the Mahavamsa records it. But considering the story synchronically, the juxtaposition of characters and associations suggests that the Awakened One appeared in Kataragama in the role of an unsurpassed teacher of gods and men who proceeds to illuminate good King Mahasena and all the subjects of the storybook kingdom of Kataragama by relating parables about *another*

story book kingdom very much like Kataragama and leaving it to his cultured listeners to understand the parables' inner meaning for themselves.

This reflexive quality of the two a *Jinas* or Conquerors is illustrated the fact of in their being mirror-images of each other, different expressions of the same universal human reality. It is no accident the tradition in Sri Lanka of the epic or *vamsa* like *shara*, another word meaning 'rush' or 'reed', recall that Skanda Kumara was born and fell into a forest of these whether they are considered as plants or as living oral literary traditions) places the historical Buddha and the mythological good-king side-by-side or face-to-face, together in the same location at the same time at a spot due north of both *Vedahitikanda* '(The Peak where He Was', i.e. before He moved down and due north some three kilometers away on the left bank of the Menik Ganga) and the Kataragama Mahadevale. Again and again, the *Dharmacakra* and its turning around the vertical or polar axis are suggested in word imagery and the actual physical geography, or cosmography, of Kataragama.

The role of mirror imagery in the cosmography of Kataragama is well illustrated by the process of role inversion displayed at Kiri Vihera. To Sinhalese Buddhists, it is the place where the Blessed One exhorted King Mahasena and His subjects to live in peace and harmony with the ultimate object of liberation.

But according to Tamil oral tradition, Kiri Vihera is *Curan Kottai*, literally 'The Demon's Fortress'. Obviously, a great potential for misunderstanding exists here, and until now no scholarly attempt has been made to interpret this delicate paradox in terms other than conflict.

By applying the modern analytical tools just outlined, however, the paradox resolves itself so that Tamils and Sinhalese need not wage a war of words over the issue. The structure of the annual Esala Maha Perahera, the great full moon procession, shed sufficient light that these apparent contradictions dissolve into different perspectives on the same Kataragama story. For once a year the entire romance of Kataragama is retold in one evening not in words but in a series of silent gestures connected with the dramatic procession.

That the Tamil tradition is correct in depicting the bodhisattva King Mahasena as setting out with his army for a great battle is shown by the fact this is the only occasion in the year when Mahadevale drummers sound the war beat on their drums. This unambiguous message signals the start of the colorful torchlit procession setting to set out on its march due north to the imposing symbol of *samyak sambodhi* or supreme awakening. This annual engagement reenacting the meeting of Mahasena and the Buddha is performed by King Mahasena's prime minister or wazir, the Bas Nayake Nilame, who comes on foot to offer ritual gifts, hospitality and respect to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha as represented by the incumbent *bhikkhu* of Kiri Vihera.

Here at one time and place are represented two *chakravartis*, two world conquerors whose conquests are said to be over demons ignorance and fear, personified as *Māra* and *Cur* respectively. What is called the unshakable confidence or steadfastness of both Lords Buddha and Kataragama is nothing other than else but their irremovable possession of *jñānaśakti*, the 'power of wisdom' so elegantly symbolized by images suggesting the axis around which the

earth turns. The stupa, the sacred Tree, the sacred mountain, the alignment of all three towards the Pole Star (suggesting a sacred axis), and not least of all the potent symbols of the *Vel*, the *yantra*, and the Dhamacakra.

If in olden times the god was pictured as facing due south towards the Peak where he was previous to that, then this would suggest that he, like his Father Śiva, was *Daksinamurti*, 'Facing South' in silent aspect gesture of teaching with his back to a gigantic magical tree of stone. The magical tree, of course, is again the World Tree and *axis mundi mundi* combined.

There is only one geographical spot on earth where a god or yantra could have many different aspects or faces and where, paradoxically, all of them would be *dakshinamurti*, 'facing south' in the aspect role of guru. That spot, of course, is the earth's North Pole itself. Interestingly, the spirit of the Christmas tree, Father Christmas, is also portrayed as living on the North Pole except for one night in the year when he makes his a magical down from his pole answer wishes journey to of the faithful. The structural similarity bordering upon identity of these mirror-image pagan pole spirits should not be overlooked.

It is significant that, in order for the axial or polar character to face any direction other than south whether this mistaken all suggest through imagery and without words the existence of an imaginary and yet real (upright) vertical ray penetrating our world and turning or ordering it in some mysterious fashion. All this would seem to imply that god-king Mahasena or Kataragama, who is already reckoned to be a bodhisattva who has made a vow to come back again and again for the protection of Dhamma and *Dhamma Dipa*, may have more in common with the Buddha and the Principle of Dhamma than most people, including scholars, have so far conceded recognized. And this is not to say that he is a Buddhist god any more or less than a Hindu one, for if he is anything originally he is a Vedda god. But somehow he lends himself to expression in terms of most any tradition equality well. For he is, after all, a god of many approaches appearances or perspectives.

So, in other words, the *Surasamhara* war that is understood to take place at Curan Kottai or Kiri Vihera is structurally identical to the victory of the Buddha while seated under the sacred Tree of Awakening against the demon army of Mara who, like Murukan's enemy Curapatman, is also a shape-shifter who continually changes appearances. The only weapon that can defeat this super-demon is the power of wisdom, the *jñānaśakti* or *Vel* that is represented by the vertical shaft or axis. Both the Buddha and God Kataragama possess that super-weapon, and both use it to vanquish the forces of ignorance and terror.

If the vertical and North-South axes of Kataragama's three-dimensional cosmography are represented, then what about its east-west axis or dimension? Does it have one at all and where? In fact, the earth itself has no single East-West axis as such for it can only turn around one axis and that is the polar axis.

But if an imaginary East-West axis could be imagined as existing in Kataragama, one could reasonably expect it to pass through the Mahadevale where the seed-symbol representing the three-dimensional cross is believed to reside. And in fact, if one looks at the Mahadevale and

the major shrines in its immediate vicinity, one finds them all in an intriguing East-West configuration.

Or almost, at least. For the Kataragama Mahadevale does not face due south but south and somewhat to the east, towards the residence of Valli Amma, the god's jungle sweet heart and favorite consort. In other words, he is a god who prefers earth over heaven (or he would not be in Kataragama) and a pure-hearted human devotee, Valli, over his own queen wife, goddess Devasena or Teyvāni (or he would face Devasena instead of Valli).

At any rate, the good-character seated under the sacred tree, whoever he may be, probably once faced due south in reverence to and contemplation of the Peak where he was Vedahitikanda, which is reputed to have been the center of his worship in early times. A full consideration of the Seven Sacred Hills a conspicuous feature of sacred cities the world over; Athens, Rome and Jerusalem are being only a few examples must await separate treatment. Suffice it to say that, in terms of cosmography, the central of highest hill represents the central point of the three-dimensional cross; the other six hills correspond to the six cardinal points or directions of the cross.

Valli also may have once stood due south of Swami, her Lord. But that would position her in the (i.e., bathing?) Menik Ganga, or on the right bank, the profane side in modern times, as against the left bank or sacred side where the gods are. She may indeed have crossed over, so to speak, to join the immortals. It would not have been difficult.

In the course of doing so, however, she appears to have captured the god's attention and is holding it ever since. He is no longer facing Katira Malai, the 'Shining Peak' that is due south, but has turned his attention to Valli, who now looks back at him from a discreet distance of some three hundred meters, about as far as one can spot a person in his wooded setting. They are still roughly north and south, but she having put a twinkle in his Lord's eye, has and come east a bit to be on the same side as her Lord.

This slight turning of god Kataragama's attention from the *katir* of *Katir* Malai to the kama of his passion for Valli was also built into the foundation of Kataragama Mahadevale so that it also faces not due south, but south and little to the east, towards Valli Amman Kovil. This skewing of the Mahadevale's foundation has profound ramifications, for not only does it tilt the East-West axis considerably but it also tells us something more without saying a single word Kataragama's mysterious activities.

If in olden times the god was pictured facing due south towards the Peak where he was previous to that, then this would suggest that he, like his Father Shiva, was Daksinamurti, 'Facing South' in silent aspect gesture of teaching with his back to a gigantic magical tree of stone. The magical tree, of course, is again the World Tree and *axis mundi* combined.

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except for one night in the year when he makes a magical journey down from his Pole journey to answer wishes of the faithful. The structural similarity bordering upon identity – of these pagan pole spirits should not be overlooked.

It is significant that, in order for the axial or polar character to face any direction other than south – whether this is taken in its symbolical or strictly geographical sense – he first has to come down from his pole or mountain or *Samādhi* to a lower latitude or elevation or level of self-awareness where distinctions between like ‘east’ and ‘west’, ‘I’ and ‘Thou’, ‘he’ and ‘she’ are meaningful and important. Skanda-Murukan, again like the biblical prophet Moses, is one who comes down from the sacred ‘Peak where He was’; where ‘Peak’ has a number of metaphorical dimensions as well as the strict geographical sense. He starts out as a twinkle in his Father’s Third Eye, descends down from heaven to earth, down from the Mount Kailāsa far North to Sri Lanka, down from *Vedahitikanda* to a more lushly inhabited area, and finally down from his own high divinity to flirt and make love with the low-caste hunter’s adopted daughter.

This downward movement is from North to South, heaven to earth, unity to multiplicity, divinity to humanity, *katir* to *kama*, *logos* to *eros*. It maps, effectively, the descent of grace or *arul* that is described as a rain or even flood.

But still we have not considered the East-West axis passing through the sanctum sanctorum. We have already seen that the Mahadevale’s structure and cosmographical orientation tell a great deal about the story of Kataragama. And now the configuration of adjacent shrines tells us still more.

At the heart of the entire *mandala* or *yantra* that is Kataragama stands the *Ruhunu Kataragama Maha Devale*, which houses both *Swami* (i.e. God Kataragama himself) and the six-cornered *yantra* with which he is identified. All lies neatly upon the north-south meridian connecting *Kailāsa*, *Kiri Vihera*, *Katira Malai* and the North Pole.

Immediately to God Skanda Kumara’s right and facing in the same direction is *Ganesa kovil*, *literally*, ‘the royal palace of Ganapati’, the elephant-natured god who is reckoned to be God Skanda Kumara’s *older* brother. Synchronically, that is, for in historical or diachronic terms Ganesa or Ganapati, the ‘Lord of Multiplicity’, is considered to be far younger than Skanda. In this fashion, the two equally playful and mischievous god characters are paired together as a topsy-turvy team, the one an inverted reflection of the other, a fact that emerges in their depiction as sibling rivals forever in a tug of love, as it were.

That the two characters work in tandem with each other is amply shown in mythological stories and legends. Certainly the relationship of these looking-glass two trickster archetypes is deep and complex. As Ganapati is associated with beginnings, he is reckoned to be the older brother and is generally always worshiped first.

As the little brother Skanda Kumara is reckoned to be playing the role of King of Kataragama in his make-believe game with Ganapati and others, his older brother naturally falls into the role of counselor and advisor, the royal court *purohita*. Here the elephant-god of wisdom and

success is teamed up with the royal warrior bodhisattva-king Murugan or Mahasena in a classic instance of the marriage of sacred authority and temporal power that together govern the ideal kingdom.

This relationship, expressed implicitly through gesture rather than explicitly through words, is further suggested in their relative positions at Kataragama. In fact, both divine sons are kings of their respective realms of Sinhala poetic tradition in which Kanda Kumara the First Man, followed the path of elephants from Sri Pada to Gajaragama, the 'Home of the Elephants'. Ganapati, Leader of the Elephants, Kumara Leader of Man, the divine generalissimo Skanda, the active warrior-type, stands to King Ganapati's left, less-preferred the side allocated to the military in royal court functions. To Ganapati's right, side, occupying the senior position of *wazir* or wise counselor, stands Lord Vishnu, who is considered to be the *mama* or maternal uncle in his culture, Uncle Vishnu also joins in His nephew's make-believe game, whatever it is. That is Skanda got it from Ganapati and Ganapati got it from Vishnu. Buddha is understood to be one of Vishnu's many *avatars* or guises.

Similarly, to the priestly or *wazir* side of Lord Skanda Kumara stands his proverbially wise Prime Minister and older brother Ganapati, who advises the mischievous Child in the cunning strategies for which he is so notorious. Together in this intriguing configuration, then, one finds the two child-like brothers and their equally mischievous uncle silently conspiring together, as it were, in a pantomime. Mirroring each other through inverted roles, they play together here on earth in ways that could not be done even there in heaven. In a sense, they actually come down to earth, in their own mysterious ways, square upon the *yantra* or enchanted game board that is Kataragama.

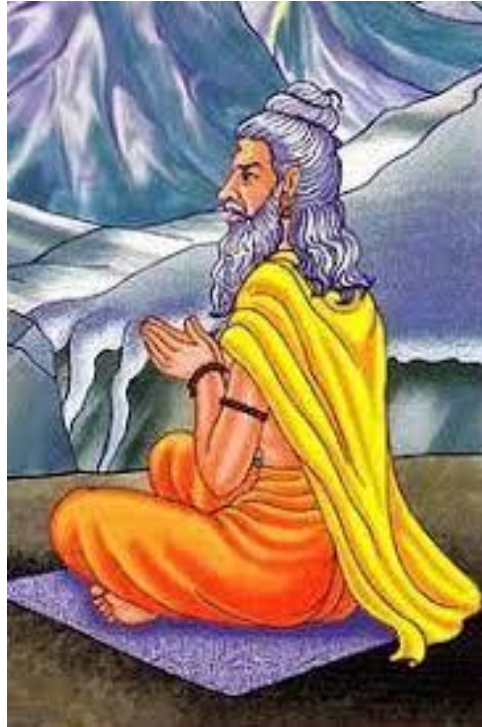
And what about god Kataragama's left side? On the King's less-preferred military side would expect to find His army commander. And this is precisely the case, as shown by the presence on that side of a separate courtyard and residence for *Teyvani Ammā*, the young god's divine consort whose Sanskrit name *Devaseā*, 'Army of the Gods', clearly reveals her ancient association with military duty. Skanda is *Devasenādhipati*, another instance of linguistic punning or dual intention. Or the same word may mean 'General of the Divine Army' or 'Husband of Devasenā', depending upon the context.

But some natural questions arise. Why is *Teyvani Ammā* standing apart from her Lord with her back to him? Shouldn't she be with him, close to his side? Of course, one could argue that she came to Kataragama only later, with Kalyanagiri Swami around the fifteenth or sixteenth century of the Christian era, and that the celebrated Swami was obliged to have her face east because theirs is a Brahmanical order of orthodox Hinduism. This is the conventional interpretation.

But the fact is, as geography clearly shows, she does not face east exactly. Rather, [in synchronic terms], she is aligned with her Lord and his other playmates, with her neck squarely turned to him so that she actually faces east but considerably towards the North. Why then with her back to her Lord? Does she feel slighted that the right, favoured side of

her Lord is already occupied by someone, leaving her with the less enviable left side only on which to stand’?

Again, the whole configuration lends itself easily and naturally to synchronic analysis. For by looking the disposition of Kataragama’s shrines in terms of the story that is considered to take place there, a clear pattern presents itself.



Devasenāpati

All the leading characters are in some alignment or other with the protagonist Murugan, the hero or *talaivan* of his own mystery play, his *tiruvilaiyāttu*. He faces, not surprisingly, the heroine or *talaivi* Valli, whose apparent movement captures his eye, drawing his attention away from contemplation of the ‘Peak Where He Was’, *Vedahitikanda*, his very own ‘Southern Kailāsa’ and down to the earthier considerations that justify the use of the term ‘passion play’ to described their activities. In short, she brings him down to earth. For only here in the realm of duality, in the seething jungle of duplicity, can here exist the polar duality of Lover and Beloved, ‘I’ and ‘Thou’.

This *kāma* or passion, the basic human urge to procreate, to preserve and transmit to others the basics of humanity and culture, is said to be the motive that drew god Skanda to *Katir-kāma* in the first place. And this is only one more reason why he is still considered to be a rogue after all these years.

The pivotal character of the *talaivan* or hero Skanda in his own drama is thus graphically illustrated in concrete geographical terms in the relative disposition of the major shrines or

characters. By integrating the geographical facts with structural features of the Kataragama romance, a pattern emerges that suggests something like the following composite picture:

The solar hero, whose primordial role it is to maintain the continuity of life and the patterns that govern it, such as regular seasonal rains and human fertility, is closely associated with the constancy of the *axis mundi* or vertical shaft that governs cyclic repetition. Unseen but detectable, he maintains the balance of his kingdom on earth by locating himself here or there upon that axis between its poles of light and dark, unity and multiplicity, highness and lowness, heaven and earth, passion and dispassion. Because of this *modus operandi* of operating unseen and out of sight, the solar character, in this case *katir* to *kāma*, *logos* to *eros*, Skanda Kumara is justifiably considered to be predisposed toward or imputed with a propensity for stealth military secrecy, underworld activities, secret love affairs, philandering, duplicity, amid a host of other dark insinuations and innuendos.

As a god of both promise and fulfillment, Kataragama Deviyo may assume dark and even repulsive guises to fulfill his bodhisattva's vow to bring light to the world and awaken humanity to its potential. Through the accumulation of a vast store of merit or grace, he keeps on keeping his promise time after time in surprising ways. In this dependability, absolute assurance, lion-like courage, gracefulness, and luminosity nature, he is likened to the Person in the Sun. He is found all over the world if not all over the universe, but he favors certain places, like Kataragama, to make his appearances. When at last he shows himself, he is said to shine as brightly as the sun itself; his rising is often compared to the dawn of day and to the passage from the fearful realm of darkness to that of light. He comes, literally and figuratively as a blessing in disguise.

Intertwined realms or worlds

Certain places on earth are believed to exude mystical power or *s'akti* partly because they are felt to be in continuous contact with their subtlet counterparts in other worlds. That is, their connection with myth is sustained not so much because of a presumed historical relationship ('so-and-so came here and did such-and-such') but because the very place itself remains connected through living myths or legends that happen *in principio*, i.e. not at a unique unrepeatable moment in past history, but *always* in the eternal here-and-now (Tamil: *ippo-inge*),

An example of this concept concerns the Kataragama Mahadevale on the left bank of the Menik Ganga where the god is believed to reside and around which the mystery tradition revolves. The Mahadevale is a modest, single-story temple of indeterminate age said to have been originally built by the 2nd century BC Sinhala King Dutugemunu on the direct order of

God Kataragama. But according to current lore, when practitioners visit the Mahadevale while in a state of yogic or lucid dreaming, they find that it has not one story but seven – three stories above ground and three more below in addition to the ground floor. In this sense, the god’s temple-palace encompasses multiple *lokas* and is a microcosm of the hierarchical cosmos described in pan-Indian tradition. In recent years lucid dreaming has become the object of recognized medical research worldwide, so perhaps dream researchers may someday be able to duplicate (or disprove) the findings of Kataragama’s indigenous tradition of yogic dreaming.

Vows and the power of true utterances

In Kaumara tradition, vows (Tamil: *nerti*) and vow-fulfillment (*nerttikatan*) play important and even critical roles. Indeed, Valli’s vow that she would marry no man but only the great god himself forms the core of the Kataragama legend and is common to the South Indian recession as well. In Sinhala folklore *Kataragama Deviyo* himself vows that he will remain in Kataragama always to help and protect his devotees. Murukan devotees routinely make vows to perform difficult and/or sacred acts in return for the god’s *arul* or grace in meeting life’s challenges. Both in India and Sri Lanka this takes the form of a personal promise: in return for a (usually) specific favor from a god or spirit, devotees promise to reciprocate with specific acts of penance, devotion or sacrifice.



The Kataragama Mahadevale on the seventh day of the annual festival gets a new *pandal* covering of tree branches representing its original form as a jungle shrine.

Of course, the idea of undertaking a contract or covenant with an unseen god is not peculiar to the Indian subcontinent alone but is an honoured tradition even in Semitic religions. Indeed, all over the world from remote times people individually or collectively have undertaken formal commitments or vows or covenants with unseen gods or spirits.

Everywhere the practice is felt to confirm and reestablish the relationship between the human and spiritual realms by giving the force of truth to utterances and ritual acts associated with them.

In the Kataragama Pada Yatra tradition too, vows play a fundamental role. The Kataragama *Aesala* (July-August) festival season officially begins forty-five days before the festival itself with the *kap hitavima* rite at the Kataragama Mahadevale when *kapurala* priests go to an undisclosed location in the god's forest where they cut two tree saplings yielding milky sap and ritually 'plant' them in the public forecourt of the Mahadevale. By this ritual act the *kapuralas* express an unuttered vow (*anirukta vrata*) that they will perform the elaborate *Aesala* festival starting forty-five days later.

On the very day that the *kapuralas* are performing the *kap hitaveema* rite, far to the north the *Pada Yatra* pilgrims have assembled at the great Vattapalai Kannaki Amman festival near Mullaittivu. Here the pilgrims make their private pledge or promise to do something which may be hard to do or else to abstain from certain habitual ego-gratifying activities, usually for the course of the pilgrimage. This may mean walking barefoot to Kataragama for some, or abstaining from smoking for the duration of the pilgrimage for others. Both are instances of 'self-naughting' of *akiñcana*, one of the cornerstones of spiritual practice.

Disguise and Change of Identity

Closely related to the theme of movement between *lokas* or spheres is the element of shifting identity. As Bryan Pfaffenberger observes, "Pilgrimage..... requires the submission – if not the annihilation – of day-to-day identities, and emphasizes the shared experiences of the pilgrims rather than the differences among them." In the Kataragama tradition, this shift is a critical but gradual one that progresses over the weeks of each pilgrimage and years of repeated practice.

This process is also related to the archaic theme of divinity or majesty moving about in disguise, which is not restricted to Sri Lanka or India alone but was long common throughout the ancient world. Even today, it is recalled in the exceptional hospitality bordering upon reverence that persists in traditional oriental cultures towards guests of distant or uncertain origin, as recalled in the Sanskrit injunction *atithih devo bhava*: 'Regard the sudden visitor as a divinity'. In particular, the practice of traditional hospitality towards pilgrims and strangers in the form of *annatanam* (Sanskrit: *annadana* 'offering of food') is still alive in rural Sri Lanka and has played a key role in sustaining archaic traditions like the Kataragama Pada Yatra. Notably, the mostly-Tamil pilgrims are served on a grand scale not only in Tamil villages but also by Sinhalese villagers along the route.

To this day, whether a pilgrim is a Hindu *swami* (Sanskrit: 'lord or free man') or a Muslim faqir (Arabic: 'poor man'), he (or she) carries on an inherited tradition or *parampara* of divine majesty cloaked in outward poverty and simplicity. Similarly, the equivalent Tamil

term *anti* also encompasses both paradoxical senses of lordship and poverty; the term is especially characteristic of Skanda-Murukan and the initiates of his cult.

In the mythos of Kataragama, Skanda-Murukan does not display his divine nature openly from the start but approaches Valli Amma and her relatives in a series of disguises. Kataragama Skanda in particular is regarded by his Tamil devotees as *kantali*, God as the Supreme Identity, i.e. formless. Therefore whatever form or ‘face’ the god chooses to show is only a guise. In Tamil literary and oral traditions, Murukan appears to Valli first as a handsome young hunter in a brazen bid to tempt her to violate her vow, as it were. When this bid fails (but succeeds in the sense of testing her vow), he tries other disguises and finally wins the trust of Valli and her clan by appearing in the pitiable guise of a old hunchback ‘holy man.’ Because of his use of cunning and disguise to get near to Valli and elope with the girl even when she is closely guarded by her clan, the Kataragama god is widely regarded as a wily rogue and a ‘thief,’ albeit a beneficent and honorable one. Interestingly, this notion of the beneficent solar deity Skanda being a rogue is traceable to as ancient a canonical text as the Atharva Veda, wherein a section called the *Skandayāga* is also known as the *Dhūrtakalpa* or ‘Rogue Ordinance.’



***Annadana* or the offering of food to pilgrims is the time honoured basis of the Pada Yatra tradition.**

In the Katargama Pada Yatra tradition also, initiates essentially follow in the footsteps of their roguish god and his followers before them. Leaving behind their normal identities in the

villages from which they come, these ‘ordinary villagers’ become eccentric *swamis* and *ammās* – trusted counselors, teachers and healers whose reputation waxes with the number of *pada yatras* undertaken and the distance they have traversed from their home village. Of course, this also raises suspicions about the ‘real’ character of the pilgrims, who as ‘messengers’ of the god are expected to remain (at least temporarily) celibate, vegetarian and high-minded. Of course, many fall short of the ideal. What is significant is that an age-old Dionysian tradition of a wily fertility divinity coming in disguise still survives, if only in Sri Lanka since these elements are hardly evident in South India. Not surprisingly, the theatrical element (often as pantomime) too survives in association with these standard elements of disguise and protean identity through play-like activities that fully deserve the appellation ‘mysteries.’

Reversal of time and causation

Mystical traditions worldwide allude to the desirability of remaining in, or returning to, the state of childlike wonder and innocence. But in *kaumara sadhana* in particular, the quest has special resonances with a god who since remote antiquity has been invoked primarily by names (Murukan, Sanatkumara, etc.) implying perpetual youth.

Kaumara sadhakas undertake a deliberate course of practices that aim to reverse the course of mental and physical aging – in effect, ‘reversing the course of the Ganges’ and turning the irresistible flow of time and causation backwards towards its origin *in principio*. This in part explains what appears to the non-participant observer to be backward or topsy-turvy logic that characterize many ‘impractical’ cult practices such as walking great distances when cheap transport is easily available. Hence, too, the natural affinity of works like *Alice in Wonderland* to the practice and exegesis of Kumara traditions.

In the context of Kataragama Pada Yatra, time reversal is evident to discerning pilgrims not only inwardly but even outwardly as well. The pilgrimage customarily begins from one’s own doorstep or wherever one happens to be when one gets an irresistible ‘call’ to attend the Kataragama festival as testified to this researcher by many Tamil, Sinhalese and Muslim pilgrims. It therefore begins for most pilgrims from relatively developed and ordered communities within the framework of contemporary Sri Lankan society. But as the pilgrims move southward, they progressively leave small urban centers behind; the towns and villages get smaller and farther apart until they pass the last small village of Panama, after which they must cross nearly a hundred kilometers of uninhabited jungle – Yala National Park and environs. In effect, the pilgrims are moving *backwards* in time from the twentieth century to a prehistoric era until finally at Kataragama – prepared by weeks of mental adjustment and ‘walking mediation,’ in theory at least they have entered the ‘real’ Kataragama in its primordial identity as mythical cult center, entirely above and beyond time, causation and history.

The Narrow Gate: Pilgrimage and the Passage to the Otherworld

The storytelling tradition of Kataragama speaks of secret or hidden passageways leading to and from other *lokas* or realms. Typically the tradition speaks of passages that lead underground, rather like Alice when she tumbles into an enchanted rabbit hole. While the possibility of discovering such gateways cannot be discounted entirely, the passage referred to is allegorical in character yet intensively real to one who undertakes the journey. With help from experienced wayfarers, the seeker studies the surface contour of his or her own immediate realm of ideation and perception. At moments of insight, habitual patterns of ideation and perception cease and older (yet fresh and new) modes of ideation present themselves. When this happens, the *sadhaka* perceives the world in strange and magical new ways.

The perilous passage through an Active Door or 'narrow gate' is a common motif of folklore traditions worldwide and has been the subject of a vast literature, of which Ananda Coomaraswamy's essay "Symplegades" is arguably the best. His description of the hero who undertakes the Grail Quest also captures the essential character of the Kataragama Pada Yatra tradition:

The expert, for whom the antitheses are never absolute values but only the logical extremities of a divided form (for example, past and present of the eternal now), is not overcome by, but much rather transits their "north-and-southness" or, as we should say, "polarity," while the empiricist is crushed or devoured by the perilous alternatives (to be or not to be, etc.) that he cannot evade.

The essential story of the passage between 'Clashing Rocks,' according to Coomaraswamy, is replete with the "signs and symbols of the Quest of Life which have so often survived in oral tradition, long after they have been rationalized or romanticized by literary artists." "The distribution of the motif," he adds, "is an indication of its prehistoric antiquity."

The Kataragama Pada Yatra, too, consists of folk tradition practices and legends which suggest that, although preserved and transmitted by generations of simple villagers, it was originally undertaken and its possibilities developed by religious specialists of considerable doctrinal sophistication. The 'folk' character of the Kataragama Pada Yatra tradition, therefore, properly refers only to the custodians who have preserved it.

Kataragama Pada Yatra: Present and Future

Who are the *pada yatra* pilgrims? As a proportion of the Tamil Hindu population, they are a small minority. After a decade in eclipse, a high proportion (nearly half) of *pada yatra* pilgrims today are novices, but many others have walked not once but repeatedly, although the practice takes weeks or even months to perform, depending upon from where one starts. Many senior pilgrims report that they first walked as children in the company of one or both parents. A case in point is that of Mrs. P. Maheswary of Trincomalee, who first walked with her family as a teenager in the 1950's. Bebi Amma (as she is now known) has since walked nearly forty times from Jaffna or the farthest starting point from Kataragama (currently Trincomalee).

When the writer first walked with the Pada Yatra pilgrims from Jaffna in 1972 in Bebi Amma's party (the *Celva Cannitikuttam*) she was already a seasoned veteran. Today she is the most senior pilgrim (seniority is reckoned not by age but by the number of *pada yatras*). As such, despite her gender, Bebi Amma has inherited the role of *Vel Swami*, the ritual bearer of the *vel* or spear-emblem of Skanda Murukan and group leader who decides (or confirms collective decisions) upon such issues as the route (critical in dense jungle where even experienced pilgrims may easily get lost), where to halt and when to start, etc. The previous *Vel Swami*, Muttukumar Vel Swami of Kilinochchi, had walked from Jaffna in excess of fifty times since the late 1930's, possibly an all-time record. In times of peace, the pilgrims used to walk in small *kuttankal* (parties) consisting of as many as thirty (the maximum capacity rice pot that one adult can carry). But nowadays for reasons of security a *kuttam* may consist of up to 170 adults and children, an unwieldy size considering that the party is but a loose, temporary organization – and yet life-critical decisions must be made and executed daily, often in remote dry jungle.

The total number of pilgrims is also difficult to ascertain, since pilgrims walk of their own accord whenever and by whatever route they please and only recently have Sri Lankan security officials begun to try to register the foot pilgrims as they arrive out of the Yala National Park to attend the Kataragama festival. Hausherr cites a rough figure of `1300 Pada Yatra pilgrims from Jaffna district alone in his study in the 1970's, which tallies with estimates this researcher heard elsewhere in the early 70's. Following the anti-Tamil riots of 1983, for years it was not safe for Tamils to walk openly through Sinhala areas, and since 1990 they have not been able to walk from points north of Trincomalee. But with the founding of the Kataragama Devotees trust in 1988 with the explicit objective of reviving the Pada Yatra and other Kataragama traditions, the number of pilgrims has begun to return to earlier levels, if only in Sri Lanka's eastern districts. The great majority of foot pilgrims walk from Batticaloa and Ampara districts, which are much closer to Kataragama than Trincomalee, Vavuniya of Jaffna districts where only the most ardent devotees are prepared to walk for forty days or more. Some villages in Ampara district are less than a week's walk from Kataragama, such that farmers can afford to leave their fields for a short time and return within ten days or two weeks at most, which villagers in more distant districts can ill afford to undertake.

Significantly, the Kataragama Pada Yatra has continued to include one or more Western pilgrims each year as well as a few Sinhalese devotees despite the elements of risk and hardship involved. Indeed, it would be wrong to characterize the Kataragama Pada Yatra solely as a Tamil Hindu tradition, although Tamils have long been considered as the its custodians and have long been predominant numerically as well. The survival of this ancient yet vigorous tradition despite all the challenges posed by Sri Lanka's changing society suggests that it may continue to flourish in spite of rapidly changing social conditions. While its precise impact upon Sri Lankan society in return has never been studied, the tradition has undoubtedly helped in establishing inter-ethnic harmony and respect in years past and could play an important future role in healing the wounds of long years of ethnic strife.

Despite the shroud of secrecy surrounding the ancient Kataragama god's cut, nevertheless there are certain injunctions of guidelines based upon longstanding tradition which are common knowledge to experienced pilgrims. Important ones pertaining to the Kataragama Pada Yatra may be summarized as follows:

1. Be alert to the Spirit's inner and outer messages. If the 'call' comes, heed it.
2. Do not announce your destination or starting time, Upsets may occur.
3. Maintain a low profile. Learn from others who know more than you know.
4. Increase the faith all around for self and others. Or else remain at home.
5. Keep your promises few and simple, but keep them. Penalties can accrue
6. Sleep out of doors at night or in temples, but not in private homes. Taste the homeless life fully and enjoy it while you can.
7. Accept whatever comes. Blessings may appear in disguise.
8. Share whatever comes; accept the alms, friendship and wisdom of others.
9. Do not unload your personal grievances upon others while en route. Deliver all complaints to Kataragama and register them there personally.
10. Trust in the Spirit and make it your constant guide. Beware of imitations.

In summary, an age-old Sri Lankan mystical tradition closely associated with archaic concepts of sacred geography still survives among simple and doctrine unsophisticated villagers whose inherited practices may be characterized as raw *bhakti* or devotion, yet who are aware of many elements of the profound doctrine upon which their practices and beliefs are based. Seen in this light, it should be clear that Kataragama and its associated *pada yatra* traditions preserve many features of great antiquity that deserve to be appreciated on their own terms, including elements of an archaic traditional science of cosmography or sacred geography which have long escaped the attention of outside observers. As such, this study should be regarded only as an initial survey of a subject to be examined appropriately and in greater depth that it richly deserve where the God's Tamil devotees worship him as *kantali*, which Ponnambalam Arunachalam as "reality transcending all categories without attachment, without form, standing alone as the Self."

Kataragama's indomitable spirit of paradox, antithesis and intercourse between worlds is event even in the usual etymology; Kataragama is *Katir-Kāmam*, where *katir* (Skt: 'luster'), connoting the *Logos* or Unitary Principle, meets *Kāmam* (Skt: 'lust'), denoting *Eros*, the

diving force of duality, birth and everyday embodied existence. As the story tells us, *Katirkāmam* is the place where Skainda-Murukan-as the Logos-manifestly express his yearning for the joys of earthly existence, personified in the vivacious heroine Valli, who may have been an agricultural goddess of fertility if she was not a flesh-and-blood maiden of the Neolithic era. Dionysus, too, is closely associated with love-fulfillment and Anacreon's song to the god begins with the words "O Lord, whose playfellows are the mighty Eros and the dark-eyed nymphs and violet Aphrodite!"

The coincidence and harmonious reconciliation of opposites is another recurrent theme in the myths of Dionysus and Skanda-Murukan. Indeed, the very coherence or internal consistency between the myth, local ritual practices and underlying metaphysical principles is in itself further structural evidence of Kataragama's antiquity and continuing stereological function. Alternatively, one may interpret this extraordinary structural cohesiveness in synchronic literary terms, as a *homology* of form and content, exhibited throughout the artistic traditions of both Dionysus and Skanda-Murukan. Indeed, it would not be too much to assert that this homology of form and content, or Unity of Theory and Action, is evident in the cyclic structure of the traditions, as both homologize a body of mythic events with the ritual calendar. At the same time, both draw upon the motif of eternal return, of ends being identical with beginnings. Just as Kataragama Deviyo makes a promise or solemn vow (*bara*) to remain or reappear at a later time, so likewise his followers undertake solemn oaths in a ritual practice that can only be concluded before the deity, i.e. by returning to Kataragama. Similarly the *diya kapeema* (Tamil: *tirttam*) or 'water-cutting ceremony' at the conclusion of the great festival of Kataragama, ritually enacts the end of one annual cycle and the beginning of a new cycle.

Another expression of this homology of form and structure is intimately associated with the very nature of mystery itself. The Latin *mysterium* and Greek *mūsterious* are derived from a verbal root *mus* 'to close (the eyes or lips)' and one who was initiated into the ancient mysteries was called *mustes*, meaning 'one vowed to silence.' Thus, strictly speaking, silence and secrecy are integral components of any genuine mystery tradition – as the Taoist dictum puts it: 'Those who know don't speak and those who speak don't know'. Having made this confession, I can only point out that the same rule applies to the mystery cult of Kataragama – its central injunction *cummā iru!* (Tamil: 'Be still!') enjoins both contemplative silence and secrecy and is said to the essence of instruction imparted by Skanda-Murukan himself. And indeed, silence and secrecy characterize both the theme and content of the *dromena* or numinous performances associated with the cults of Kataragama Skanda and Dionysus. As such the hierophany or mystery drama of *Katir-kamam*, like that of Dionysus, may be understood as the "plentitude of divine configurations" permeating the story, the principles that govern it, its enactment and even the stage upon which it is enacted, which is Kataragama's sacred geographical setting together with its shrines and hypothesized underworld.

The fact that the *dromena* of Dionysus or Kataragama have never been remotely understood or, in the case of Kataragama, scarcely recognized as such at all, fits perfectly with the underlying patterns common to both. I say 'underlying', for both mysteries are characterized

by motifs of disguise, guile and trickery – all elements common to life in the wild and survival in a perilous underworld or, for that matter, in today’s urban jungles. It is noteworthy in this regard that Skanda-Murukan has long been reckoned as the presiding spirit of the *Kali Yuga* and all its tumult, including such activities as children’s games, hunting, erotic sports, dramatic performance, politics and warfare. All these have a place in the myths of both gods who are spirits of paradox, duplicity and inexpressible unity within duality. One should recall that Skanda’s epithet *Guha* means not only ‘the Mysterious One’ but also ‘the Concealed One’. That is, he is not merely quiescent, but constantly engaged in playful unseen activities.

Lord of the Labyrinth

Persistent oral traditions preserved in Kataragama speak of the locality as being riddled with hidden passageways leading to other places of sacred power (such as Adam’s Peak and Mount Kailasa) or even to other *lokas* or worlds. Many local stories tell of gods, goddesses, demons, *siddhas* and other supernatural beings passing in and out of our world through such gateways. Others tell of unwitting humans who stumble through such entrances: there they behold incredible wonders and marvelous wealth, but when they attempt to bring things back, either they cannot return or their treasures vanish.

For years, I dismissed as pure fantasy such stories claiming that beneath Kataragama there exists a ‘sunken kingdom’, an ‘underground university’, or vast subterranean chambers full of priceless gems guarded by *nāgas* or dragon-spirits. However, after years of focusing on the literal or surface (*pratyaksa*) meaning, I am now convinced that these stories are allegories deep with metaphysical or parabolical (*paroksa*) meanings or applications.⁵⁸ These narratives were – and still are – recited for the enjoyment and wonder of all listeners but specifically intended to serve as conscious exegetical exercises, attracting and enticing spiritually-qualified aspirants at the same time that they screen out those who are unsuited to proceed further. As such, they implicitly direct the aspirant to *search beneath the surface* meaning to progressively deeper realms of allegory, imagination and eternal archetypes. Other bardic traditions the world over, notably that of the Celts, have also made extensive use of this theme of subterranean or otherworldly adventure. Furthermore, it suggests the survival of a cult of the earth-goddess, of divinity abiding in the earth-mother *Gaea*, recalling and invoking the maternal rhythm of basic life processes and feminine creativity – as Euripides (fr. 488) once said, “The myth is not my own, I had it from my mother.” A matrilineal line transmission further suggests an origin in antiquity prior to the Sanskritisation of Sri Lankan society by early patriarchal Sinhalese immigrants.

The fact that no one, outside of the tradition’s custodians themselves (who are vowed to secrecy anyway), has ever drawn attention to these peculiar features of Kataragama fits perfectly with the complex maze of interwoven themes, motifs, practices and outward circumstances that characterize Kataragama and, as a profound intellectual edifice, serves the purpose of a *labyrinth*, the penetration of which was-and remains-one of the heroic tasks of initiates of metaphysical traditions the world over. For the most part, like Dionysus, the god

of Kataragama maintains a low profile in legend and his cult's custodians or connoisseurs follow suit. Most, it seems, have been *āndis*, *swamis* and other itinerant performers who revel in life regardless of outward exigencies. They may be said to express what they know, or know of, less through the medium of words than through embodying a tradition whose central injunction *cummā iru!* enjoins utter simplicity and profound silence as well as secrecy.

Moreover, one should also bear in mind that the myths or stories of Kataragama and Dionysus concern and unknown (and perhaps unknowable) principle or agent acting in an unseen and unrecognized way with an invisible power or efficacy, called *shakti*, upon the visible realm of multiplicity and manifestation – our own world. The central theme concerns a passage through the Gates of Death into an inconceivable realm lying beyond. As such, it is a stereological theme of liberation, salvation or deliverance from the tyranny of *Cur* (old Tamil: literally, Angst or fear) the terrific protean demon that Murukan subdues and then accepts as his servant. Dionysus, too, was known by the highly significant epithet *Lusios*, “the Liberator.”

In like fashion, we are reminded that the epithet *Bacchos*, of obscure etymology, was applied both to the god Dionysus and to his celebrants. Similarly, the common honorific epithet *swami*, (Skt: ‘one who is (lord of) himself, i.e. a free man), originally referred exclusively to the deity Skanda and to his hierophants, as did the Tamil epithet *velan* (literally, spearman or lancer). Even today, not only is the god of Kataragama still called *Swāmi-ammas*, many of whom still bear the *vēl*-emblem (as well as personal names) that implicitly homologises them to the deity. Thus, the pervasive theme of instantaneous (Skt: *sa-krit*) transition or simultaneity between worlds or levels expresses itself as a homology of roles, divine and human, ideal and actual.

While an individual *swāmi* actual apprehension (‘realization’ in modern Indian vernacular) of the cult's metaphysical subtleties may vary, most aspirants must persevere for years or decades before being regarded as a *swāmi* or expert. As such, it is not orthodoxy, ‘correct belief,’ that matters in Kataragama as much as *orthopraxis*, ‘correct practice.’ Highly esteemed Kataragama swamis tend to be child-like, guileless and friendly, but they are not overly talkative and proselytize still less. As such, they stand in stark contrast to the typically modern ‘*swāmis*’ of the Vivekananda model with their diverse social and political agendas, which are singularly absent from the Kataragama model of contemplative mysticism.

Students of ritual have noticed the points of similarity between ritual and play. As Frits Staal observes, in play as in ritual activity, “the rules count, but not the result” and yet “the two kinds of activity, ritual and ordinary, can be juxtaposed without conflict or contradiction.” Or, in Segal's words, “Dionysian play, like its artistic equivalent, is jealous of practical application; it insists on the spirit of play for its own sake.” This persistent absence of expediency shown in the core tradition is a characteristic feature which, as Otto observes, “Makes cult practice so alien and strange to the modern mind.” This Kataragama's cloak of secrecy, too, is partly woven of our own reluctance to understand, i.e. our modern prejudices and notions.

Gods of Abusive Epithets

Millions of Sri Lankans visit Kataragama, most with a practical purpose in mind, usually to request a boon or to give thanks for one received. Ironically, however, cult initiatives themselves frequently address the god – privately and not so privately – with abusive epithets. As noted, both Skanda-Murukan and Dionysus are widely reckoned to be earthy and even roguish gods. In as ancient a canonical text as the Atharva Veda, a section called the *Skandayagāis* also known as the *Dhūrtakalpa*, or ‘Rogue Ordinance.’ This association of the solar hero Skanda with cunning and fraud has long puzzled scholars. He is repeatedly called *dhūrta*, meaning ‘rogue’. Why?

In brief, the reputation of both Dionysus and Skanda – and particularly Kataragama Skanda – for roguishness is a natural consequence of their paradoxical, playful and picaresque character. Both gods are perfectly at home in a shadowy underworld replete with word play, trickery and thinly disguised sexuality. Both are amoral, mischievous characters who employ crafty stratagems – divine *picaros*, as it were. Both are masters of duplicity and mime or natural theatrics. All this suggests the tension, paradox, or contradiction felt between the Logos, *katir* and Eros, *kāma*. At the same time, this duplicity is the principle of duality outside of which there can be no Eros, the experience of aesthetic rapture.

Not only myth and legends, but also in practice, the god of Kataragama is a god of *oaths* and *abusive epithets*. His closed friends address him intimately – with insults; even Valli mocks the god when he appears to her in disguise. Dionysus, too, was called ‘womanly’ ‘mad,’ ‘lecherous’: Lycurgus, King of the Edones, however unknowing, insults and expels Dionysus. There is, after all, at least a kernel of truth in most of the allegations and, given the hidden or clandestine character of the gods, no one can say for certain what improprieties they have *not* committed in the course of their long careers. That Kataragama Deviyo, is a philanderer, thief, rascal and friend of criminals and politicians is well known throughout all of Sri Lanka, if not in India as well. Indeed, his very notoriety serves to underline his down-to-earth immediacy and accessibility to devotees of every stratum of society.

Arunakirinar, the brilliant and prolific fifteenth-century composer of ambrosial Tamil poetry celebrating Murukan (who earlier had been a rogue and profligate himself), is mindful of this tradition of ‘abusive praise’ (Skt: *nindāstuti*) when he exclaims:

The bridegroom of Valli with tresses adorned with garlands is ready to foster even those who curse and abuse – in threefold Tamil!

This same grassroots tradition of abuse, slander, or reproach (Tamil: *ecal*) directed at Skanda-Murukan and/or his shakti-consorts finds expression in the still-flourishing and popular genre of *Vallikkum Teyvayanaikkum ecal* in which the god’s rival consorts hurl abuse at each other.

Indeed, both gods in legend and Skanda’s initiates in practice to this day follow a pattern of guile and deceit whereby they encourage humanity at large to misinterpret them, their motives and their behavior by confusing such conventional distinctions as high/low,

good/bad, divine/worldly, etc. “As above, so below” goes the ancient hermetic dictum or principle; so likewise gods of alchemical transformation generally appear as socially-despicable characters, divine culprits who disseminate lofty metaphysical wisdom in the form of inscrutable behavior and low or uncouth speech. For instance, the very quintessence of wisdom is said to be expressed in the terse utterance *cummā iru*, which in common parlance means ‘shut up!’ Unrecognized for what they truly represent, the gods and their followers are free to go about their inscrutable business, whatever it may be. These subtle cloaks of disguise, woven out of the mistaken perceptions of the world at large have also played a role in other ancient Indian cults such as that of the *Pas’upatas*.

This beguiling practice of inverse adoration is not without parallel elsewhere in the ancient Mediterranean world even up to modern times. Says Dionysius the Areopagite, “Divine things should be honoured by the true negations and by comparisons with the lowest things, which are diverse from their proper resemblance.” Rosalie Colie observes that these “rhypological” images of low and sordid things “become by Dionysius’ argument appropriate to attempt comprehension of the divine essence. Against this background, several things become clear, among them, the curious habit of devotional poets’ using ‘low things’ in immediate juxtaposition to the highest, such as Herbert’s likeness of Christ to a bag, of God to coconut and Donne’s of the flea’s triple life to the Trinity.”

Rather than to abuse – or praise – the god too much, I should point out that this beguiling practice of *nindāstuti* is not only attestedly very ancient, but it, too, survives to this day among the traditional folk of Sri Lanka. Some, especially village elders, are said to be extremely adept at it. Modern education, however, has taken its toll on this local tradition, while radio and television threaten to eradicate it altogether. It is a bardic tradition of *double entendre*, of ambiguous reference and risqué connotations. Truly, little is known or understood about this practice, but it is safe to conclude that it is closely related to the god’s own association with roguery, the swearing of oaths, and magical word-play.

This use of language having double meanings – especially with sexual innuendoes – again points to cultures and times where ‘Mother Wit’ alone could prevail over brawn, where women both goaded and restrained their men through subtlety and where justice or Dharma was regarded as being virtually a cosmic force. Combined with the recurrent motif of periodic return, it suggests an origin in matriarchal culture prior to the imposed structure of a civilizing patriarchy, often associated with Aryan invasions. Above all, it was – and remains – a tradition of basic human values and needs.

To suggest, as this hypothesis does, that a millennia-old mystery cult has survived unrecognized until the dawn of the 21st century may sound like an extravagant claim to many. But when one looks at the cult of Kataragama-Skanda as that cult views itself, Durkheimian sense: it has a body of doctrine and myth, a set of associated rituals, a priesthood and other ritual specialists and “a moral community” of believers. As such it deserves to be studied on its own terms, as it sees itself and not merely as an adjunct or product of the society that has developed around it. When one considers the body of evidence from all available sources, including first-hand experience – as I have attempted – one arrives at a picture of Kataragama

that is very different from the descriptions offered by social scientists – and remarkably similar to the mystery cult of Dionysus as its contemporaries described it. In short, there is much more to Kataragama than social research to date has made it out to be. Beneath Kataragama's surface, beneath layer under layer of secrecy and subterfuge, an initiatic mystery tradition survives to this day, waiting for intrepid souls to penetrate its ancient mystery.

Not surprisingly, this study raises more questions about the cults of Kataragama and Dionysus than it answers. Did one cult inspire or exert influence upon the other. Or do they share a common origin lost in antiquity, as Clothey suggests, as two branches of the same west Asiatic mystery tradition? Without postulating a Cosmic Intelligence or Jungian universal mind, can one maintain that they arose independently? Most especially, what is the underlying mystery of Kataragama and what can modern humanity learn from it? The in-depth study of Kataragama and cult of Skanda-Murukan has really just begun. As a riotous affirmation of life in this world and in other worlds as well, it stands without equal as a survival of times in remote antiquity prior to the imposition of patriarchal values upon older cultures. When feminine or matriarchal values were the norm of society, the rhythmic biological cycle of the *Magna Mater* was seen everywhere together with her Son the archetypal cultural hero.

As down-to-earth gods of paradox, fertility and ecstatic terror, Dionysus and Skanda-Murukan have baffled and inspired rural and urban, educated and unlettered, rich and poor devotees alike since millennia. Undoubtedly, this is among the reasons why Skanda-Murukan remains so popular in modern Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu and even appears to be making a comeback once again after centuries of relative obscurity.

Through ritual, symbolic gesture and allusive language, the mystery of Kataragama – so remarkably akin to that of Dionysus – has endured through the centuries to become antiquity's gift to modern humanity. But does modern man still possess the intuitive faculties needed to apprehend what Kataragama represents? Kataragama, it is said, embodies the *mysterium magnum*. If so, then it may represent the ultimate frontier and the gateway to humanity's understanding of itself, which is, after all, the *real* mystery.

***From Kailasa to Kataragama: Sacred Geography in the cult of
Skanda-Murukan***



Pilgrims both young and old from the North and East of Sri Lanka cross 100 kilometers of uninhabited jungle on foot to attend the Kataragama Esala festival.



The Kataragama shrine

In most world religions, pilgrimage is given relatively low status in the hierarchy of religious practices. But in one ancient yet still vibrant Sri Lankan tradition, the practice of *pada yatra* or foot pilgrimage demonstrably embodies profound metaphysical truths while serving as a working framework or matrix for the exploration of progressively subtler levels of religious practice that have long escaped the attention of non-participant observers. Far from being a merely outward practice suitable only for laity or the exceptionally naïve religious specialist, pilgrimage in the *Kataragama Pada Yatra* tradition is a comprehensive exercise of body, mind and spirit having ramifications far exceeding the suppositions of 20th century indological scholarship.

Despite its great antiquity, stature and symbolic importance in Sri Lanka multiethnic society, the tradition of annual *Kataragama Pada Yatra* has never been the object of modern scholarly study. This is partly because it takes place in remote districts in the North and East – precisely the districts most affected by the ongoing conflict between insurgents and Government security forces – and partly because *pada yatras* survives as a rural village ‘little tradition’, beneath the purview of older scholarship. Studies of Kataragama to date have tended to underplay the religious dimension of Kataragama as the tradition’s custodians themselves understand it, focusing instead upon emerging social trends and regarding the Kataragama festival less as a religious tradition than as a release-valve for social tensions in post-Independence Sri Lanka. This study, the study however, surveys Sri Lanka’s longest and perhaps oldest pilgrimage tradition from the religious perspective as articulated by the tradition’s practitioners themselves and assumes that religious tradition is best understood within its own frame of reference.

Among the ancient living traditions that survive in island Sri Lanka’s rich cultural environment, few are as well-known or as poorly-understood as that of the Kataragama Pada Yatra. Starting from the island’s far north and ending up to two months and several hundred kilometers later at the Kataragama shrine in the island’s remote southeastern jungle; the Kataragama Pada Yatra tradition has played a major role in propagating and perpetuating traditions of Kataragama throughout Sri Lanka and South India. Predating the arrival of all four of Sri Lanka’s major religions, it is essentially a tradition inherited from the island’s indigenous forest-dwellers, the *Wanniyalaeto* or Veddas, as the Kataragama shrine’s Sinhalese *kapurala* priest-custodians themselves readily concede.

Prior to 1950 when a motorable road was extended up to Kataragama from Tissamaharama, the only way pilgrims could reach Kataragama was on foot or by bullock cart. All that has changed since then and now Kataragama is cheaply and easily reachable by regular bus service directly from Colombo and other districts including the Eastern Province where the *pada yatra* tradition continues to flourish in an air of revival. Easy access has entailed a drastic change in the makeup of the pilgrims who visit Kataragama for the festival season; while a few thousand still walk through Yala National Park to the east of Kataragama, now hundreds of thousands of Sri Lankan visitors come as pilgrims and even as casual tourists.

This has inevitably eroded the consensus among pilgrims which gave Kataragama its air of sanctity and mystery, replacing it with a carnival-like atmosphere. And while the more devout pilgrims may regret the process of progressive secularization that continues to affect Kataragama, they also tend to explain these changes as being the will of the Kataragama god who, after so many centuries, remains alive and well and mysterious as ever in his ways of relating to humanity.

Because of the sheer length of the Kataragama Pada Yatra, ancient times those who walk the distance (much of it through uninhabited jungle even today) tend to be dedicated religious specialists. The great majority of Pada Yatra *swamis* and *bawas* remain anonymous, but among them have been more than a few great saints, sages and *siddhas* beginning, it is said, with Skanda-Murukan himself who is the first among *pada yatra* pilgrims it is said, with

Skanda-Murukan himself who is the first among *pada yatra* pilgrims according to the tradition. These have included, notably, the renowned fifteenth century Tamil psalmist Arunakirinatar, who composed at least one *Tiruppukal* hymn at Kirimalai (near Kankasanturai on the far northern coast of the Jaffna peninsula), another at Tirukkonamalai (modern Trincomalee, a manor sacred site on the traditional Kataragama Pada Yatra route) and fourteen at *Katir-Kamam*, ‘(the place of) brilliance and passion’, i.e. Kataragama. More recent well-known pilgrims include Palkuti Bawa and Yogaswami of Nallur. The following account of Nallur Yogaswami’s pilgrimage to Kataragama remains typical even today:



Subsequently by about the middle of 1910, Swami left on a solitary sojourn by foot along the Island’s coastal belt eastward, and met many ascetics on the way. He moved freely with certain Muslim Sufi saints, Buddhist monks, and Veddha chiefs. He communed with Murugan in Kathirkamam, the Holy of Holies skirted by the Manick Ganga... from 1910, he had taken solitary long distance pilgrimages to Tiruketheswaram, and on to Wattapalai and Koneswaram at Trincomalee, and skirting the east coast by the foot path, he had spent his recluse days at Sittankudi, Batticaloa and Tirukkivil. Many a time, he had related incidents when he trekked the Vedda tracts of Monaragala and Bibile to reach the abode of Murugan at Kathirkamam, skirted by the Manic Ganga and the seven hills of Kathiramalai.

Almost no records survive written in the pilgrims’ own words, although British government agents made exhaustive records of the colonial government’s efforts to discourage or restrict a practice considered to be unhealthy and unproductive. The perspective of dedicated foot pilgrims, however, was and remains radically different from that of most scholars and government administrators.

After meeting Yogaswami in 1947, ‘German Swami’ (as he was best known throughout Ceylon) walked from Jaffna to Kataragama annually from 1948 to 1972 when this researcher had the exceptional opportunity to join the *Pada Yatra* from Celvaccanniti Murukan Kovil (Jaffna district) in his company. Although Swami Gauribala never published the results of his

lifelong study of sacred geography, his observations provided the basis for Paul Wirz's *Kataragama die heiligste Staette Ceylons* (1954), still the most comprehensive account of Kataragama's religious traditions.

The present study may be regarded as a continuation of German Swami's 'Muresearch' (as he termed it) applied to the theory and practice of Kataragama Pada Yatra, of which German Swami was widely acknowledged as an accomplished expert. His distinctly antiquarian approach, developed through decades of fieldwork and patient study of diverse literary and oral traditions, informs the content and methodological approach of the present study. German Swami deplored the approach of Western-trained researchers who insist on imposing modern values and assumptions upon oriental traditions whose *raison d'être* lies entirely outside the scope of their research. In his view, the sincere researcher should seek to reproduce the findings of oriental traditions by replacing their methods whenever possible rather than to apply alien methods and assumptions.

Pada Yatra pilgrims (above, in 1992) face a long walk south along Sri Lanka's eastern seaboard to the Kataragama God's redoubt in the remote southeastern jungle. From Mullaitivu on the island's northeast coast, foot pilgrims walk for 45 days mainly through sparsely populated areas. Traditional pilgrims walk barefoot dressed in simple garb, sleeping in the open and living from alms offered by villagers. Combatants on both sides of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict pay due respect to the pan-Indian war god Skanda-Murukan and his colorful parties of foot pilgrims.

The researcher's methodological approach therefore is both critical and problematic, for while most pilgrims will gladly speak about their experience of *pada yatra*, only a very few pilgrims among hundreds are qualified to speak authoritatively about the essential inner pilgrimage. And since the interior pilgrims who have penetrated deeply will not or cannot express their experiences except by allusion and metaphor, the earnest researcher has to build a picture of the essential mystical practice based partly upon the example or testimony of others but based to a greater extent upon firsthand experience.

Sacred Geography and the cult of Skanda-Murukan the Kataragama Pada Yatra was Swami Gauribala's practical introduction to cosmography or *sacred geography* as he called it, the systematic study of what Eliade termed *hierophanies*, those rare, divine spots at which divinity reveals itself on earth.⁸ Island Lanka preserves a wealth of folklore said to originate from remote prehistory and puranic sources, including notably the *Ramayana*, which still survives in the form of local place legends. Swami Gauribala's approach involved analyzing the relationship between sacred places and their associated legends. Having *re*-researched and *dis*-covered the principles of traditional oriental cosmography, he concluded that they should remain *sacred* and *secret*, i.e. evident but unarticulated. His contention was that anyone qualified to study a sacred science who studies that science in depth would arrive at the same principles and, hence, similar conclusions. Decades later, his contention appears at least partly confirmed.

The cult of *Murukan* (Tamil: ‘tender or fragrant one’) or *Skanda* (Sanskrit: ‘leaper or attacker’ from *skanda* ‘to leap or spurt’), like the god himself, has a complex, composite history. Western-trained scholars are quick to point out the composite nature of the god as an amalgam of two distinct yet structurally analogous deities, Dravidian and Sanskritic respectively. But among indigenous religious specialists and millions of devotees at large, there is no question that the diverse body of lore in Tamil, Sanskrit, Sinhala and other languages describes a single vigorous and complex deity familiar to both northern and southern traditions since antiquity.

Qualitative space and Chronological Time

Whereas Semitic and other nomadic peoples tend to think historically in terms of time and genealogy, people of long sedentary heritage and markedly cultic outlook think in terms of space, typically postulating a ‘center of the world’ in their own midst. In South Asia, the geographical environment has played a major role in shaping Indian thought. India thinks in terms of qualitative or mythical space in which each place has not only its own outward characteristics but also its own significance for those beings who inhabit that space. Hence, in the traditional worldview of India, spatial differences are also qualitative differences. In qualitative space, not all places are equal and the directions of space also have non-spatial qualities, in contrast to purely mathematical Euclidean space in which all points and all directions are content-less quality-less and equal. Of course, South Asia is no stranger to the concept of sacred time, either, since most of the calendar is sacralized; even the modern Gregorian calendar remains sacralized to a certain extent. Yet nowhere else in the world has the tradition of pilgrimage and sacred geography remained as pervasive and vibrant as in the Indian subcontinent.

Aaru Patai Veetu: The Six ‘War Camps’ of Skanda-Murukan

In the context of Tamil Nadu, sacred geography is invariably associated with the *Aaru Patai Veetukal*, Murukan’s six ‘camps’ or sacred sites associated with particular episodes in His divine career that are scattered across the length and breadth of Tamil Nadu, effectively homologizing the landscape of Tamil Nadu with the career of Murukan. In fact, there are only five *patai veetukal*; the number six should be understood not as a statistical tally but rather a significant number in numerology and sacred geometry, a sister science of sacred geography.

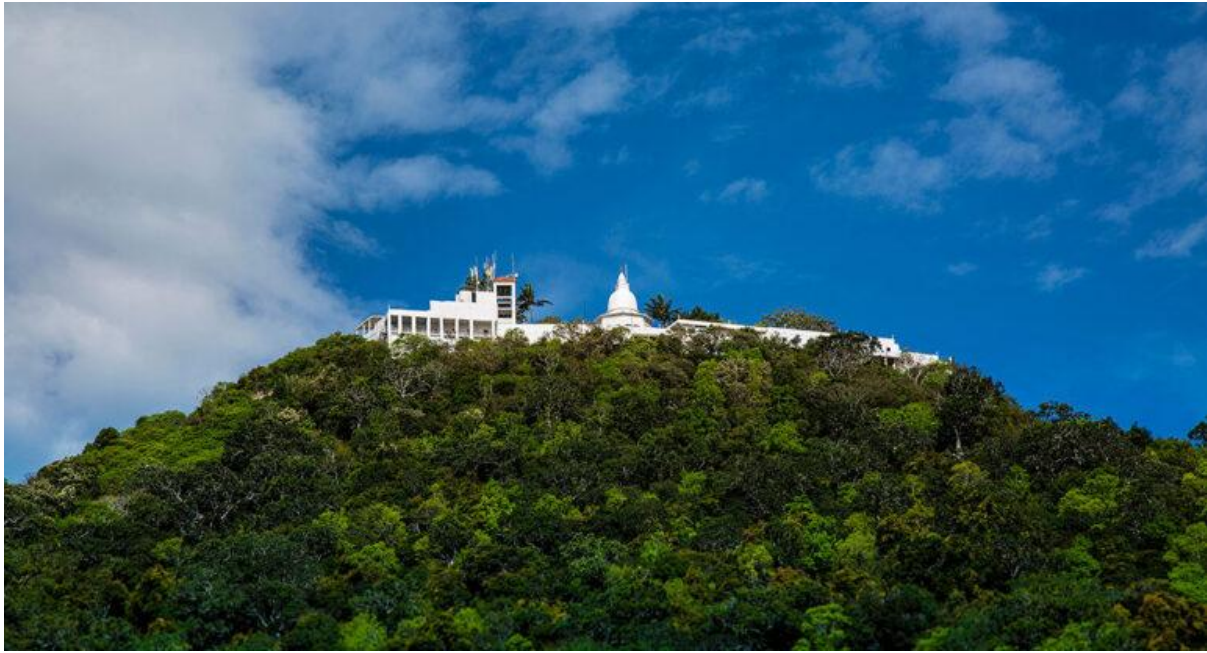
The number six signifies, among others, the six ‘rays’ of the three-dimensional cross, i.e. the six cardinal directions of space. This structural relation of the number six to three-dimensional space (and hence to the exploration and mapping of sacred space) is directly related to the genesis of Skanda from six rays of light that coalesce and integrate in the *Sanatkumara* or Perpetual Youth personified.

In this aspect as *Shanmukha* ‘the Six-Faced,’ Skanda-Murukan is the Lord of Space, the Unmoved Mover abiding as a conscious presence at the source and center of the matrix of infinite possibilities – our own three-dimensional world of embodied existence. It is precisely this aspect of Skanda-Murukan that is celebrated at Kataragama, where no icon is worshipped but only a small casket containing (or said to contain, for it is never displayed) the *shadkona yantra* or six-pointed magical diagram etched upon a metal plate. Indeed, in contradistinction to the tradition of Tamil Nadu, in Sri Lanka the entire career of Skanda-Murukan is said to take place at Kataragama, such that the God’s six stations or directions of space collapse, or rather return, back into their source undifferentiated singularity.



Sadkona Yantra

At Kataragama this principle also finds embodiment in the *ezhumalai* or Seven Hills, where the highest (417m.) and ‘best’ peak, *Katira Malai* (Mountain of Light’) or *Vedahitikanda* (‘the Peak Where he Was’), is homologized to the number seven signifying reversal, return, integration and completion or perfection in childlike innocence and simplicity (Tamil: *cumma iruttal*), which is the specific objective of *kumara sadhana* or praxis for aspirants in the tradition of Skanda-Murukan. This holographic quality of Kataragama, where the whole may be seen within any given part, permeates Kataragama not only on the levels of myth and ritual but even on the physical level of geography. Mention may be made here that an ancient times when sacred geography played an important role in the identification of powerful sites, a configuration of seven hills was considered to be the ideal location for the capital of a kingdom. Notable examples include Athens, Rome, Constantinople and Jerusalem as well as Kataragama, the capital of a virtual kingdom.



Southern Kailasa: Seven Hills of Kataragama with Vedahitikanda (Katiramalai) at center

From Kailasa to Kataragama: The mythical career of Skanda Murukan

In the cult of Kataragama Skanda, *pada yatra* has mythological significance. In most version of the legend current in Sri Lanka, Skanda-Murukan originates as six rays emitted from his father Siva's third eye, which fall to earth where six water nymphs, the *Krttika* maidens (hence his name *Karttikeya*), discover him in a marshy lake (s'ara-vana) in the Himalayas, a birth motif familiar elsewhere in the birth of Moses and Osiris. In the puranic accounts considered authoritative among Hindus today, *Karttikeya's* childhood is spent upon on Mount Kailasa, a real geographical place in the trans-Himalaya which in the pan-Indian cosographical conception is regarded as the *stambha* or *axis mundi*, the center and axis of the cosmos.

Anticipating the momentous career that await Karttikeya in the southern continent of *Jambudveepa* (South Asia), the *devarsi* or divine sage (and troublemaker) Narada instigates a contest between Karittikeya and his rotund older brother the elephant-god Ganapati. With his parents' connivance, Ganapati falls back on his natural rat-like cunning to cheat Karttikeya and claim the prize. His sense of justice enflamed, Karttikeya leaves home never to return. He discards his divine raiment's and, with only a *kaupina*-loincloth and a staff, storms down from the Himalayas to the Gangetic plain of India and continues southward to South India. In the South Indian recension, the god's greatest exploits occur in Tamil Nadu. But in the Sri Lankan recension, he crosses by boat to island Lanka and proceeds on foot to *katir-mamam* or Kataragama where he leads the army of the devas to victory over the *asura*-titans before the crowning event of his career – his secretive courtship and marriage with Valli Amma, daughter of the local chieftain of the Veddas of *Wanniyala-aeto*, the indigenous forest inhabitants.

From the conventional standpoint, this union of high god and low-born earthly maiden is a gross miss-match. And yet, representing as it does the ‘illicit union’ of Spirit with the earth-bound soul, the legend of Kataragama has long served as a creative framework for the most diverse forms of mysticism imaginable – the very hallmark of Kataragama down the ages and the wellspring of its well-deserved reputation for mystery and sanctity.

Pada Yatra as Passage into the Labyrinth

In traditions the world over, pilgrimage essentially refers to the passage or transformation of the soul that turns away from the periphery of the outward world of multiplicity and turns inward through progressively deeper levels of awareness to arrive at the sacred center. The sacred center is entirely within the contingent being’s inherent range of ‘infinite possibilities,’ and as such it may also manifest outwardly at certain times and certain places in the socially conditioned world of sense perception. When the essential sacred center within is seen to have its counterpart in a sacred geographical site, the ‘two’ passages may be combined or integrated or, rather, *comprehended* to be inward and outward reflections of one and the same sacred passage: the return from multiplicity to one’s original nature at the center of the world. In *Kumara sādhana*, this passage is also understood as the return to one’s original childlike nature of wonder and innocence. In Tamil called *cumma iruttal*, a multivalent expression meaning ‘being still,’ ‘remaining simple,’ or ‘just being.’

In Kumara tradition, the Spirit’s active yet covert involvement is the vital or magical ingredient that transforms *pada yatra* a mere walking journey into the experience of spiritual passage through a maze of subtle dimensions that escape the attention of non-participant observers. By the power of an underlying presence that none can claim to understand, earnest pilgrims traverse through the shadowy world of outward appearances and penetrate deep into an effulgent interior realm of *Katir-Kāmam* or ‘light and delight.’ For them the spiritual journey is not an empty metaphor but intensely vivid and real. In this sense, only experienced pilgrims can appreciate what it means to cross invisible thresholds and plunge into strange realms of sacred time and sacred space. Hence, the motif of the *labyrinth* or passage to the innermost sanctum finds application in spiritual traditions worldwide, particularly in the context of pilgrimage in the dual sense of outward journey and inward passage to one’s metaphysical source or center.

Through a process of release from conventional notions of self, time, space and causation by ‘coursing against the stream’ of worldly opinion and habitual ideation, veterans of the tradition consciously aim to recover the *amrta* or *ma’ul hayat*, the Water of Life that others are said to have found before them. In order to arrive at its source, they may enter dimensions where what was once thought impossible can come to pass in the twinkling of an eye. Despite hunger, thirst, fatigue, illness and a host of very real dangers one may encounter when traversing jungle and areas of civil conflict, most foot pilgrims reach their destination in the outward sense at least. But the longer and deeper passage to the sacred center within is beset

with trials and obstacles of even greater diversity and subtlety (often depicted as walls of fire or water) which effectively screen out all but the most dedicated and resourceful pilgrims.

From Kailasa to Kataragama: Mystical passage via the axis mundi

Like his ‘father’ Rudra of Siva, Skanda-Murukan is a god associated with mountains and hilltops; his Wanniyala-aeto worshippers even today know him as *Kande Yaka*, the hunter Spirit of the Mountain. *Vedahitikanda*, ‘The Peak Where He Was’ in Kataragama, to Tamils is *Katira Malai*, the ‘Mountain of Light’ and even to this day the Kataragama Pada Yatra is also known in Tamil as *Katira Malai Kar ai Yattirai*, the ‘coastal pilgrimage to the Shining Peak.’ In view of its strong associations with the god’s origin on Mount Kailasa, it is also well known as *Daksina Kailasa*, the ‘Southern Kailasa.’

This long-standing postulation of a North-South axis anchored at *Uttara Kailasa* in Tibet and *Daksina Kailasa* in Sri Lanka takes on profound significance in the tradition of pilgrimage and mystical practice at Kataragama. For it is a remarkable fact that Mt. Kailasa in the trans-Himalaya and Kataragama in the far south constitute a North-South axis not merely in yogic lore, but also in modern geographical terms as well (see figure 1) Coincidence or not, this fact further highlights the role of geography in Kataragama’s mystical traditions.

This striking feature of a virtual North-South axis or geographic alignment between Kailasa and Kataragama is well-known to Kataragama swamis and yogis, who regard it as a macrocosmic analog to the microcosmic *sumna nadi* or subtle central nerve channel envisaged in Kundalini yoga. In their view, Kailasa is homologized or equated to the thousand-petalled *sahasrara cakra*, subtle worlds superior to our world of physical sense perception. By process of transposition, the North-South axis geographically represented by Kailasa-Kataragama is also analogous to the *vertical ray* that ‘shines upon the waters’ in religious traditions worldwide. In this sense, the descent of Skanda-Murukan from *Uttara Kailasa* to *Daksina Kailasa* also represents the descent of visitation of the Spirit into matter, which expresses in metaphysical terms precisely the legend of Skanda-Murukan’s disguised visitation to Kataragama to woo and wed the yearning human soul represented by Valli. In this context, the Kailasa-Kataragama axis is also homologized *katir* (effulgence, light or brilliance, i.e. *logos*) while *kamam* (Sanskrit: *kama* or Greek *eros*) pertains to the passion of Valli and Murukan in the romantic jungle setting of Kataragama which, although undoubtedly a very human love story, is also subtle and profound religious parable at the same time and it is on this level that scholars and devotees interpret it.

Scholars of religion, too, are familiar with this process – in their own scholarly way, of course, if not directly and immediately as a result of actually *undertaking* the journey or passage as the traditions under their study may practice it. Mircea Eliade was perhaps the first modern scholar to articulate this process. In the context of Indian tantricism, anthropologist Aghananda Bharati describes the process as characteristic phenomenon of tantric pilgrimage, both as a concept and as a set of observances, is the hypostatization of pilgrim-sites and shrines: the geographical site is homologized with some entity in the esoteric discipline, usually with a region or an ‘organ’ in the mystical body of the tantric devotee.”

These structural features of Kataragama and its legends – which have not passed unnoticed by generations of practicing *kaumara sadhakas* or aspirants – are also related to Kataragama's hoary tradition of passage to and from other *lokas* or worlds as well as the appearance in Kataragama of diverse spirits and godlings from other *lokas*. The Kataragama festival, for example, is essentially a wedding or fertility celebration which, in theory, is widely attended not only by human but also by spirits of every hue and variety from many *lokas* and not just from our familiar sense world alone. Senior swamis and yogins allege that strange beings used to visit Kataragama in human or animal guise quite commonly until only a few decades ago. Such visitations have become less common, they say, due to the increasing secularization of Kataragama. As outlandish as such claims might sound at first, they should not be discarded but should be considered in the light of traditional sciences which best explain these alleged occurrences on their own terms.

**** intersecting equilateral triangles representing the Mother-principle and the Father-principle in balanced union and thus – *voila!* The *bambino* or Holy Child known to mythologies the world over. In the traditions of Europe and West Asia, the hexagram is well known as the 'Seal of Solomon', which alludes to its widespread association with the conjunction of sacerdotal authority and temporal power. Moreover, the *yantra* in conjunction with the *vel* or spear corresponds to the archetypal warrior's *shield* and *spear* or, in another context, to the *axis mundi* and the *chakra* or *loka* or plane of existence through which the *axis mundi* or 'solar ray' passes as an axle around which a wheel turns.

The *yantra* is another product of India's indigenous, non-discursive schools of ritual magic and as such it is intended not for merely decorative purposes but for its magical efficacy. Its etymology offers a clue to the *yantra*'s function and *raison d'être*. Like the similar terms *mantra* and *tantra*, it consists of a verbal root *yam* ('to hold') plus the suffix-*tra* denoting instrumentality. Hence, *yam)-tra* or *yantra*, 'a device that holds,' i.e. a magical snare, trap, or container, especially one designed to hold a spirit, *daimon*, or god. In this function, the *yantra* parallels the pervasive South Indian pattern of place-goddesses (e.g. Madurai *Meenakshi Amman* or *Valli Amman* of Kataragama) who first attract and then 'hold' wandering gods to those places as their husbands. In the context of Kataragama, the *yantra* in the holy of holies may be understood to 'hold' or 'contain' god of six faces or directions, much as the Ark of the Covenant was understood to 'contain' the *Shekinah* or 'presence' of the Holy Spirit of god Jehovah.

Despite their feminine associations, both appear as archetypal heroes whose coming is characterized by strife and conquest. As the wargod Karttikeya, Skanda is *Mahasena*, the Supreme Commander 'who has a great army' of demons and angels alike; his initial appearance is accompanied by such tumult that the devas at first mistake him for another super demon. Dionysus, too, is described by Nonnus (Dionysus 24. 151 ff.) as a warrior-chief whose troops advance to the sound of flutes, drums, pipes and crashing cymbals, astonishing the inhabitants of India. A sarcophagus from the early third Century AD (now in the Landgrafenmuseum, Kassel) depicts the young Dionysus returning from his conquest of India surrounded by his army of devotees and riding upon an elephant. Skanda-Murukan, too is *Gajarudhan*, he who rides astride the elephant as his *vahana* or vehicle in battle; to this day,

the Kataragama god is carried in procession upon an elephant and is accompanied by his 'army' of devotees.

Both gods are identified with the fringe of civilized society: with wilderness, 'crazy' or roguish behaviour, sudden possession or intoxication and underground or otherwise vaguely subversive activities – in Sri Lanka, exclusive protagonists of religion look askance at Kataragama and its amoral reputation. Victor Turner and others would speak of Dionysus and Kataragama in terms of 'liminality', of being on the margin, in an in-between geographical or psychological space "where fluidity challenges stability, where fusion replaces boundary – here too normal relations and normal inhibitions are suspended in a quasi-magical interlude characterized by joyful play, imaginative exuberance and free energy." This liminal quality of Kataragama also marks it as a place of transition or passage between psychological states or *lokas* ('worlds'), as we shall see. This liminality or meeting of worlds expresses itself as ecstatic possession (Skt: *arudha* literally, 'mounted' i.e., by a spirit), a common feature of the cults of both Dionysus and Murukan, readily visible in South India and Sri Lanka to this day. Dionysus is called *Gynaimanes*, 'he who maddens women'; his madness affects women and they are his principal followers, called *Maenads* or 'raving' Bacchantes. In ancient Tamil poetry, too, Ceylon or Murukan is credited with creating love-frenzy in young women, as in the following lines from one of the oldest poems in the Tamil language, which could also well depict the cult of Dionysus:

It is worth noting in this regard that adherents of cults of both Dionysus and Kataragama commonly engage in trance-practices that are nothing less than miraculous in the eyes of many. Euripides' *Bacchae* draws a picture of the marvelous circumstances under which fire does not burn the god-intoxicated celebrants and weapons do not wound them. Even today in Kataragama, hundreds of celebrants may be seen walking over beds of live coals hot enough to melt aluminum, while others pierce themselves with pins, knives and skewers without a trace of injury – provided that they are in trance.

Finally, both Dionysus and Murukan are intimately associated with drama, mystery and ritual theater. Both Dionysus and Murukan are patron deities of bardic poetry, prophecy and dramatic performance and Murukan is closely identified with the genesis of Tamil, one of the world's great classical languages. In his play *Bacchae* (289 ff), the ancient Greek playwright Euripides says that Dionysus "is a prophet and the bacchic revel is filled with the spirit of prophecy."

Danielou proposes an explanation for the identification of Dionysus with both Shiva and Skanda. "In the Mediterranean world," he speculates, "Skanda appears as a new Dionysus and his legend is mingled with that of the old Dionysus." Citing Diodorus, he distinguishes "Bacchos, son of Semele, who is Skanda, from an older Dionysus (Shiva), born of Zeus and Persephone" who is credited with the invention of wine. However, he offers no plausible chronology to support this hypothesis.

Clothey's version of this general hypothesis reconciles the best accepted conclusions concerning both cults and, as such, is more satisfactory. As he observes:

By the time of the *Cankam* literature... the Murukan cultus manifests certain aspects that have striking parallels in the Dionysian cult of the Middle East. The early Murukan is particularly similar to the agricultural Dionysus of a pre-Greek era.... at Murukan and Dionysus at a later period are ‘Aryanized’, both become associated with warrior and celestial motifs and become the son of the presiding deity of the mountain at the center of the world.

However, he does not resolve the vexing issue of how Middle Eastern motifs may have entered the South Indian cultural milieu.

It would go beyond the scope of this book to explore the intriguing associations that both Dionysus and Skanda share with Alexander the Great and folk of literary traditions of an Alexander Romance, but careful analysis could reveal much about the migration of mythic patterns and cult ideologies across the ancient world. Interestingly, the historical world-conqueror Alexander was widely identified with Dionysus and, to a lesser extent, with Skanda-Murukan as well. For example, one of the oldest major pilgrimage centers of the hill-god Murukan, Tirupparankunram near Madurai, has at the top of the hill a Muslim *dargah* dedicated to *Sikandar*, whom local Muslims identify with Skanda-Murukan. By a linguistic coincidence, both ‘Alexander’ and ‘Skanda’ transliterate into Arabic as *al-Sikandar*. N. Gopala Pillai has argued that the cult of Skanda is derived from the influence of Alexander on North India, but few scholars take his argument seriously. Clothey, however, concedes that “it may not be impossible that the name of Skanda was associated with Alexander, in a way still not precisely understood and that elements of Skandas Northern iconography were derived or influenced by the impact of post-Alexandrian Hellenization.”

Dionysus and Kataragama Skanda

The issues are assuredly more complex than they initially appear, but these points taken together should be enough to turn our attention from Shiva and towards Skanda-Murukan in the search for affinities with Dionysus. So let us turn to the known structural and thematic parallels between the Dionysian mystery cult of the ancient Mediterranean world and the cult of Skanda-Murukan as I survives especially in Kataragama. Necessarily, I must confine my remarks here to a brief overview of relevant features, leaving unsaid many fascinating details.

The myths of Dionysus and Skanda-Murukan display other thematic parallels in their marvelous birth accounts. Skanda is born in the trans-Himalay and migrates to South India and Sri Lanka where he is explicitly identified with the South – in Indian cosmography, the direction or realm of chaos and death, presided over by Yama, Judge of the Dead. The ancient Greeks used to look to the Far East and the South as the birthplace of Dionysus and some accounts placed Nysa, his birthplace, in India. Skanda is born from his father Shiva seated upon the cosmic mountain Kailasa or Meru; by a linguistic pun, Dionysus is born from his father’s thigh (Greek: *meros*). As Danielou observes, “It has been suggested that the fact that Shiva’s sperm stayed on the snowy mountain Himavat, identified with Mount Meru, the axis of the world, is not extraneous to the legend of Dionysus’ sojourn in the thigh (*meros*) of

Jupiter.” On this point, one may say, there is agreement –both traditions point to, or suggest, a common mythological origin, even in a geographical sense.

Moreover, this heritage of punning, word play and *double-entendre*, too, persists both in Dionysian ritual drama and in the cult of Skanda-Murukan even today. For instance, one of Skanda’s ancient epithets, *Shaktidhara* (Skt. Literally, ‘he who holds *shakti*’) plays upon the multiple meanings of the grammatically feminine word *shakti*, such that the epithet may mean ‘he who holds the spear’, ‘he who holds his goddess-consort’, or ‘he who wields mystic power’. All three interpretations are perfectly applicable to the god; they also, incidentally, illustrate the god’s common affinity to women, magical power and the spear-symbol. When allegorical tales abound with such ambiguous references, the informed listener or connoisseur apprehends a rich universe full of multiple levels of meaning or exegesis, which serve as a virtual stairway of ascent to higher and higher levels of understanding. This finds its material counterpart in the multiple curtains that hang between the worshipper and *sanctum sanctorum* of the god at Kataragama.

Lord of the Underground Dream World

Again, both deities are protean figures who transform themselves into myriad forms. Both appear first as hunter-gods: Dionysus as Zagreus, ‘The Great Hunter’ and Kataragama Deviyo as a Paleolithic hunter-ancestor of the Veddas. Dionysus undergoes numerous transformations in his battle with the Titans. So likewise does Murukan in his battle with the super-titan *Surapadma* (Tamil: *Curapatuman*). Otto observes that “In Nonnus, the Indian Deriades complains of the impossibility of conquering him – Dionysus - because the ‘many-faced one’ was now a lion, a bull, a boar, a bear, a panther, a snake and now a tree, fire, water.”

Like Skanda-Murukan, Dionysus is reckoned to be both king and prophet, patron of hunters, bards and *antis* or itinerant magical performers. Dionysus appears incognito on earth as one of his own bacchantes in Euripides’ *Bacchae*; again in *The Frogs* of Aristophanes he journeys into the underworld, also in disguise. In like fashion, Sinhala oral tradition likens the Kataragama god to a king who routinely inspects his kingdom disguised as a beggar, a pilgrim, or a *swami* to ascertain the conditions of the realm and the attitudes of his subjects – a recurrent theme in Indian literature and folklore. As gods who journey in disguise through a lower world, they also share chthonic associations; nocturnal processions by torch light are conducted in their honor and their presence is felt with great immediacy – even nowadays at Kataragama. Both are suprasensual guides to deliverance, psychopomps who guide, paradoxically, by leading astray. As such, Dionysus is also *Lusios* (‘The Liberator’) while Skanda is *Guha*, ‘The Mysterious’.

Kataragama’s reputation for mystery and sanctity is well deserved; living traditions current among the majority Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims all testify to the shrine’s mysterious power. An example from Islamic lore of Tamil Nadu will suffice, but many others could be added. A Tamil text, the *Kanzual Karamat*, tells how the sixteenth-century Muslim saint

Kuthub Shaul Hameed of Nagur was mysteriously transported to the bank of the Menik Ganga in Kataragama and thence conducted underground to a subterranean palace where the mystic robe of Kuthub-ul-Akhtab was conferred upon him by *al-Khadir*, ‘The Green Man’ of Islamic lore who appears in the Holy Quran (Surah 18 verses 57-83) as the teacher of Moses and who is none other than Kataragama-Skanda according to local Sufi interpretation.

Not surprisingly, this underground Kataragama has been variously attested by contemporary resident experts as well, not only as a standard theme of Kataragama’s story telling tradition, but also as a recurrent subject of visions and dreams. For instance, it is well-known in Kataragama that no ritual innovation or architectural renovation may be undertaken unless and until the god himself so commands his servants in a dream; untimely death or misfortune is the certain consequence of disregarding this tradition. Moreover, even today some advanced practitioners are known to engage in yogic or lucid dreaming, a practice whereby the dreamer may consciously explore Kataragama in the dream state.

Reports from yogic dreamers who have explored the subtle dream world of Kataragama tend to support and even elaborate upon longstanding tradition. One experienced adept described to this researcher the Kataragama god’s *Mahadevale* as he beheld saw it in a lucid dream: as a pagoda of seven stories – a ground floor, three upper stories and three subterranean stories, in contrast to the simple, single-storied Kataragama shrine of diurnal consciousness.

Evidently, in the dream world the god’s *sanctum* has an added dimension – the vertical, corresponding to the solar ray or the *axis mundi* – encompassing the chthonic and heavenly planes which the god (and, presumably, the accomplished yogi dreamer) may freely visit as a “mover-at-will” (Skt. *Kamacarin*). This, too, is structurally related to kundalini yoga practices that postulate a virtual ladder of psychic centers or *cakras* with the human frame which practitioners pass through or experience in ascending and descending order. In the tradition of Kataragama, however, distinctions between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ lose their familiar hard-and-fast quality, as does the distinction between dreaming and waking consciousness. Here the microcosmic psychic centers are routinely homologized to macrocosmic centers of sacred geography. Thus, Skanda’s heavenly abode corresponds to Mount Kailasa in Tibet, while Kataragama itself is equated to the *mulādhāra cakra* of Kundalini Yoga – the center where the stambha or *axis mundi* touches the earth and, as such, the subtle gateway through which one may be ‘transported’ to heavenly and chthonic spheres.

Neither Dionysus nor Skanda-Murukan dwells in a celestial heaven, but rather in shadowy underworlds (which include, from the divine perspective, life here on earth) the realm of the dead and the source of life. Both are gods who have known the lofty heights – the Himalaya of their own divine origin and nature – but who nevertheless prefer the life-sustaining valley (homologized to Mother Earth, the *Theotokos* or *Magna Mater*) teeming with earthly sensations and emotions like love and hate, the stuff that life, theater and literature are made of. They revel in intrigue and wear a thousand beguiling disguises or masks – most, but not all, of which are human or humanlike. Kataragama Deviyo, for instance, may appear as a Vedda, as an itinerant beggar, as a youth, as a holy man, or even as a tree – and he still appears as such even today, leaving those who have encountered him changed for life, as they

readily testify. This conviction that the god is *present* and *real* has long characterized the mystery rites of Kataragama and is still a feature of the Kataragama festival even in the late 20th century; Dionysus, too, was “thought and felt to be present with overwhelming certainty.”



Mount Kailasa 81° 10' E. long

As spirits of antithesis and paradox, both Murukan and Dionysus are characterized by the juxtaposition of pandemonium and silence, another coincidence of opposites. Not only in myth, but also in cultic practice, their epiphanies are celebrated with colorful noisy processions and frenzied dancing by torchlight – and yet, during the procession at Kataragama, ritual participants do not utter a single word. In the cult of Dionysus, too, melancholy silence was the sign of women possessed by the god. Indeed, Kataragama’s ritual performances are all conducted strict silence and no initiate will verbally disclose anything about his or her oral-performative tradition (Skt: *parampara*) except to reiterate its prehistoric origins. This, of course, is perfectly concordant with the cult’s central injunction *cumma iru!* (Tamil: ‘be still!’) enjoining both contemplative silence and secrecy upon cult initiates. Incidentally, the utility of discursive research methodologies is also severely restricted when so much of what the researcher intends to study is shrouded in silence and secrecy. As such, the traditional approach to acquiring specialized knowledge becomes truly indispensable.

Both deities are gods of epiphany who repeatedly ‘come’ or manifest themselves, Otto calls Dionysus “the god who comes, the god of epiphany, whose appearance is far more urgent, for more compelling than that of any other god. He had disappeared and now he will suddenly be here again.” That is, both gods appear mysteriously from the water or chthonic depths in disguise to shatter the conventional social order and to fill with terror and wonder the hearts of those who behold them before incomprehensibly disappearing again. Until the twentieth century, the Kataragama god was regarded with such direct summons would dare to visit the remote shrine. Robert Know, who spent eighteen years as a captive in the Kndyan kingdom of the seventeenth century, testifies that “The Name and Power of this God striketh such terror into the Chingulayes, that those who otherwise are Enemies of this King and have

served both Portuguese and Dutch against him, yet would never assist either to make invasions this way.” Public perceptions have changed since Knox’s time, but the fact remains that millions consider the Kataragama god to be the most down-to-earth and powerful of the island’s guardian spirits. To this day, the god’s devotees invoke him repeatedly urging him to ‘come’.

This ‘coming’ of Dionysus or Skanda-Murukan is, properly speaking, a return or reawakening of an age-old experience. For instance, when Murukan first appears to *Valli* in a Neolithic setting, his cult is already the god’s ardent devotee even before he comes in person to woo her and she becomes his beloved only later when at last she see through his disguise. Like the god himself, the cult of Kataragama has passed through many cycles; the locality itself has risen from jungle into urban center and returned back into jungle repeatedly in recorded history. And so it is with Dionysus: according to Otto, “The Greeks themselves considered their principal cults of Dionysus to be age old.... Homeric epic is intimately acquainted with his cult and his myths and it speaks of him in the same manner in which it speaks of the deities who have been worshipped since time immemorial.”

Lords of Water, Life and Fertility

Yet another common motif which classicists and ideologists have long recognized about these two gods is that both are associated with the watery element and its connection with fertility and with life itself. That is, both Dionysus and Skanda-Murukan are closely associated with fruit, blood, semen (the Sankrit verbal root *skand* refers primarily to the spurting of semen; hence *Skanda* means ‘Spurt of Semen’ or, by extension. ‘The Leaper of Attacker’), the sap of fresh vegetation and with an elixir of immortality, whether wine of *soma*. As infants, both are nursed by Females of the watery element. In Kataragama’s Islamic lore and in the Alexander Romance as well, for instance, the mysterious figure al-Khidr is Alexander’s accomplice or cook who discovers unsought what Alexander sought in vain – the *ma’ul hayat* or ‘Water of Life’ that bestows heavenly knowledge and the everlasting to those who taste it. His epithet *at-Khadir*. ‘The Green Man’, also points to his chthonic association with plant growth, sap and the underground fountain of life which, local Islamic tradition maintains, he discovered in *Khadir-gama* (i.e. Kataragama), the ‘home of *al-Khadir*.’ Like god Murukan of South India, the Kataragamagod is looked upon as a fertility god who brings or withholds rain – as god-king of a hydraulic civilization, he “divides the waters” and ensures that each community gets its share of life in the form of water. Both functions – fertility and the regulation of life-giving water – are ritually enacted in the colourful *diya kaepeema* or ‘water-cutting ceremony’ that is the climax of the Esale festival.

Dionysus, of course is well known in Greek mythology for his association with water, plant sap, sperm and another elixir of knowledge – wine. Plutarch tells us that, according to Greek belief, Dinoysus was the lord of all moist nature ⁴¹ Varro (August. *De civ. D.7.21*) declares that “the sovereignty of Dionysus was not only to be recognized in the juice of fruits whose

crowning glory was wine but also in the sperms of living creatures: ⁴² Since prehistoric times, the worship of Murukan, too, has included fruit, honey, the fermented juice of paddy and coconut and the blood of sacrificial rams. In the widely-circulating legend of *Palani* in Tamil Nadu, the popular shrine's name is interpreted in the expression *palam nee* – 'you are the fruit', i.e. you (Murukan) are the *ñānappalam* of 'fruit of gnosis' – that father Shiva says to placate his precocious and impulsive son Murukan.

The association of blood and fertility finds expression in the importance of the color red in both cults. Blood or vermilion power and Murukan as *Ceylon* 'the Red', mutually symbolize each other and evoke his close connection to *shakti*, the feminine principle. Blood-red color simultaneously symbolized both life and death, as well as both classical genres of ancient Tamil poetry: *akam* ('love-matter') and *puram* (mainly war), over which Murukan presides as the patron of Tamil language, poetry and drama. Likewise, images of Dionysus were commonly colored with vermilion and his Maenads in their frenzy were known to rip apart and devour the raw flesh of male goats and even men unwary enough to intrude upon their torchlit upon the mountains – the god himself was *omestes*, 'eater of raw flesh.'

Again both Dionysus and Skanda-Murukan have strong associations with certain species of plants. Dionysus is *Dendrites*, 'he who dwells in trees' and is the patron of orchards and vineyards. Similarly, Skanda was equated with *Vishakha* or *Bhadrashakha*, the 'God of the Auspicious Bough,' recalling an early association with tree-worship which persists to the present day. Alexander Dubianski has lately given a lucid account of the association of Valli and Murukan with specific flora and fauna of the *Kurincittinai* or mountainous landscape in *Cankam* poetry. He notes that from the *Canka* Age (and probably far earlier), Murukan has been associated with the *katampu* (*Anthocephalus cadamba*) and *venkai* (*Pterocarpus bilobus*) trees, both of which have strong fertility associations in Tamil culture. The *venkai*, for instance, produces fragrant, golden-red flowers during the season considered most auspicious for weddings and its bark yields a reddish sap when cut. Murukan is said to have transformed himself into a *venkai* tree while wooing Valli. Indeed, the tamil word *valli* means a creeper (*Convolvus batatas*) and the motif of the creeper entwined around a tree evokes to the Indian mind the image of a woman embracing her lover.

In Kataragama specifically, the god has strong arboreal associations and may have originally been a tree-spirit or *yaksa* from pre-Buddhistic times. In the beginning, we are told, the god came by foot to Kataragama, planted his *vel* in the ground under a shady tree, sat down and remained there. Hence, the tree was his original 'temple' and even today the exterior of his *sanctum sanctorum* retains relief-images of trees, lotus blossoms and elephants only. Indeed, the *vel* symbol, which tradition says is equivalent to the god himself, is itself an image of the *axis mundi* or the *arbor vitae*, the 'Tree of Life' or *kalpavruksha*, the 'with granting tree' of pan-Indian tradition; its spearhead, for instance, is in the shape of a *venkai* leaf and is frequently compared to a leaf in *Cankam* literature. As Coomaraswamy rightly observes, "All these are forms of the Axis of the Universe, thought of as a Tree by which the very existence of the cosmos is maintained." With the advent of Buddhism as the state religion, however, the Kataragama god's tree became the papal or 'bo-tree') (*Ficus religiosa*) that now offers its shade to the god's *Mahadevale* and, in return, receives ritual offerings of water from the

Alatti Ammas and the *kapurala*-priests every Saturday when the god – at least until recently – also received a ritual offering of venison, the hunter-god’s favorite food.



Valli Amma, Spirit of life and fertility

God of Play and Drama

It is no coincidence that the world ‘play’ refers equally to sportive behavior and to dramatic performance. This is as true in Indian languages as it is in European: Murukan’s ‘divine play’ (Tamil: *tiru vilaiyatal*; Sanskrit: *leela*) is also the word used to describe his pranks, sports and dalliances, especially with Valli, the vivacious and even cheeky jungle heroine who is Murukan’s devotee and sweetheart. Together with Valli and his ‘older’ rival brother, the elephant-headed Ganapati, the ever-youthful god of Kataragama is widely regarded in Sri Lanka to be still sporting to this day, dispensing justice along with boons to those who respect him.

In the eyes of connoisseurs, this ‘play’ goes on year-round in the form of divine pranks, tricks and games like hide-and-seek which, we are told, Murukan and Valli love to play with each other and with their devotees. But it is especially during the Aesala festival which, as Paul Wirz already observed in the 1950’s, “consists of a dramatic staging of the legendary traditions of Skanda” that the god’s ‘play’ also manifests as *dromena*, or “numinous performances” as Obeysekere calls them, that are conducted as *ritual pantomime* in keeping

with the festival's theme and content of mystery, secrecy and dangerous power. As part of its powerful magic, the annual mystery rites are felt to portend the peace and fertility – or misfortune – of the entire realm or kingdom and so great care is taken to ensure its successful performance. It is also a spellbinding spectacle to behold and attracts many thousands of devout pilgrims and casual spectators alike, a fact that has given it commercial significance in contemporary Sri Lanka as well.

In ancient Greece this close relation between drama and mythology was epitomized by the mask, which stood both for the god Dionysus himself and for a process whereby those who participated realized a glimpse of the wild paradoxes that were related as myths and enacted as mystery rites or *dromena*, literally 'things performed'. South mystery traditions were commonplace in the ancient world and some are known to have endured for thousands of years. Gnostic Christianity was a relatively late example of initiatic mysteries and even today the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches retain ritual elements recalling an origin in mystery religions, such as the transubstantiation of the sacraments into Christ's own body and blood.

For ancient Greeks, the mask or *persona* was a symbol of unity in duality. The wearer was both himself and someone else at the same time, or temporarily became the *persona* (Greek: 'sound through' i.e. speak through the mask) in the *dramatic personae* or characters of the ritual drama. The mask 'held together' the two identities. As such, it also represented the possibility of a passage or gateway between different realms or worlds of experience. As we have seen, this passage into a dangerous, shadowy underworld realm of chaos and death is a key theme in both cults; as Godwin notes, it is characteristic of mystery gods that they descend to an underworld to redeem those souls incarcerated there. Except for some masked dancers who explicitly represent *yakku* or other-worldly spirit, masks are not in evidence at Kataragama. Nor are there any lines to be spoken, or even a single utterance by ritual performers, although enthralled spectators may sing and many are head to cry *Haro-Hara!* ('Hallelujah'). And yet, the dramatic or numinous character of the ritual performance is readily evident; the presence of the principal divine characters is keenly felt though they are seldom to be seen, as secrecy and disguise are integral motifs of the ritual drama both in theme and content.

In the cult of Murukan, the mask-symbol may be said to find its counterpart in the youthful god's ever-present *vel*, or spear. The spear, too, unites hunter and prey, life and death, in a sacrifice that enables life-the world-to continue. The *vel* motif reappears as the god-king's scepter, the magician's wand, or the ascetic's staf. But its persistent representation as a spear clearly points to its Paleolithic origin in the dawn of human consciousness. It seems that in early times Murukan was represented by abstract symbols like the *vēl oryantra* alone, which perhaps explains why there are no anthropomorphic images or temples dedicated to the god prior to the bhakti age. This aniconic tradition, too, survives to this day in Kataragama.

Whenever this human-like undying divinity of Kataragama appears, he is accompanied by an entourage of closely related spirits or characters. Playing the lead role of king disguise, he goes so together with the figure of a royal priest or minister, typically described as his

playmate and older brother the elephant. Ganapati. These two jungle characters, the Elepahnt and the Lion, jungle characters, together comprise the *Gaja-Singha* polarity that is the ancient symbol of just kingship.

Following His extraordinary military or magical exploits, the high god falls in love with an earthling girl, Valli, whose stunning beauty and devotion conqueror Himself. Love is the final victor. The innocent orphan girl, representing the human soul, binds her heavenly Lord and hero to the earth with bonds of love. Even this mighty queen and rightful consort Devasenā is powerless to move him, and she herself must accept the youthful god's amorous relationship with Valli. This she does turning her back to him, pretending not to notice the obvious.

The story or myth – although it is all about make-believe, pretending, and games or play – is nevertheless very real in that millions of people, today more than ever, have been intimately affected by. And what is more, growing a body of evidence now exists strongly suggesting that, in typically mysterious fashion, the entire metaphysical drama of Kataragama is somehow told in the very geographical layout of the story's setting. Properly speaking, Kataragama would appear to be a vast diagram or *yantra* expressive of these ancient traditional cosmography that underlies it and, as such, surely deserves further study.

In technical phraseology, the structural integrity of Kataragama's multiple parallel patterns is such that it presents itself as an elegant paradigm of suitable creative activity or kingship. It's living oral and per per-formative traditions, previously all but ignored by modern researchers, is only now coming to light.

The importance of preserving and exploring the living, growing structure of Kataragama's diverse traditions should now be evident. Whether the mystery of Kataragama is man-made or god-given is not the issue. The fact is that something utterly foreign to modern science and modern thinking has quietly escaped notice in Kataragama despite exhaustive surveys based upon inappropriate methodology. It is now time to change gears and look at Kataragama the way the living traditions themselves do. This can happen only when the Western-educated are prepared to accept the expert authority of the swamis, bawas, and others who are the custodians of Kataragama's diverse yet integral traditions. But for this to happen to the Western-educated they will have to experience a change of heart concerning the basic issues of human existence.

In conclusion, it is imperative to issue a reminder to all that, as Sri Lankans well know, there is some deeply profound power operating in Kataragama, a sacred or divine spirit that none should treat lightly or ignore, for to do so is to risk great peril. By approaching it in a spirit of humility, however, we stand to be enriched in many unexpected ways, not least of all spiritually. The responsibility to our fellow man amid to successive generations is an awesome one, but one that we dare not shirk nevertheless.

Specifically, within the context of the findings presented here, it is prudent to make the following suggestions:

1. First, that the relevant governmental authorities – and especially the Urban Development Authority – refrain from demolishing or altering any shrine-like structure or approving any activity that may alter the subtle character of Kataragama without first consulting the indigenous authorities and heeding their advice.
2. Second, that support and encouragement be made available to those who embody Kataragama’s living traditions. This means trying to understand them rather than trying to reform them. It means recognizing wisdom in the most unexpected circumstances. This is a task that should be undertaken primarily by people’s devotees and only secondarily by bureaucracies, whether secular or religious.
3. Third, that researchers and scholars consider with greater sympathy the methods used and conclusions reached by students of traditional schools of thought, however strikingly different they may be. A genuine synthesis of ways Eastern and Western, traditional and modern, is perhaps the only point of entry to Kataragama for the modern educated.

Undoubtedly, much more remains to be discovered about Kataragama and the spirit or divinity that is said to inhabit it. The full consequences of the profound undertaking can scarcely as yet be imagined.



Lanka or Taprobane figured prominently in the maps of Strabo (above) and Ptolemy (below), The island’s prominence on world maps reflected its legendary reputation among mariners.

This is but one of many poetic accounts of the cosmography or traditional ‘sacred geography’ of the Sri Lanka that, considered together, paint a genuinely fabulous picture of Lanka’s position in the ancient world. And this glowing picture of the island was not a mere conceit of its inhabitants only, for some of the most incredibly insightful accounts of the island come from the traders, pilgrims, and adventurers from other corners of the earth who helped to make Lanka renowned throughout the world.

Storybook Kingdom

In fact, most of the cosmographical descriptions of Taprobane or Serendib, as the island has also been known, come to us in the form of oral or written accounts of visits of diverse and colorful protagonists around whom a host of stories is woven. Thus, among other fabled characters said to have come to this island are such luminaries as Gautama Buddha, God Vishnu (in, His *Ramavatara* or Descent as God Rama), wargod Skanda-Murugan (who decided to stay), Alexander the Great in his fabled quest to see the far end of the earth), al-Khidr (‘the Green Man’, mysterious teacher of Moses from quranic lore), and travelling merchant-adventurers like Sinbad the Sailor and Marco polo.

More important than issues of the historicity of these visits is the undeniable existence of the stories themselves, for all describe a marvelous isle in terms that reflect a more or less deep awareness of Lanka’s sacred geographical character and position. Taken together, they suggest the existence of an arcane traditional science, known virtually worldwide to a handful of specialists, that recognized Lanka as one of its practical paradigms. Most indicators or clues remain part of living oral traditions, while others have found their way into such literary works as the Ramayana and the Mahavamsa.

These various cosmographical accounts all agree in describing Lanka as a kind of storybook kingdom, a magical isle of legendary proportions where the topsy-turvy and miraculous are commonplace. At the root of this is a non-temporal but *spatially-oriented worldview* that makes no fundamental distinction between the sensible world of empirical extension and the cognizable words of mythic reality where all occurs *in principio*, i.e. ‘at the source’ rather than at some chronological ‘Beginning’.

This cosmological principle or source, not surprisingly, lends itself easily and naturally to cosmographical expression in such familiar spatial distinctions as higher-lower, before-behind, and North-South, etc. In this sense, every point is reckoned to have its own character or sacred qualities, its own ‘story’ that maps its relation to other points.

Traditional cosmography, therefore, represents more than the plotting of distances between points. Rather, it is the greater story of these points, of how they differ from each other, and of how they are all tied together. Properly speaking, cosmography or sacred geography is the ‘lay of the land’ in the sense of the songs sung and tales told about it.

Small wonder, then, that spatially oriented thought was cultivated to such a remarkable extent here in Asia over the course of ages. The result is a wealth of arcane lore expressed in terms

of cosmography, astrology, grammar, and *iti-hasa* or epic storytelling. Even the Mahavamsa derives from this tradition and is no exception.



Ptolemy's map of Taprobane

Detail of Ptolemy's map of Taprobane: *Bachi Oppidum* the 'Town of Bacchus' near present-day Kataragama

Tropsy-Turvy

Sacred geography or cosmography, the mapping of the ordered universe, is one such *vidya* or sacred science for which Lanka has long been famous. As the Roman historian Pliny notes in the sixth book of his 37-volume *Natural History* written in the first century AD, the people of the ancient Mediterranean world thought that Tapraobane was another world altogether, such that many took it to be the place of the antipodes ('where feet are reversed'), calling it the *Antichthones* world, where everything is inverted, upside-down or tospy-turvy.

Ptolemy of Alexandria

A century later, Ptolemy of Alexandria, the 'Father of Modern Geography', was able to compile a picture of Taprobane of such accuracy that it remained in use for over sixteen hundred years. Living as he was in Alexandria at the time of its ascendancy as a world center of traditional sciences, Ptolemy's work might reasonably be expected to reflect an intimate familiarity with then-current mystery traditions, even where distant Taprobane is concerned.

This spatially-oriented mythical or magical thinking is clearly to be distinguished from the conventional rationality of modern historicism or the ruthless logic of the marketplace. In most of South Asia to this day, historicism is still a modern import with scarcely any impact on grassroots, day-to-day thinking of people whose values drive from age-old traditions.

Indeed, Ptolemy's map of Taprobane is strewn with clues implying that the island is, in fact, the place of the Antipodes, a kind of hypothetical 'East Pole' or far end of the earth, literally 'where feet are opposite'. And not only does Ptolemy reckon Taprobane to be many times larger than the island we know today, but he also assumed that it lies upon the earth's equator, for this is what ancient mariners firmly believed: that the Antipodes region lies upon the equator where day and night and seasons are all equal.

Equally important to this picture of Taprobane as the topsy-turvy Antichthonic world is Ptolemy's recognition of the existence of a *Dionysi seu Bacchi Oppidum* (Latin: 'town of Dionysus or Bacchus') in the close vicinity of Kataragama (see Ptolemy's map). Bacchus or Dionysus, the ancient Greek and Asian god of theatre, netherworld intrigue and ecstatic torchlit processions, also bears extraordinary structural similarities to God Kataragama that are outside the purview of this study but which Ptolemy and others must have clearly recognized. How much more Ptolemy knew but would not write on his map of Taprobane must remain a tempting subject for speculation.

Lanka Deepa

When we turn to the island's own sacred geographical traditions, an enormous wealth of lore confronts us. There are legends and beliefs peculiar to the island's Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian communities, as well as indigenous traditions preceding the influence of major religions. All participate to some extent in this underlying mystique of the island's reputation for the fabulous, as witnessed by the persistent vitality of cults centering upon certain shrines still widely believed to emanate subtle influences that may be propitiated in diverse fashions. Indeed, the very word 'serendipity' was coined to express this propensity of Lanka or Serendib for happy surprise discoveries of marvelous things.

This belief in the congruence of name and form (Sanskrit: *nama-rupa*) is further illustrated in the traditional etymology of the island's ancient name Lanka, which is interpreted to mean 'shining point'. The island's modern honorific prefix Śri similarly denotes radiance, hence its distinction as 'the resplendent isle'.

Not, coincidentally, Lanka is also widely believed to be *Dhamma Deepa*, a Pali rendering of either of two Sanskrit terms, *Dharma Dweepa* 'the island of Dharma' or *Dharma Deepa* 'the lamp of Dharma'. Similarly the term *Lanka Deepa* is regarded as a shining point in a sea of dark water. This ancient philological relic persists in popular usage as an intriguing survival (if ancient poetic cosmography). Likewise, all of Lanka was known as *Naga Deepa*, literally 'Dragon's Lamp' or 'Isle of the Naga People' depending upon the context.

Axis Mundi

All of these terms associate the island Lanka with concepts of luminosity and fairness or justice (Dharma), motif which appears over and over in the most diverse surviving accounts, regardless of the agency or ‘source’ of the accounts. Typically, accounts of the island portray it as fulfilling the role of a half-real, half-imaginary or hypothetical *Antipode* or ‘East Pole’ that is simultaneously the far end of the earth and the center or hub around which the world is said to turn in a metaphorical sense.

Hence Lanka has long been identified with the axis *mundi* or ‘World Axis’ that is also the *stambha* or fulcrum of the universe. Literally meaning a prop, support, or pillar, the *stambha* is described as being a shaft of light piercing the upper, lower, and intermediate regions (*triloka*, ‘the three worlds’) and ordering the activity or cyclical turning of the universe (Latin *uni-versus* ‘all in one turn’, hence ‘complete’). For this reason, the *stambha* is also associated with the Supreme Being and traditional concepts of kingship. All these are recurrent elements in the traditional cosmography of Lanka.

Axic and Wheel

No doubt, the island’s reputation as the principal source of such royal trappings as rare jewels, spices, elephants and peacocks has something to do with this association of Lanka with concepts of kingship, and is also a point worth considering. The ideal monarch, further was long reckoned to be the living analog of the *axis mundi*, symbolized by the vertical shaft of the royal scepter (Tamil: *cenkol*) that he (or she) alone is authorized to wield.

Accordingly, the vertical or polar shaft, along with the Dharmacakra or ‘Wheel of Justice’ through whose empty hub the unmoving shaft passes, are both ancient emblems of just kingship. Closely associated with the symbolism of the world axis and wheel is the notion of the *cakravartin* or (‘Wheel Turner’, the Universal Monarch or world conqueror, well-represented in the figure of Alexander the Great and whose weapon of choice, it is said, was the lance.

All of these royal or divine attributes – luminosity, power, firmness, wisdom, justice, kingship and so on – converge, as it were, in the fundamental imagery that has for millennia been employed not only to name the island but also to describe its *svabhava* or natural disposition. This structural convergence of names and attributes coalescing upon a common source or origin is itself an analogue to the solar Dharmacakra image with its multiple converging spokes or rays. The empty hub, saddle, or throne at the center is understood to be the seat of the Person in the Sun whose mysterious life-supporting power acts through the *stambha* or axial shaft upon all living things under the sun.

Storytelling Matrix

In its capacity as a focus or fulcrum for the human imagination right down the ages, Lanka has served faithfully as a kind of matrix for the generation of allegorical tales of wisdom transmitted in the guise of odysseys of mystery and adventure. Over and over, these recurrent themes of disguised majesty, magical kingdoms, and hidden treasure have re-surfaced in fresh versions that reveal the depth of awe and mystery our ancestors felt towards this enchanted isle of Serendib or Lanka.

Firmly convinced this Lanka is not in any sense a flat two-dimensional entity, their accounts are tiered or layered into a surface story for all to enjoy and, simultaneously, progressively deeper allegorical levels that lead the listener closer to the storyteller's own understanding. The resulting descriptions disclose a rich texture and depth that can scarcely be duplicated. Each in their own way, these early explorers discovered in Lanka a cosmographical hierarchy that could only be faithfully portrayed by analogy, by verbally mirroring the entire cosmos as it was seen reflected on earth.

Lemuria

The cosmography of Lanka, then is the story of a 'shining point' in the midst of an ocean at the very end of center of this world of ours. It is a shining lamp or island, Lanka Deepa, situated somewhere sometimes visible and sometimes hidden, such that it is also the fantastic Serendib or Lemuria, the part-real part-imaginary 'East Pole' or Antipode so far removed from our humdrum modern perspective. The hub of the world, it is all this and the site of the mysterious vertical shaft or *axis mundi* as well. Despite its deceptive appearance of inactivity, it is the seat of mysterious divine power.

This cosmographer's Lanka, then, may be seen as an island or lamp of consciousness that is firmly fixed, a pole star of sorts that is also a point of reference called the center of the world. Situated where heaven and earth converge, this point is explained in Lankan oral tradition as being nowhere unless in one's own heart, the living lamp of awareness that is the seat of one's unseen guide through life. It is firmly fixed at the center of the world, here and now, between a non-existent past and an unrealized future. And yet, despite this self-confession, traditional cosmographies nevertheless postulated that an enchanted isle of Lanka or Lemuria does indeed exist somewhere above or below the surface of the earth. Each, according to his or her own fashion, set out to explore the reputed magical kingdom and reaped experiences that chart the land of their dreams.

These paradigms or patterns survive in the form of fables and fabulous adventures that literally come from the Heart. They are the stuff that cosmography or sacred geography is made of, the flights of imagination that map the contours of two worlds, interior and exterior, that are seen to reflect and even shape one another.

East Pole

The original Lanka, according to oriental cosmographers, was far greater than the Lanka on today's world map. Also called Lemuria in some accounts, it was a continent-sized island-kingdom of fabulous wealth, technology and magical sciences. Its capital Lankapuri was situated in the heart of the kingdom at 0° latitude, 0° longitude, i.e. at the center of the world on the equator.

So important was the location of Lanka's capital to ancient cosmographers that they took it as 0° longitude as the Meridian of Lanka, just as we moderns reckon longitude arbitrarily in relation to Greenwich Observatory near London. In other words, geographically speaking, Lanka or Lankapuri at 0 degrees latitude 0 degrees longitude was the center of the world for the ancients, and the Meridian of Lanka – said to pass through the royal observatory of Ujjaini or modern Jaipur – was the reference meridian used by ancient cosmographers and astrologers.

Even in Ptolemy's time and much later also, the conviction persisted that Lanka or Taprobane is much greater than our senses might lead us to believe. Could the ancients have known something that we moderns have forgotten? Fortunately, it has not been forgotten entirely. No doubt, our modern civilization would do well to heed the example of Lemuria or Lanka.

Ravana

Perhaps the best-known legendary Lanka, however, is that of the Ramayana, the epic story of the great solar god Vishnu's descent as Lord Rama to restore order to the world following the havoc and mischief raised in remote antiquity by Ravana, the King of Lanka in those days. So much power centered upon Ravana and Lanka that the gods themselves became incapacitated and had to turn to the high God to beg Him to incorporate Himself on earth and set things straight. The resulting Great War, like that of the Mahabharata, remains etched in human memory even today.

Not surprisingly, local legends of Lanka display a great deal of sympathy for this legendary *bhumiputra* or 'son of the soil' who rose to an extraordinary height before his downfall at the hands of none less than the great God Himself. In fact, far more local legends celebrate places and incidents in the career of Ravana than of Rama, who is meek and colorless in contrast to the robust and more human-like King Ravana. Interestingly, the same oral tradition tells the story of a Patala ('sunken') Lanka where the surface Ravana's powerful elder brother Mayil Ravana ('Peacock Ravana') rests peacefully until entreated by his younger brother to join the fracas on the surface of Lanka.

Island Spirits

Long after Ravana's time, Lanka was still considered to be a mysterious haunt not for humans but for terrific demons (*rakshasas*), mischievous spirits (*Yakshas*) and serpent-

totemists (*nagas*). Even the early Lankans themselves were reckoned by visitors and immigrants alike to partly human in appearance only to mask better their alien character.

Whatever the truth of the matter, the wild spirits of Lanka were never entirely driven out as many would have preferred. Instead, oral tradition records, they were driven underground into caves and shadowy jungle retreats where they still brood to this day, ready to change forms on a moment's notice whenever opportunities for mischief arise. Even today, the vitality of spirit cults associated with particular shrines bears mute testimony to the survival of mysterious living forces whose geographical fixedness in Lanka is their most persistent trait.

Over the centuries, a complex network of shrines dedicated successively or simultaneously to shamanistic, Brahminical, Buddhist, Christian or Islamic principles or powers have survived the transition over centuries to remain as the silent bedrock for almost every faith under the sun. It is this network, matrix or foundation that ancient cosmographers sought to map and describe.

Sinbad the Sailor

Some splendid applications of these cosmographic principles are found in the, great compendium of traditional Arabic storytelling. The *Alf Laylah We Laylah* or 'Thousand and One Nights'. In it, the unanimity (Sanskrit: *mahasammata*) of traditional thought clearly expresses itself for those who hold the metaphorical key to the Kingdom, while those who do not are both entertained, and appreciating. Because of the simplicity, beauty and elegance of its treatment of Lanka or Serendib and because of its usual dismissal at the hands of 'serious' modern people, it is worthwhile here to have a second look at the case of Sinbad the Sailor.

Sinbad, the narrator and protagonist of his own strange and wonderful adventures, is reputed to have been a highly-successful merchant-seafarer during the caliphate of Harun er-Rashid. A native of Baghdad, he once agreed to narrate the story of his life 'so that all might know his strange adventures and conjecture no longer as to the *source of his marvelous wealth*'.

Sinbad proceeds to relate the story of his Seven Marvelous Voyages of profit and adventure of which, he tells us, each one was more marvelous than the one before it. The first five journeys are truly bizarre storybook adventures in mythical lands and oceans teeming with wonders.

But his most wonderful journey of all, Sinbad claims, were those to Serendib, the sixth and seventh voyages. And yet these greatest of marvels, unlike his earlier escapades, together form an entirely plausible scenario of two successive visits to Serendib from Baghdad. For the high point of all the adventures of Sinbad the Sailor was his service and friendship to the King of Serendib, 'whose name and power and learning are known through all the earth'.

Serendib, Sinbad the Sailor informs us, is a kingdom of unrivalled splendor and magnificence. There the day and night are equally divided the whole year round and, when the sun rises, its light bursts suddenly upon the earth. There the fragrance of spices fills the air and rare jewels glitter in the streams of a lofty mountain (i.e. Adam's Peak).

But when Sinbad and his seafaring companions first land in Serendib, they find ‘themselves shipwrecked and hemmed in by impassable mountains. One by one his ship makes die of tropical fever until Sinbad alone remains literally to dig his own grave and wait for the end to come. But Sinbad’s *kismet* or destiny is otherwise. Driven to the brink of madness, he relates how at that very point he discovers a river that he had not seen before, one that comes gushing forth from out of one mountain and into another.

With little to lose but his own life, Sinbad builds a raft for himself and his precious goods. Lashed to the raft, he boldly enters the torrent and is hurtled wildly into the dark mountain depths until he passes out from sheer terror.

When Sinbad awakes, he finds himself still lying upon the raft. But the sun is shining upon him, tropical birds are singing, and there are trees on all sides. He is floating upon a lake and dark-skinned, long-haired inhabitants are gathering on the shore. They speak in a language strange to Sinbad, but one of them steps forward and welcomes him in his native Arabic. He is soon plied with island hospitality and asked to relate his story. Filled with wonder at Sinbad’s adventures, they urge him to meet the King of Serendib and relate such wonders to His Majesty.

Sinbad does encounter the world-renowned monarch, and from his grace and magnificence he knows that he is in the presence of the King of Serendib himself. Marveling at Sinbad’s story, the King addressed him in Arabic, saying “Thou art greatly favored by destiny; wherefore I join my happiness with thine at thy deliverance and safety”. Sinbad further relates that. “The delights of this realm herd me enthralled for a long time, so that I forgot my own country... But, on a day when I ascended the high mountain and looked far out across the sea, I seemed to hear the voice of my own land calling to me. Then, with that far call still in my ears, I went to the King and asked him to let me go. At first he demurred... but when I pressed for his permission, he relented and gave me a large sum of money for my journey, and also many gifts.”

The King’s gifts to Sinbad are fabulous indeed, but most fabulous of all, we are told, is the gift of a jeweled goblet or grail that Sinbad is to deliver to the Caliph of Baghdad together with a message of friendship and goodwill. He returns home to a warm welcome from the Caliph Haru-er-Rashid, who is himself the protagonist of many stories of wisdom and who later dispatches Sinbad back to see the King of Serendib for his seventh and ultimate voyage.

Apart from revealing an actual familiarity with the geographical Lanka or Serendib, the story of Sinbad the Sailor also betrays an intimate knowledge on the storyteller’s part of the principles applicable to Lankan cosmography down the ages. Particularly, the metaphorical dimensions of Sinbad’s meeting and befriending the legendary King of Serendib to become his messenger and ambassador to the Caliph of Baghdad and all the Arab world deserve deep reflection. Like another gem of middle eastern lore, ‘Attar’s poem ‘The Conference of the Birds’, the marvelous journey to meet the King of Paradise is also an allegory mapping the yearning soul’s journey to meet its Lord.

Sinbad the Sailor's fabulous story is of special interest to students of cosmography, for within it he confides to listeners a description not only of what (or who) is to be found in this enchanted Serendib, but more importantly how to arrive there and find it, i.e. 'the source of his marvelous wealth'. He tells, for example, how he had to survive many adventures only to reach the point of despair and certain death before plunging into the magical living waters that would whirl him deep beneath the surface to emerge into an entirely different world of staggering wealth and felicity.

In his fashion, Sinbad's account of Serendib is fully in agreement with the principles employed down the ages by ancient cosmographers to paint an in-depth picture of Lanka. Simultaneously, they sought to describe both the inner and outer journey of adventure and discovery for which this island is so famous the world over.

The same 'shining point' at the center of the outer geographical word was clearly seen to be a functional analogue, and therefore a magical gateway of sorts, to the much greater Lanka hidden within the human heart. That Lanka, still very much alive and reachable, is the real source of marvelous wealth, mystery and majesty.

Islamic Kataragama: The Timeless Shrine

According to Islamic tradition our forefather Adam (alai) first descended to earth in Serendib (modern Sri Lanka) upon Adam's Peak. From the very beginning it seems that Serendib was the nearest of all places on earth to heavenly Paradise. And a great deal of this divine endowment is still preserved in Serendib to this day.

Islamic Kathirkamam is one of the foremost living examples. Its fabulous wealth – still largely untapped – is amply testified by the thousands of Muslim pilgrims who go there annually even from distant places far beyond the shores of blessed Serendib. A simple yet powerful Mosque and Shrine there are intimately associated in quranic and pre-quranic lore with *Hazarat Khizr* (alai)m 'The Green Man', identified with the mysterious servant of Allah and holy teacher of prophet Musa (moses) spoken of in the Holy Quran (*Sura Khalf* 'The Cave'), is believed to be the discoverer of the *M'ul Hayat* or Water of Life.

As the contemporary author m.C.A. Hassan once observed:

In olden days, people held this place in such reverence that a Muslim traversing the wilds in the entire Eastern Province and parts of the Northern Province shuddered to refer to Kataragama by name. If one were to inquire from another as to where he was going the latter's answer often was "to the Khizr region". The surrounding hamlets were listed as places receiving the patronage and blessings of Hazarat Khizr.

A parallel testimony is found in the 1870 report by the Government Agent, Hambantota, Mr. Hudson who certified that:

Mohammadans of the village of Hambantota and the nearby village come in vast numbers to the Kataragama in search of a secret subterranean spring, the waters of which, if drunk are said to endow a person with the blessings of perpetual immortality.

The heart of the ‘Khizr region’ of Serendib, therefore is none other than Kathirkamam of *Khizr-gama* as the place is also known among Sri Lankan Muslims, many of whom, remarkably, claim to have seen the ancient living prophet Hayat Nabi (Arabic: ‘living prophet’) or Khizr himself. To this day, the reputed site of the *Ma’ul Hayat* in Kathirkamam is occupied by an old Islamic house of prayer also known as *Khizr Maqām* or ‘the (spiritual) station of al-Khizr.’

Zikr or Rememberance

Originally a humble wattle-and-daub hut, the ‘Khizr Room’ as it was called was occupied by pious recluses who came to live a life of undisturbed prayer and poverty. They were *faqirs* or ‘impoverished ones’ in the genuine sense of being endowed with the ornament of spiritual poverty. The tradition also survives to this day.

Muslims believe that there are certain times and certain places that yield a rich return to those steadfast ones wisely engaged in profitable undertakings. The holy month of Ramazan, for instance, represents an exceptional opportunity for believers to please Almighty Allah with offerings of prayer, fasting, charity (zakat), and ‘remembrance’ or zikr.

What exactly is it, however, Sufis or Islamic mystics are keen on ‘remembering’? And who indeed is the mysterious figure of al-Khizr that so many claim to have drawn inspiration and blessings from – and even to have met? And what connection has Kathirkamam with a body of lore originating from far beyond the shores of Serendib?

Often associated with the biblical prophet Elijah and St. George the patron saint of England, al-Khizr in the traditions of Islam is identified with an unknown servant of Allah who was blessed by God ‘out of His own knowledge’ (*min ladunni ilma*) with exceptional wisdom and the gift of perpetual life – the Water of Life in other words. Prophet Moses (alai), commanded by God to learn of the higher mysteries from this servant of Allah, found Khizr (alai) ‘at the place where two currents meet and merge into the sea (*majma’ul-bahrain*). Local tradition maintains that the two currents are the visible Menik Ganga or River of Gems and the hidden or underground current of grace (Tamil: *arul*) and wisdom that issues from this site on the left bank of the Menik Ganga – al-khidr’s Fountain of Life.

Even prophet Moses himself, however, could not bear patiently with Khizr’s baffling lessons into the paradoxes of life. With his third failure, Moses was obliged to part company with his strange teacher.

According to the commentator Husain, al-Khizr was a general in the army of Zul Qarnain (Alexander the Great) while some legends maintain that he was Alexander’s cook. Either way, the association of al-Khizr with Iskandar or Alexander the Great has persisted from pre-Islamic times and is amply testified over much of south, central, and western Asia. To this very day, encounters with al-Khidr by pious believers continue to occur, particularly at Khidr-gamam.

In Serendib, for instance, the principal Khizr shrine at Kathirkamam is situated a scant three hundred meters from that of the ancient war god Skanda or Iskandar deified. The two –

Iskandar and Khidr –are said to have come together in search of the Fountain of Life; Khizr (alai) alone discovered and tasted the divine elixir. What Iskandar doggedly sought, Khidr found without seeking, they say.

As recently as the sixteenth century, so many mainland Sufis continued to cross by way of Jaffna en route to Kathirkamam that the Portuguese authorities feared native plot to infiltrate a mufti-clad army in to expel the colonialists. The old Jaffna pilgrimage route, ordered to be sealed off, fell into relative disuse thereafter. Yet many Sufi descendants still carry on the tradition of pilgrimage to Kathirkamam to this day.

Saints

In 1845 Seyed Jabbar Ali Shah came from Bakhara in central Asia to Kathirkamam in response to a divine summons. The saint lived a long life of solitude, prayer, remembrance, and voluntary poverty in Kathirkamam. His mausoleum today is a prominent feature of the sacred premises that are said to contain at least sixty unmarked graves of Muslim pilgrims.

The annual 15-day Kataragama festival in July is a spirited occasion for Muslims no less than others. The colourful festival, dating from antiquity, officially begins only with the *kodiyetrum* or ritual hoisting of an Islamic flag at the mosque, signifying to Muslims the primacy or preeminent position of Islam. Although pious Muslims keep strictly apart from non-Muslim practices, the Kataragama Mosque and Shrine is open to all humble seekers of truth and admits pilgrims of every confession.

Kataragama, it is rightly said, is a place where every pilgrim is respected and people of all religions may mingle openly, sharing freely with others the spiritual food of their respective traditions.

Caption page 103

Above Flag-hoisting ceremony at Kataragama Mosque

Anticipating a growing stream of Muslim pilgrims of Kataragama, the Mosque and Shrine under the evenhanded stewardship of M.H.A. Gaffar of Galle has undertaken an ambitious and well thought-out programme of building restoration and expansion.

Under al-Haj Gaffar's personal direction, the old mosque has been restored and improved to meet the needs of pilgrims while also preserving and protecting the sacred character of the site. A separate Muslim pilgrims' rest house with spacious facilities is also under construction in the New Town with the support of many Muslim donors.

And yet among modern Muslims there are some who declare that it is *shirk* (idolatry) for believers to resort to the shrines of saints, although even the Holy Prophet Muhammad (sal) also did so.

In practice, however, many believers have found that the intercession of Allah's beloved servants – the awliya – yields an astonishing return in the divine grace, wisdom and peace of soul that, in the final reckoning, is the best insurance and the only abiding asset on Judgment Day.

Sri Lanka: Gateway to Other Worlds?

Scientists re-examine legends of Serendib

Ongoing space research shares much in common with recent investigations studying the basis for Lanka's ancient reputation as a gateway between worlds. The implications, researchers say, could be enormous.

This article was written to commemorate Sri Lanka's contribution to worldwide functions making 1992 as the International Space Year.

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“Not only is the universe more complex than we ever thought, it is far more mysterious and magical than we ever believed.” – American physicist Dr. Fred Alan Wolf

Instantaneous transport between worlds, once the stuff of science fiction and long a favorite theme of lore and legend would ever dare to imagine, according to a growing consensus of researchers in the rapidly-emerging field of parallel universe theory. Now scientific interest appears to be focusing upon Sri Lanka's living tradition of cosmography or sacred geography the understanding of which could lead to discoveries that are literally out of this world.

Theoretical physicists, backed by recent findings in the field of radio astronomy, are suggesting that the visible universe as we see it may in fact consist of multiple overlapping universes that are dependently inter-related in some yet unknown way. They point, for instance to recent calculations indicating that nine-tenths of the universe's postulated mass may consist of 'dark matter' that is yet undetected and unaccounted for – a disturbing fact to astrophysicists that is nearly explainable in terms of parallel universe theory.

Not only is the universes more complex than we ever thought. It is far more mysterious and magical and we ever believed,” argues Dr. Fred Alan Wolf, theoretical physicist and author of *Parallel Universes: The Search for Other Worlds*, adding that I now see the universe as a gigantic magical mystery tour, far in excess of the Beatles' verses.

Simplicity

One of the hidden axioms of physics, Dr . Wolf observes, “is that beneath everything lies simplicity. Whatever secrets lie in store for the discoverers of the universe’s law, those secrets will be simple ones.”

Following similar clues researchers in other fields have been turning to Lanka’s living traditions for help in understanding persistent assertions that whole world-systems may arise solely from activities of the mind. Accordingly, many believe that Buddhist ontology may also find a place in the development of parallel universe theory in surprising ways. Traditional and accredited online colleges with courses in philosophy, cultural and theoretical studies may one day benefit from the results of these researchers. Still no one, scientist or yogi, has ventured to predict the shape of things to come, but already some starting implications are beginning to come to light.

Anticipating a day when mankind may be able to peer across into parallel worlds, some researchers have already begun to reckon with the possibility that older forms of intelligent life may have long ago employed elegantly sophisticated means of transport to visit worlds such as our own. Indeed, they say, it is a sobering thought consider that any truly higher intelligence would almost certainly find us long before we could detect it. And yet longstanding oral, written and performative traditions from the world over, including Lanka, suggest that their hunch is correct.

Intelligent life

Not by defying laws of nature but by comprehending them, intelligent life from other worlds may have already had frequent contact with earth without ever resorting to crude mechanical means of transport. Like ancient mariners of earth, truly intelligent beings may have long ago discovered more efficient means of traversing space, if not time as well. Even now a high-stakes scientific race is on not to fly to the moon or Mars, but to explore the universe’s deepest secrets right here on earth.

Long before modern scientist ever dreamed of the existence of gateways between parallel universes, the ancient world already regarded Lanka or Serendib as being the antipodes, a topsy-turvy wonderland inhabited by *nagas*, *yakas* and various other-worldly spirits. Oral traditions still current in Lanka tell of hidden gateways situated islandwide through which *yogis* and *siddhas*, including Lord Buddha and His assembly of *arahats*, could travel to distant places or even to other *lokas* or worlds in the blink of an eye, reputedly through sheer comprehension alone.

Similarly, the *nagas* and other fairytale spirits may someday be understood as intelligent visitors from other *lokas*, exactly as Sri Lankan traditions have long maintained. Even Father Adam of Christian and Islamic tradition is said to have descended from paradise to earth upon Adam’s Peak, a major focal point of sacred power of *shakti* in Lanka to this day.

Lanka’s longstanding reputation as mysterious gateway to other worlds has been testified to in modern times also by the great pioneer of dream-related psychology, Dr. Carl G. Jung. In

Memories, Dreams and Reflections, Jung recorded his own experience of an intensely vivid post-anesthesia dream in which he suddenly found himself floating in space hundreds of miles above the earth's surface. He especially recalled seeing the island of Ceylon directly beneath him like a vast emerald in the shimmering blue Indian Ocean.

Looking upward, Jung beheld a dark temple-like structure which he felt drawn to enter. When he felt that he had passed out of this world and into a higher one of sacred knowledge and superhuman wisdom.

Space Odyssey

Dr. Jung's prophetic dream of a mysterious 'gateway to heaven' and its explicit association with island Lanka may not have been sheer coincidence. By the 1960's other scientific visionaries like Dr. Arthur C. Clarke were developing the same essential theme there in Sri Lanka such that it is clearly identifiable in the science fiction film classic 2001: *A Space Odyssey*. Subsequent writings of Dr. Clarke also suggest that he has drawn ample inspiration from oral traditions that portray Lanka as an ancient spaceport of sorts between parallel worlds.

Even in the 1990's encounters with protean forms of intelligent life are still believed to be fairly common in Sri Lanka, especially among experienced mediators, practicing shamans and other traditional specialists, who insist that such gateways are mind-made but functionally real nonetheless. Their extraordinary claims, while admittedly difficult to verify, fully deserve closer scientific scrutiny and, indeed, already advanced research is being conducted that may settle many questions once and for all.

This often whimsical association of island Serendib or Lanka with the search for intelligent life is perhaps nowhere better exemplified than at the University of California, Berkeley, where astronomers using the world's largest radio telescope to scan the sky for possible signals from deep space are calling their project Serendib (Search for Extraterrestrial Radio Emissions from Nearby Developed Intelligent Population).

Black Holes

Not to be outdone, however, physiologists at nearby Stanford University's sleep research center under Dr. Stephen LaBerge and at other centers around the world have been achieving stunning breakthroughs in the exploration of inner space that may revolutionize space travel in years to come. By employing a common *yogic* practice known as lucid dreaming, they have been monitoring and recording the neuro-motor activity of sleeping human subjects who have learned how to recover full waking consciousness even as dreams are yet in progress. The technique, whereby a dreamer may creatively interact with mind-generated virtual reality, has long been used to explore the subtle dimensions of Lanka's living traditions.

Albert Einstein and Nathan Rosen were the first modern theorists to posit bridges gateways crossing time and space in the vicinity of intense gravitational distortions – possibly even rips in the space-time continuum. Called Einstein-Rosen Bridges, they are suspected of

connecting parallel universes, especially in the vicinity of black holes or gravitational sinkholes that result when a massive star's core has collapsed.

Researchers exploring ways of mapping the contours of present-day Lanka's geographical sites of intense sacred power have been using the black-holes predicted by physicists as analogs to describe these hierophanies. Hierophanies here on the earth's surface may be expected to serve analogous functions as well. Instantaneous transport between *lokas*, for instance, could turn out to be more than mere fairy tales.

Ironically, modern science seems to know more about events in deep space than about equally mysterious hierophanies right here on earth. And yet, by applying findings from fields as diverse as astrophysics and dream psychology, researchers hope to penetrate deeper than ever before into sacred invisible realms governed by wonderfully simple principles.

Mankind, in other words, may today be standing at the threshold of discoveries having the most profound and far reaching consequences.

Buddhist tradition says that Lord Gautama the 'Awakened One' paid three visits to ancient Sri Lanka during his lifetime. Modern scholars have long scoffed at the idea, but remarkable findings by scientific research teams around the world now see a possible basis for such extraordinary visits.

Scientific studies of lucid or yogic dreaming may lead to undreamt-of applications in the communications, entertainment, and travel industries. Yogic dreaming could even help us to save the Earth's living environment and to make other worlds such as Mars suitable for human habitation.

Until the introduction of modern ways of thought during the colonial era, oriental people generally neither questioned nor disputed their own oral traditions. Accounts of Lord Buddha's reputed visits to ancient Lanka and even to other looks or worlds, for instance, were part and parcel of a vast integrated body of inherited lore of which only a little was stored in writing while most by far survived in living succession from generation to generation through a network of thousands of durra communities.

With the rise of a European-minded system of values and education, however, the living oral and per formative traditions of the rural hinterland have come to be regarded as the domain of backward, superstitious villagers who obviously did not know the truth behind their own 'unhistorical legends'. Today's front-line scientific research teams, however, have been taking a fresh look at traditional village lore and they are discovering that there could be far more truth to village traditions than modern folks had ever dared to imagine.

According to local tradition, Lord Buddha came down from North India to visit sixteen sacred sites in ancient Lanka in the course of three visits; modern historians consider the tradition to be a pious fiction. Similarly, Lanka is said to have been inhabited by *devas*, *asuras*, *yakshas*, *nagas* and kindred other-worldly spirits long before humanity arrived on the scene and man, such as the Kataragama God or spirit, still live here according to popular

belief. Even today, reports still surface purporting to tell of visits to other worlds or other-worldly beings visiting Sri Lanka.

Did Lord Buddha actually visit ancient Lanka? Longstanding tradition throughout the Buddhist world insists that he did indeed come here. Not, however, by boat or by flying machine, say Buddhists, but by virtue of the Buddha's all-encompassing comprehension of reality manifesting to observers as *iddhis* or marvelous powers. Modern scholars, however, have found no concrete evidence, like inscriptions, to support this view and historians insist that the historical Buddha never left North India during his lifetime.

Now it appears that historians and other modern skeptics may have been barking up the wrong tree. Scientific research teams working in a variety of fields have lately been turning their attention to indigenous wisdom traditions that had been in partial eclipse for centuries and the discoveries they are making are often astonishing. The reputed marvelous abilities of ancient seers and sages, these scientists now believe, may represent only the tip of the iceberg of yet-unfathomed powers that may someday be harnessed once again to transform today's troubled world even beyond recognition.

For several years now, scientists at the Stanford University Sleep Laboratory and at other dream research laboratories in America and Europe have been studying and experiencing for themselves states of consciousness that have long been familiar to Oriental practitioners of 'dream yoga' as it is broadly understood among its exponents. Oriental wisdom traditions typically liken our working world to a vast dream from which very few awaken within the short span of one dream-life. But for those who do wake up within the dream – like Lord Buddha among others – life and death hold no terror and the very universe itself seems to bend as if in obeisance to them.

The case of Lord Buddha is characteristic, if not typical. When first asked to account for his divine composure and luminous presence, the sage of the Sakya clan explained that he was *samma sambuddha*, which in plain English means 'One who is completely, perfectly awake'. That is to say, he had fully woken up from our great collective dream of *samsara*, the repetitive 'sorry-go-round' of imagined material existence, even as the dream was still in progress for others around him. Thus, he was not 'enlightened' from above as early Western scholars mistranslated the word, but awakened from within. And this self-description, it seems, was not a mere teaching device or metaphor but the precise and self-consistent account of a genuine scientist's successful research conducted upon himself.

Canonical Buddhist tradition also records that, employing but a few of the *iddhis* or marvelous powers that arose as a result of Lord Buddha's awakening from the dream that others call 'reality', he visited other worlds including the lofty *Tushita* heaven where he paid his respects to his deceased mother. It is still widely accepted among Buddhists that Awakened One, because of his self-mastery and all-embracing comprehension, was capable of visiting any corner of the myriad universe without even leaving his seat. Needless to say, this included ancient Lanka and other places on earth, too.

Constrained by modern beliefs and expectations about what is humanly possible and what is not, however, Westerners and modern-educated Orientals have been unprepared to accept accounts that do not conform to their own assumptions and patterns of thinking. Hence, they typically highlight and approve selected passages in books that seem to resemble and confirm Western schools of thought, while summarily dismissing as ‘fantasies’ the *Jataka* stories and accounts of Lord Buddha’ reputed visits to Lanka, let alone to other worlds.

Thus, even in canonical passages where the Buddha likens this world to a dream, a bubble, or a magical show, scholars conditioned by modern education can concede only a poetic or metaphorical sense to the Buddha’s words. But now modern science itself is probing deeper than ever before into human consciousness and already its discoveries are already its discoveries are posing challenges to deeply-held modern assumptions concerning next to everything under the sun.

Specifically, psycho-physiologists at major universities in Europe and America have been making breathtaking advances in the field of dream research in the past two decades, especially with regard to lucid dreaming, whereby dreamers regain walking consciousness even as normal dreams are still in progress. Lucid dreamers, in addition to flying, breathing underwater, and passing through ‘solid’ objects, have also shown themselves capable of undertaking pre-arranged research experiments within their lucid dreams, very much as the *siddhas*, saints, and dream masters of oriental lore are reported to have done from remote prehistory right up to modern times.

Lucid Dreaming

Psycho-physiologist Dr. Stephen LaBerge of Stanford University, USA is a world-renowned pioneer in lucid dream research. He describes lucidity in terms of three sets of attitudes:

“During non-lucid dreaming,” he says, “you tacitly assume that you are awake; during lucid dreaming, you know that you are asleep and dreaming.”

“A related pair of attitudes would be the tendency, while non-lucid, to assume passively that the events of a dream are ‘just happening to you’, versus your realization, while lucid, that you are actively creating, or at least significantly contributing to, what happens in your dream.’

The close affinity of such findings to standard Buddhist theory and practice has not escaped the notice of Dr. LaBerge and other researchers. This has led them to study the dreaming techniques not only of Buddhists but also of Sufi dream masters and indigenous schools of dream yoga that still survive in places like Sri Lanka. Taking full advantage of indigenous wisdom traditions, Western researchers have made brilliant advances in a very short time and now appear poised to overtake their Oriental counterparts in a crucial field that was long the uncontested domain of Oriental masters.

Not only have lucid dream researchers gained valuable experience in learning how to visit distant places in the blink of an eye, but there is mounting evidence for the validity of mutual or shared dreams in which two or more dreamers meet in the same dream environment. This

hallowed dream technique, whereby Sufi dream masters still continue to convey teachings and instructions to their murders or disciples to this day, may also be related to accounts of marvelous but unhistorical full-moon assemblies of the Buddha with his company of accomplished *arhats*, *devas* *gandharas* and other exceptional beings, including deputed assemblies in ancient Lanka.

Not too surprisingly, traditions of dream yoga – including dream-exploration of sacred localities – are still preserved and practiced at places like Kataragama that are associated with marvelous visits of meditation masters including Lord Buddha. Experienced dream researchers in Sri Lanka affirm, for instance, that a subtler, interior Kataragama exists in a subtle world parallel to our own and that events in that world presage events in our own world. The same living tradition, in fact, maintains that our planet Earth and everything upon the face of it, has been created and sustained by dream activity, very much as Australian aboriginal peoples preserve their memory of the *Dreamtime*, when powerful ancestor-spirits shaped the landscape itself.

If indeed there is also truth in these pervasive indigenous traditions that associate lucid or yogic dreaming with the process of designing wholesome, fertile living environments and actually creating them in some sense, then this knowledge could have literally undreamt-of possibilities and practical applications, especially in restoring the ecological balance here on Earth and perhaps on other worlds as well. No less a distinguished scientist and visionary than Dr. Arthur C. Clarke of Sri Lanka – formed a planet Mars to make it into a garden world for human settlement.

Another celebrated British scientist who saw vast potential applications for Sri Lanka’s indigenous traditions of environmental management was Dr. David Bellamy. A distinguished botanist, ‘green’ activist and television celebrity in his own right, Dr. Bellamy and research associates have been exploring and documenting on film a great deal of evidence that, analyses from a number of perspectives, tends to support the validity of living oral tradition. Dr. Bellamy and associates over a three-year period have assembled a six-episode documentary series filmed entirely in Sri Lanka entitled *Routes of Wisdom* for international release.

“Incredible as it may sound to modern ears,” said Dr. Bellamy while on location in the Wannu region of the island decently, “there is ample evidence to suggest that a science existed here that gave Lankans the ability to maximize the island’s fertilized by ensuring regular rainfall for instance.”

“Lanka’s ancient kings also had their environmental ministers, or wizards properly speaking, and together the kingdoms recreated Paradise upon Earth, it seems. Each village was virtually a world in itself, and dither whole of Lanka consisted of 24,000 of these parallel worlds, one may say.”

Were ancient seers and sages like Lord Buddha really capable of coming and going by instantaneous, non-physical means? Certain occasions, like the full moon, and certain powerful places, like Adam’s Peak or Kataragama, are still believed to provide favourable

‘windows of opportunity’ for subtle information-gathering and even for passage to parallel worlds. Lord Buddha’s visits to ancient Lanka, for example, are associated with the full moon of *Duruthu* (January).

Sri Lanka’s Indigenous Wanniya-laeto: A Case History

Sri Lanka’s indigenous inhabitants, the Veddas or Wanniya-laeto (‘forest-dwellers’) as they call themselves, preserve a direct line of descent from the island’s original Neolithic community dating from at least 14,000 BC and probably far earlier according to current scientific opinion. Even today, the surviving Wanniya-laeto community retains much of its own distinctive cyclic worldview, prehistoric cultural memory, and time-tested knowledge of their semi-evergreen dry monsoon forest habitat that has enabled their ancestor-revering culture to meet the diverse challenges to their collective identity and survival. With the impending extinction of Wanniya-laeto culture, however, Sri Lanka and the world stand to lose a rich body of indigenous lore and living ecological wisdom that is urgently needed for the sustainable future of the rest of mankind.

Historically, for the past twenty-five centuries or more Sri Lanka’s indigenous community has been buffeted by successive waves of immigration and colonization that began with the arrival of the Sinhalese from North India in the 5th century BC. Consequently, the Wanniya-laeto have repeatedly been forced to choose between two alternative survival strategies: either to be assimilated into other cultures or to retreat ever further into a shrinking forest habitat. In the course of history, uncounted thousands of these original inhabitants of the *wanni* (dry monsoon forest) have been more or less absorbed into mainstream Sinhala society (as in the North Central and Uva Provinces) or Tamil society (as on the East Coast). Today only a few remaining Wanniya-laeto still manage to preserve their cultural identity and traditional lifestyle despite relentless pressure from the surrounding dominant communities.

While the shy, retiring nature of the Wanniya-laeto has served to insulate them from the contaminating effects of contact with mainstream society, it has also effectively precluded their fair and adequate representation in the democratic decision-making process. Whenever a conflict of interests has arisen between the nomadic hunter-gatherer Wanniya-laeto community and the far larger dominant community of settled agriculturists and traders, the dominant community has invariably ignored the interests of the Wanniya-laeto.

Early Sinhala immigrants from North India were of the opinion that the forest-dwelling aboriginal were not human beings at all but wild jungle spirits (*yakas*) who were human in outward guise only. Such negative, stereotyped attitudes towards the island’s indigenous people persists up to the present day even in educated circles and has been a major stumbling block to the recognition of Wanniya-laeto self-respect, dignity, human rights, and cultural uniqueness. Hence, the Wanniya-laeto are widely *assumed* to be a backward, gullible people whose point of view may be conveniently ignored.

The vulnerable position of the Wanniya-laeto *vis-à-vis* mainstream society may be said to stem from two principal causes. One is that they have never received secure land tenure that recognizes their collective custodianship over traditional hunting and gathering ranges. The other reason is that they have never been consulted or represented in the decision-making process that affects their daily lives. Given the secure right to manage their traditional habitat according to their ways and given a voice to represent their collective aspirations within the framework of society at large, the Wanniya-laeto are more than capable of preserving both their endangered forest habitat and their ancestral culture for the benefit of all.

The Wanniya-laeto themselves operate within a radically different conceptual framework from that of the local administrators who wield power over Wanniya-laeto land and interests. For instance, the Wanniya-laeto do not entertain modern notion of real estate belonging to individuals, but believe that they and their ancestor-spirits belong to the forests of the Wanni which they inhabit and protect. Likewise, the concept of acreage is strange to them since they recognize only natural landmarks like hills, rivers, and villages. As a consequence of such cultural differences, the Wanniya-laeto have been repeatedly swindled out of their ancestral heritage by contrary interests anxious to seize control over Wanniya-laeto lands and forest resources. Such encroachment and economic exploitation has noticeably accelerated in the post-Independence era.

Similarly, modern observers have typically been blind to the basic facts about indigenous culture. For instance, Wanniyala-laeto social structure is a *matrilineal* exogamous clan organization based on *female* line of descent. In simple terms, the Wanniyala-laeto are a forest people who trace their ancestry through their *mother's* line back to their mother-ancestor, the *yaka*-princess *Kuveni*.

This self-identification of the Wanniyala-laeto differs radically from the definition of a 'Vedda' ('hunter') that was imposed upon them from outside with far-reaching social consequences. Hence, to colonial census-takers and other outsiders, a 'Vedda' was a primitive human-type of wild disheveled appearance, uncouth language and appearance, who resides in caves or wanders in the jungle, and who subsists by primitive means such as hunting with bow and arrows.

Thus, by these misleading criteria, the 'Veddahs' (a term never used by the Wanniyala-laeto themselves) were doomed to disappear in the course of time. Indeed, according to census records the Veddah population actually fell from 4,510 in 1921 to 2,361 in 1946 while since 1963 no separate count has been made, although a 1978 study identified six thousand Veddahs in the Anuradhapura district alone.

This failure to recognize the Wanniyala-laeto people's own criteria of self-identification. Whether intentional or not, it has effectively accelerated their disappearance as a distinct culture and denied them representation in the democratic decision-making process.

As a result of pervasive social discrimination directed against the Wanniyala-laeto, many of their people have adopted a survival strategy that includes taking Sinhala or Tamil names for themselves and their children, adopting the prevalent language, diet, dress, and lifestyle

patterns and becoming, nominally at least, Buddhist or Hindu converts. And yet, because their matrilineal ancestry goes unnoticed and unrecognized by the dominant patrilineal society at large, the Wanniyala-laeto have been able to preserve their social cohesion and cultural self-identification even while immersed within the outward trappings of cultures very much unlike their own.

A field study conducted in 1992 by a specialist in indigenous development policy from the International Labour Organisation succinctly summarized the plight of the Veddhas (Wanniyala-laeto) with respect to current development policy in Sri Lanka: According to the existing studies, the majority of the resettled Veddhas are economically backward, socially isolated, and politically marginalized. The Veddhas did not have the skills, means and knowledge needed to either adjust to the new situation (no knowledge of capital accumulation or savings, no familiarity with the monetary system of exchange, no long-term involvement in agriculture as a livelihood, lack of incentive for competitive tasks, etc.), or to cope with the other non-Veddha settlers. As a result, they are being exploited by the other settlers who have control over the local political institutions and economic opportunities; in several cases attempts to get the Veddhas used to seasonal paddy cultivation have failed, thus worsening severely their livelihood since they do not resort any longer to hunting or food gathering. It has been pointed out that tribal peoples have suffered from depression and loss of confidence as a consequence of factors such as loss of land, loss of freedom of the forest and disappearance of ritual hunts as the causes of their demoralization. The situation has not changed substantially even after national authorities recognized the Veddhas' desire to preserve their cults and customs and to be resettled in close proximity to their traditional lands.

The same study traces the wholesale disruption brought upon Wanniya-laeto culture due to 20th-century development activities:

The drastic changes in the number, distribution and social organization of the Veddhas started in the 1930s and 1940s when large irrigation and colonization schemes in the Polonnaruwa and Mahiyangana regions were launched. These projects brought a massive influx of Sinhalese and Tamil colonists and a reduction of the forestland that was homeland to the Veddhas. In the '950s when the Gal Oya scheme was completed, access of the Veddhas to their ancestral lands and their means of livelihood were eroded even more drastically.

The Sri Lanka government's concern for its indigenous people dates back to the early 1950s when a Veddha Welfare Committee was created as part of a Backward Communities Development Board. During this period, the prevalent philosophy of development regarded the disappearance of indigenous and tribal peoples as district societies as an irreversible and desirable process. Seen as backward and irrational, they were regarded as obstacles to national development and growth. Needless to say, such indigenous and tribal peoples as the Wanniya-laeto were not consulted for their views on the subject.

In recent years, however, the way of viewing the relationship between culture and development has undergone changes. Even during the 1960s and 70s, culture was considered to be irrelevant to the development process and much of the blame for failed development projects was attributed to resistance to modernization from affected traditional communities. Later, culture came to be regarded as inviolable and, as such, development was to be discouraged and enforced isolation was advocated. But this strategy also is inadequate to enable endangered cultures to cope with social change.

More recently, culture has come to be regarded both as a goal and as a framework within which to promote other development goals. This means that it is up to the affected people to decide how and to what extent to retain their cultural values and ways of life, and that any development initiative should bear these values in mind. Like all societies, indigenous cultures are subject to change, too.

Accelerated Development

In 1977 the accelerated Mahaweli Development scheme was launched, under which vast tracts of traditional Wanniya-laeto hunting lands were alienated for the proposed benefit of other communities. As usual, the offering of equitable compensation to the region's displaced indigenous inhabitants was not even considered. Every major decision was taken either in far-off Colombo or in distant foreign capitals without consulting the region's indigenous people.

Under the accelerated Mahaweli Development scheme, vast extents of forestland have been logged and inundated or earmarked for colonization. One last Wanniya-laetohunting domain remained upon 145,450 acres of forest between the western chain of reservoirs and the Maduru Oya irrigation dam, but this too was on November 9th, 1983, declared to be the Maduru Oya, National Park. It was intended as a habitat for displaced wildlife and as a protected catchment area. But under the terms of the Fauna and Flora Ordinance, "No person shall be entitled to enter any National Park, except for the purpose of observing the fauna and flora therein", and "no animal shall be hunted, killed and taken and no plant shall be damaged, collected, or destroyed in a national Park." Entry can be allowed only under "the authority and in accordance with the conditions of a permit issued by the prescribed officer on payment of the prescribed fee", and only to allow the permit-holder to observe fauna and flora.

Consequently, the Wanniya-laeto, who had been occupational hunter – gatherers and custodians of the forest for uncounted millennia, were transformed overnight into game poachers and trespassers. Barriers, guards, and outposts were stationed along the park's demarcated borders and the hapless Wanniya-laeto were evacuated to "rehabilitation" villages in Systems C and B of the accelerated Mahaweli Development Scheme where they were to become rice cultivators. As one translocated Wanniya-laeto leader later observed,

“The government took away our hunting tools and gave us mammoties to dig our own graves.”

The old Wanniya-laeto chieftain Uru Warige Tissahami (popularly known as Tissahamy) and his kinsfolk of Kotabakinni, however, refused to be evicted from the land of their ancestors. Officials considered him to be very obstinate and stubborn, for he would not budge an inch no matter how many emissaries came to “talk sense’ to him. Finally the government had to concede that these seven families could remain as long as the old man lives. However, according to the 1987 master plan for Maduru Oya National park, the day that aged chef Tissahamy expires. The rest his kinsfolk will have to evacuate the hamlet immediately. Knowing this, Tissahamy even refused to die (note: Tissahamy family died in June 1999 at the age of 96).

Wanniya-laeto leaders allege that since 1974 they have listened to official assurances that a sanctuary of 1,800-acre extent will be created for them to pursue their traditional way of life. Successive governments have repeated this pledge, but to date still no government has implemented its pledge. Even this modest figure (amounting to only one percent of the park’s area) was originally cited not as a sanctuary for all affected Wanniya-laeto, but only as a buffer zone to prohibit commercial logging activities around Tissahamy’s hamlet of Kotabakinni only.

In fact, the other affected hamlets cannot possibly be included in a sanctuary of this size, which is sufficient to sustain a few families by their traditional means of livelihood. But the 1800-acres figure has remained to be seized upon by officials and even, years later, by Tissahamy’s attorney, resulting in further tensions and misunderstandings.

However disadvantaged the island’s indigenous forest-dwellers may appear to be in the eyes of modern-educated observers, nevertheless their sense of honour, justice, and fair play is very keen. Despite centuries of injustice and exploitation by economic predators from outside communities, even to this day the Wanniyalaeto people remain so gentle and patient towards younger cultures that, although they are proficient hunters, they have never been known to raise a weapon in anger, to commit theft or fraud out of greed, or even to raise their voice toward outsiders, let alone to speak any untruth for personal gain. Indeed, these are precisely the elements of their cultural heritage that the Wanniyalaeto are most anxious to preserve for future generations. Colonised Wanniyalaeto are deeply dismayed by the corruption of their culture caused by forced assimilation into a modern society which they regard, justifiably, with utter contempt.

Human Rights

In the absence of any provision for direct representation of indigenous interests in official decision-making, the Wanniyalaeto have explored other potential avenues to achieve justice, including a court system that is completely alien to their own tradition of justice. Going still further, chief Tissahami and other Wanniyalaeto leaders have been granted sympathetic hearings by Presidents Jayewardene and Premadasa respectively and by other high-ranking officials who have promised to rectify injustices, but resistance to change within the

government bureaucracy has effectively stifled every high-level initiative designed to respect Wanniyalaeto aspirations.

Over the years, scientific interest in the millennia-old Wanniyalaeto culture has helped to bring their plight to international notice. In particular, one Swedish cultural anthropologist, Dr. Wiveca Stegeborn, has been closely associated with the Wanniyalaeto community of Dambana since 1977, even to the extent of learning their language and living among them as one of their people. With her professional training and close familiarity with the kinds of problems that the Wanniyalaeto have faced in recent years, Dr. Stegeborn has played an invaluable, if little-appreciated, role in garnering international sympathy and support for the Wanniyalaeto community.

With Dr. Stegeborn serving as their intermediary and patron, the Wanniyalaeto were invited to come to Geneva in 1985 to submit testimony before the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations Commission on Human Rights, Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities. But the three Wanniyalaeto delegates were unable to attend because officials of the Sri Lanka Government's Department of Immigration and Emigration refused to issue passports to them. One of the reasons offered for the refusal of passports was that the Wanniyalaeto were "not real Sri Lankans". Subsequently, Dr. Stegeborn was declared *persona non grata*, further obstructing efforts to redress social injustice.

Wanniyalaeto people say that they are still prohibited from pursuing their ancestral livelihood and face harassment or arrest by wildlife officials if they are caught 'trespassing' outside of their tiny enclaves. Tribal leaders accuse the armed forest officers of intimidation and allege that only recently the same officers were responsible for the shooting deaths of three Wanniyalaeto clansmen. To date, however, no investigation of the incident has been made.

Wanniyalaeto Sanctuary

On June 16th, 1990, President Premadasa and other high-level officials met in Kandy with a delegation of Wanniyalaeto leaders including chief Tissahamy to discuss longstanding grievances and measures required to address these grievances. Following the meeting, President Premadasa ordered prompt steps to be taken to reverse years of official injustice towards the indigenous community. Three days later, the President's Minister for Lands, Irrigation and Mahaweli Development, Mr. P. Dayaratna, recommended and later received Cabinet approval for the following twofold course of action:

- (i) Demarcate an area of approximately 1500 acres (covering Kotabakiniya, Keragoda, Buluganhadena and Kandeganwila villages), from the area gazetted as the Mduru Oya National Park, and declare this area as a Sanctuary under the Fauna and Flora Protection Ordinance.
- (ii) Take specific measures to protect and nurture 'Veddha Wanniyalaeto' culture and establish a Trust or a Board for this purpose under the chairmanship of the Director of Wildlife Conservation with representation from the Ministry of

Cultural Affairs and other relevant state agencies and non-governmental organizations.

Under the Fauna and Flora Protection Ordinance, all traditional Wanniyalaeto occupations including hunting, honey-gathering and chena cultivation are prohibited within national parks, but ‘limited human activities’ are permitted within other areas defined as ‘sanctuaries’. However, the four aforementioned Wanniyalaeto hamlets cannot be encompassed with 1500 acres only, nor can 1500 acres sustain more than a few families living by hunting and gathering supplemented by shifting cultivation. Moreover, no provision is included to accommodate families of evacuees who wish to return to their former habitat.

A Multi-faceted God

In the dry jungle of remote southeastern Sri Lanka lies Kataragama or *Katir-Kamam*, the (place of) ‘light and love-passion’, a shrine complex of exceptional antiquity and sanctity that attracts many thousands of Buddhist, Hindu and even Muslim devotees year round, particularly during the fortnight-long Aesala festival in July-August, when a small casket believed to contain the secret of the god’s birth-day, the god himself – is taken out in solemn yet joyful torchlit procession nightly, escorted by his women-votaries and troupes of riotous dancers representing the animal, human, chthonic and heavenly spheres. An archaic spirit of paradox, fertility, rejuvenation and play, the Kataragama God also preserves an essential soteriological dimension as the Divine Psychopomp who guides his followers beyond the Portals of Death into an unconditional realm of freedom from the tyranny of the pairs of opposites (Sanskrit: *dvandva*).

A host of local indigenous, Sinhalese, Tamil and Islamic legends purport to explain the origin, character and exploits of the Kataragama god, whose reputation for scared or mysterious power extends far beyond his immediate forest domain. Broadly speaking, scholars and cult-adherents alike identify him with the ever popular Tamil hill god *Murukan* (‘Tender One’), who arose before the dawn of history and has long been considered as the Dravidian counterpart or expression of the pan-Indian wargod *Skanda-Kumara*, ‘son’ of the great mountain-dwelling god Shiva. Skanda, tutelary god of warriors, kings, yogis and scholars and (as *Guha*, ‘The Hidden’) patron of all secret knowledge and covert activities, once quit his home on Mount Kailasa in the trans-Himalaya and, according to various traditions, made his way south in a series of exploits culminating at Kataragama with his secretive courtship and marriage to the indigenous Vedda maiden Valli, which is the theme and substance of the *Aesala* mystery rites. Local tradition insists that Skanda-Murukan has remained in Kataragama ever since, ruling unseen over his domain as Kali Yuga Varada, the boon-granting divinity *par excellence* of the Kali Yuga, the recurrent cosmic era of tumult and quarrel – our own present-day world.

Due to its isolation on the social and geographical margin of Sri Lankan society, Kataragama has long been insulated from the mainstream of religious change affecting Sri Lanka and South India. As Heinz Bechert has firmly established, this has enabled Kataragama to preserve archaic institutions attested in the ancient literature that have long since died out

elsewhere in the subcontinent, such as the persistent tradition of the Four Guardian Deities common to Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka who have always included a war-like ‘Red God’ (Tamil: *Ceylon*) identified with Murukan and *Kataragama Deviyo* respectively. From what has been said here and from what follows, it is hardly surprising that informed Western observers should readily identify Skanda-Murukan with Dionysus or Bacchus, the ancient Eurasian god of paradox, fertility, drama, epiphany and the dissolution of boundaries. Alain Danielou draws attention to the close similarities between the two deities and concludes that the ‘Indian Bacchus’ of the Greeks was none other than Skanda. Cultural anthropologist *Agehananda Bharati* earlier made the specific observation that Kataragama Skanda is a “Dionysian god”.

Fred W. Clothy, in his landmark study *The Many Faces Murukan*, cautiously endorses the possibility of a common origin of the ecstatic cults of Dionysus and Murukan in the megalithic culture of the Anatolian plateau and western Iran of ca. 1500 BC.⁴ Apart from these, however, no study has ever probed beneath Kataragama’s teeming surface to uncover supporting evidence to associate the surviving cult of Skanda-Murukan in Sri Lanka with the cult of Dionysus which flourished in Western Asia and the Mediterranean world from remote antiquity until the third century AD, when it was forcefully suppressed by Rome.

In this study, I propose to demonstrate, using structural and thematic analysis as well as historical evidence and my own field observations, how Kataragama actually embodies the survival into the twenty-first century of one of humanity’s most archaic religious traditions long considered to be extinct – the initiatic mystery religion. Astonishing as this conclusion may appear to scholars, there are ample grounds for such an identification, which may be said to be inherent in the very structure of Kataragama itself. As such, Kataragama represents an extraordinary paradigm spanning both archaic and modern worldviews and over two thousand years of human history. How could such a remarkable phenomenon pass unnoticed by millions of pilgrim-observers and generations of scholars and what implications may follow for our understanding of ancient and modern cultures the world over? This study, although not exhaustive, presents an overview of the evidence and an outline of the reasoning behind this hypothesis.

A Parallel Study: The Cult of Pattaini

In his penetrating study of the goddess Pattini in Sri Lanka – where her cult survives alongside that of Kataragama – anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere has observed a similar nexus of correspondences between the cult of Pattini and the mystery cults of popular mother-goddesses current in West Asia and the Mediterranean world from the earliest historical period until the sixth century AD. “Initially,” he concedes. “I attributed the parallelism to similar socio cultural and psychological conditions... Yet, after fieldwork and historical research in Kerala in 1974, I was convinced that the Pattini cult diffused to Kerala (and other parts of South India) from West Asia.”⁵

Commercial contact between West Asia and India, as Obeyesekera found, had been brisk until the sixth century AD. Strabo (AD 20) attests that upwards of 120 ships each year sailed to

India from Myos Hormos on the Red Sea.⁶ And with the discovery in AD 45 by a Greek mariner, Hippolus, of the pattern of the monsoon winds, which enabled ships to leave Ocelis near Aden and reach the west coast of South India in forty days, trade increased dramatically. As Obeyesekere observes:

However, most of the foreign trade to Malabar and South India during this period was dominated by Alexandria, the great entrepot of trade in the Greco-Roman world (Woodcock 1966, p. 141) Along with trade, the merchants brought their own religions.... Syrians, Jews and Greeks – most of them from Alexandria and other parts of the Levant – were influential in Kerala trade during the first through sixth centuries at least. Some of them must obviously have adopted the mother-goddess cults that spread from Anatolia, Lydia (Asia Minor), Phrygia, Egypt and Syria into the Greco-Roman world from about 500 B.C.

Obeyesekere argues that “it would indeed be surprising if the Alexandrian and West Asian merchants did not bring with them the more popular religions of the time – the cults of the various mother goddesses and the dead god.” He cites accepted facts from the later history of South India and Sri Lanka to support his hypothesis that the cult of *Pattini* – originally an ecstatic mystery cult of the mother-goddess of West Asia – migrated via Kerala to southern Sri Lanka by the twelfth century. At the same time, he cautiously concedes that the evidence for his hypothesis of the West Asian origin of the *Pattini* cult “must remain tentative and circumstantial.” This same proviso must apply to the present study as well.

The popular religions among Alexandrian and West Asian merchants of their day most assuredly included the cult of Dionysus or Bacchus as well. Oral traditions as well as archaeological evidence and the testimony of the *Mahavamsa* or Great Chronicle suggest that Kataragama had a long history as a center of cult activity even before the Christian era. It is also worth noting that both gods are depicted as appearing from over the sea. According to Sinhalese legends, God Kataragama came to Lanka as a foreigner who arrived by a stone raft (Sinhala: *gal-poruwa*), landed on the island’s southern coast and thence walked to Kataragama where he has remained ever since. This suggests that a maritime origin or formative influence – possibly from Alexandria or West Asia via Kerala – cannot be ruled out. And yet, the cult’s geographical fixedness in Kataragama is one of its most persistent traits and points to an indigenous origin in remote antiquity, quite likely among the Neolithic hunter-gatherer forbears of the island’s Vedda forest-dwelling people.

Ptolemy’s map of Taprobane

This brings us to a remarkable source of evidence which, combined with the preceding observations, it suggests that Alexandrian navigators of the early Christian era were very well acquainted with the ancient Kataragama shrine and fully recognized its close affinities to the surviving cult of Dionysus of their own Mediterranean cultural sphere. The precise nature of this contact and the extent of its impact upon either cults must remain a matter for speculation and further historical research.

Claudius Ptolemaeus (2nd century AD), or Ptolemy of Alexandria as he is best known, was a Greco-Egyptian astronomer, mathematician and geographer whose influence upon all three

disciplines endured for many centuries. Remembered to this day as the ‘Father of Modern Geography’, Ptolemy laid out a coordinate system of meridians of latitude and longitude and employed it to chart the surface of the then-known world with such accuracy that his maps remained in use until the eighteenth century. Living in Alexandria when that city was the Roman Empire’s foremost center of commerce and perhaps the world’s leading center of scientific and esoteric or theological studies, Ptolemy would have been well acquainted with the manor mystery schools of his day, including the cult of Dionysus and their practices if, indeed, Ptolemy was not an initiate himself.

As a resident of second-century Alexandria, Ptolemy was also well-positioned to encounter and de-brief his principal informants, the adventurous and enterprising mariners of Alexandria who regularly ventured as far as the fabled island of Taprobane (*Lanka*) and beyond, navigating the high seas using newly-improved astrolabes and quadrants. For these navigators, the success or failure of a long and risky commercial voyage depended upon accurate and reliable geographic information. Returning fresh from lucrative voyage to obtain the island’s rare spices, pearls, gems and silks of her great emporia or trade centers, they could accurately describe the location and character of coastal landmarks from first-hand experience as well as from current maritime lore.

Indeed, Ptolemy provides at least three references to Dionysus in his catalog of island Lanka’s coastal landmarks – all of them in the close vicinity of Kataragama, which was already an ancient cult center in Ptolemy’s day. In most cases, he retains transcribed renderings of local names. But off the island’s desolate southeastern coast, Ptolemy records that the waters were known to Alexandrian mariners as *Dionysi Mare* (Latin: ‘The Sea of Dionysus’). Some versions of Ptolemy’s Taprobane indicate a coastal landmark near Kataragama called *Dionysi Promontorium* - ‘The Promontory of Dinoyesus’. Thirdly, but not least, he attests that there was an important settlement near this coast which his mariner-informants called *Dionysi seu Bacchi Oppidum* – ‘The Town of Dionysus of Bacchus’.

This terse identification, based upon the supporting testimony of not one but many Alexandrian mariners who typically sojourned for weeks of months at a time in Taprobane, bears the stamp of authenticity. As informed observers, some of these mariners must have been *bacchantes* or initiates into the still-flourishing mystery cult of Bacchus, for whom the fundamental identification of Dionysus with the local cult center or deity was self-evident. At the very least, there was a clear consensus among contemporary observers that here, far from Greece and Asia Minor, was an outpost-realm of god Dionysus extending even to the sea off Kataragama, a graveyard of wrecked trading vessels from ancient times.

Moreover, this association of an ever-youthful Dionysian god with a promontory extending into a restless sea is not without precedent. In the very opening verse of his *Hymns to Dionysus* (1. 1-4), Homer evokes the god, saying “It is Dionysus, son of the most glorious Semele, that I speak and I shall tell how *he appeared on the shore of the untiring sea, on an outmost promontory with the aspect of a young man in his first adolescence*” . It is tempting to conclude that early Greco-Egyptian mariners, who were familiar both with the cult of Dionysus and with Homer’s *Hymns to Dionysus*, had this opening verse in mind when they

spoke of the Kataragama region. Evidently, Alexandrian mariners – and Ptolemy along with them – believed there in exotic Taprobane was the original home of Dionysus described by Homer a thousand years earlier in the ninth century BC. This identification would have further reinforced the prevailing opinion of the time: that Lanka or Taprobane was the *Antipodes* (Greek: literally, ‘where feet are opposite’), a fabulous, topsy-turvy island realm where anything was possible – the natural abode of gods like Dionysus. Remarkably, this simple attestation by one of classical antiquity’s great scientists has attracted scant notice among scholars of the modern era. Apparently, what was once obvious to the ancients is no longer evident to modern observers. In the remainder of this study.

How did Alexandrian mariners come to identify the Kataragama God with their own Dionysus? In classical times, such identifications were accepted as natural. Caesar, for instance, assigned Roman names to non-Roman deities when he wrote of the Gaulish Celts: ‘Of all the gods they worship Mercury (i.e. Hermes) most of all – After him they honour Apollo, Mars, Jupiter and Minerva.’ By the same token, Tamils identify the Kataragama god with their Murukan and people of North Indian heritage, including the Sinhalese, identify him with Skanda-Kumara of Sanskritic mythology. And yet, as we shall see, such identifications are not based on outward similarities alone, but on deep-seated resemblances or resemblances which traditional people ascribe not to a human origin by cunning ‘myth-makers’ but to divine intelligence operating in the super-human sphere and manifesting itself variously at different times and places.

Regarded from the diachronic perspective that prevails today, god Kataragam ‘became’ Murukan or Skanda-Kumara or he ‘became identified’ with them, but did to ‘become’ Dionysus because the identification did not endure among the local population. However, from the synchronic perspective common to traditional cultures, the Kataragama god already *is* Murukan and Skanda-Kumara and Dionysus from the very beginning, i.e. *in principio*. It is worth noting that this amalgamation – or rather, identification – of three ‘distinct’ gods is perfectly concordant with their characteristic association with the dissolution of boundaries.

Modern scholars – who are devotees by profession of Apollo – regard with disdain the secrecy and paradoxical, double-edged logic common to Dionysus and Kataragama and abhor what they regard as cult excesses. Charles Segal observes, “As Apollo imposes limits and reinforces boundaries, Dionysus, his opposite and complement, dissolves them.” Undoubtedly, Kataragama and Dionysus “cannot be understood, only appreciated”. Accordingly, an attempt may be made not dissect the cults but to evaluate their bonds of commonality with a view to understand better their inner dynamics, if not the common source of their-sacred power as well.

From its beginning, European indological scholarship has tended to focus on languages, texts and traditions of Indo-European origin while overlooking indigenous and Dravidian sources or downplaying their role in the evolution of Indian thought. As part of a general reappraisal of the history of Indian thought, the present study also aims to re-approximate the archaic worldview, alone from which archaic cults draw their soul-inspiring vision and vitality and outside of which they appear to the modern mind as mere ‘belief systems’ with no

ontological basis in what we moderns fondly cherish as ‘reality’. As Walter Otto observes in his landmark study *Dionysus: Myth and Cult*, “It is the custom to speak only of religious concepts or religious belief. The more recent scholarship in religion is surprisingly indifferent to the ontological content of this belief. As a matter of fact, all of its methodology tacitly assumes that there could not be an essence which would justify the cults and the myths.”

As befits a multi-faceted god like Skanda-Murukan, this study considers his cult from multiple perspectives which often appear to be mutually incompatible and irreconcilable, especially where the modern, pragmatic-diachronic perspectives come up against – and clash with – the traditional, idealistic-synchronic point of view, laden as it may be with menacing paradoxes. Specifically, I maintain that no study of traditional initiatic (Skt: *parampariya*) knowledge (Skt: *vidya*) can dispense with that tradition’s own approach to the acquisition of such knowledge, according to which the means and the end are inseparable. And I contend that it is precisely because of the modern reluctance or inability to recognize and comprehend the premises of archaic religions like Kataragama that modern observers including the vast majority of casual cult adherents have scarcely glimpsed more than the most superficial aspects of this archaic cult. As such, their understanding remains narrowly confined to the outlook of the modern era, which typically fails even to recognize, let alone appreciate, the implicit assumptions of archaic cults. This, in turn, partly explains why the very word ‘cult’ has overwhelmingly negative connotations to modern ears. So vast is the gulf that separates modern observers from the cult life of Dionysus or Kataragama that only a very tentative and imperfect attempt to bridge that gulf may be contemplated within the context of this study.

However, there are problems in identifying Dionysus with Shiva. Undoubtedly, their similarity is in part due to a family resemblance shared by Shiva the Father and his ‘son’ Skanda-Murukan, the *Sanat Kumara* or Perpetual Youth. This mythological relationship gained wide acceptance only in the late classical era; in earlier times, Skanda’s parentage had been a matter of pure speculation. However, for the purpose of synchronic analysis, we accept this father-son relationship in myth at face value and take it as a starting point to re-examine the triangular relationship that obtains between Dionysus, the Indian god Shiva and his son Skanda-Murukan, the god of Kataragama.

Dionysus is recognized as the son of the high god Zeus and is sometimes depicted as sitting at Zeus’ right side atop Mount Olympus. Already this should be enough of a clue that the Indian counterpart of Dionysus should be not the great god Shiva, aloof from humanity on Mount Kailasa, but Shiva’s playful and precocious son Skanda who, in his familiar representation as *Somaskanda*, sits beside Shiva on Mount Kailasa. These common traits of Dionysus and Skanda, viz. their youthfulness, playfulness, and sonship, clearly distinguish them from the severe and dreadful father figures of Zeus and Shiva. Like Skanda-Murukan, Dionysus “is neither child nor man but, eternal adolescent, occupies a place somewhere between the two.” As such, both represent “the spirit of ludic energy and the power of transformative play, full of cunning, deception and strategies that are at once diabolical and divine. In this they reveal their common affinity to Hermes, the Greek god of cunning, theft and eloquence whose *caduceus* or herald’s magical wand finds its counterpart in Skanda-Murukan’s *vel* (Tamil: ‘spear’), called his *Jñāna Shakti* or ‘power of gnosis’.

In Greek mythology, Dionysus is born from his father's thigh and delivered to twelve nymphs or water-spirits, the Hyades, who become the child-god's wet-nurses. Later, out of gratitude for their service, they are exalted to the heavens where seven of them shine as the constellation Pleiades. Likewise Skanda, born directly from Shiva, descends to earth where he is found in a reedy marsh by six water spirits, the *Krittika* maidens, who serve as the god's wet-nurses and later are exalted to heaven as the *Krittika* constellation, which is none other than the Pleiades; hence Skanda is also *Karttikeya*, 'born of the Pleiades'. Just as Dionysus is *Purigenes*, 'the one born of fire', so likewise is Skanda called *Agnibhu*. Skanda is *Sharadhajamma*, 'born in a reedy marsh'; Dionysus is *Limnaios*, 'of the marsh'. Dionysus is *Dithyrambos*, 'twice-born', i.e. born first from the fiery element of his father's third eye and then born a second time in the watery element of *Sarvana*, a reedy marsh and nourished by nymphs, is elsewhere called Dionysus." So remarkably parallel are the thematic elements surrounding the complex birth-motif that it strains credibility to ascribe these similarities to sheer coincidence.

Again, both Dionysus, who was contemptuously called "the womanly one" and Skanda-Kumara, whose Tamil name Murukan means 'the tender one', are not purely masculine gods but possess equally strong feminine associations as well. Like Dionysus, Skanda is raised by female attendants or foster mothers, called 'mothers' or 'nurses.' To this day, women votaries at Kataragama (the twelve Alatti Ammas or Ladies of the Lamp) play an important role in his rituals; Alatti Ammas, for instance, must accompany the god in all his ritual processions, whether by day or by night. In contrast, Shiva is a masculine ithyphallic deity, surrounded by troops of ghouls. Significantly, both Dionysus and Skanda-Murukan are very seldom if ever depicted as ithyphallic. While Shiva may be depicted as androgynous, the feminine aspect is far more prominent in Dionysus and Murukan.

Gods of Feminine Power

Skanda-Murukan's principal symbols – the *vel* and the *satkona yantra* (hexagram) – both serve as reminders of the god's close association with magical power and the feminine principle – *Shakti*. For instance, the ostensibly masculine *vel* symbol – Murukan's 'own self' as the tradition informs us – comes to the young god not from his father (as one might expect in patriarchal cultures) but from his 'mother' Uma, the personification of *Shakti* (as noted, a feminine word in Sanskrit that also means 'spear'). This, moreover, is a tacit reminder that entire *Kumāra* concerning the god Kumāra) *paramaparā* or "pupillary succession" is implicitly derived from India's indigenous *Shākta* heritage of mystical devotion to *Skakti*, the Indian conception of the Godhead as *Magna Mater*.

Of particular interest, however, is the god's longstanding association with the number six and the *shatkona yantra* or 'six-cornered magical diagram,' for the *shatkona yantra* (etched upon a metal plate) is precisely what is believed to be contained in the small casket that is taken out in procession Kataragama. A full discussion of the subject of the 'calculus' of symbolic forms goes beyond the scope of this study. Suffice it to say that the god, whose Sanskrit name *Shanmukha* (Tamil: *Ārumukam*) means 'having six faces,' is homologized to the *hexagram*.