

Syed Jamil Ahmed

The Ritual of Devol Māduā: Problematizing Dharma in the Ethnic Conflicts of Sri Lanka

Western consciousness of Sri Lanka tends to be limited to bracketing the secessionist 'Tamil Tigers' among the 'terrorist threats' facing the world community. In truth, tensions between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities of Sri Lanka go back two millennia, and Syed Jamil Ahmed argues here that the conflict is reflected in the myths of origin of both communities and the rituals through which they are still re-enacted. He believes that one of these, the ritual of Devol Māduā, offers a possible resolution to the problematic relationship between religious and moral law, or *dharma*, and the pragmatics of statecraft in Sri Lanka. After examining the historical context of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and the myths of origin associated with the three key deities in the ritual, he offers an episode-by-episode description of the event, and goes on to suggest that the function of the ritual in Sinhalese–Buddhist society is revealing in terms of the dialectics of pacifism and violence that Buddhism faces in Sri Lankan ethnic conflict. Syed Jamil Ahmed is a director and designer based in Bangladesh, where he is Associate Professor at the Department of Theatre and Music in the University of Dhaka. In 2001–2 he was a visiting faculty member at King Alfred's College, Winchester. He wrote on 'Decoding Myths in the Nepalese Festival of Indra Jātrā' in NTQ 74, and his full-length publications – *Acinpakhi Infinity: Indigenous Theatre in Bangladesh* (Dhaka University Press, 2000) and *In Praise of Niranjan: Islam, Theatre, and Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Pathak Samabesh, 2001) – catalogue the wide variety of indigenous theatre forms in Bangladesh.

IN 1959, a Buddhist monk named Talduwe Somarama assassinated Sri Lanka's first Prime Minister, Solomon Bandarnaike, when the latter attempted to reconcile the differences between the Sinhalese and Tamil Communities. In 1983, a war broke out in the north of Sri Lanka between the Government, and the secessionist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which has, according to independent estimate, resulted in the deaths of 50,000 people (BBC, 1998). Such events appear to belie the canonical narrative of pacifism which constructs Buddhism as an ultra-peaceful religion. However, the dialectics of pacifism and violence which problematize Buddhist *dharma* in ethnic conflict may be better understood when viewed in relation to *Devol Māduā*, a Sri Lankan ritual held in honour of the god Devol and the goddess Pāttini.

Before deliberating on the significance of the ritual as a 'society's larger-than-life sym-

bolic representation of the world through multiple media' (Jennings, 1995, p. 17), it may be helpful briefly to examine the historical context which has led to the Sinhalese–Tamil conflict of the present day; the myths of origin related to the deities Pāttini, Kātārāgāmā, and Devol; and the structure of the Devol Māduā ritual itself.

The Historical Context

Sri Lanka – 'Pearl of the Orient' and 'Island of Dharma' – is a country of over 19 million, and has been known in recent years mainly for the hostilities between the government and armed Tamil separatists. The reason for the hostilities is deep seated, and intimately related to the history of the island, in which Buddhism has played an important role. The Tamils, who constitute 12 per cent of the population, mostly professing Brahmanical faith, claim to be the indigenous inhabitants.

This may not be entirely groundless, since only 30 miles of water separate the island from south India, the eastern part of which has a concentration of Tamil inhabitants. The Sinhalese, who constitute 74 per cent of the entire population, most of whom are Buddhists, were also migrants, since they trace their descent from Prince Vijaya, the legendary grandson of a lion, who was banished by his father from his kingdom of Lāla (possibly Rāṛha in south-western Bengal).

The legend, as related in the *Mahāvāsa*, Sri Lanka's national chronicle, has it that the banished prince landed on the island with 500 of his followers from a ship, on the day of the Buddha's *pari-nirvāṇa*. The question is not so much who was the Sri Lankan version of Columbus – for both claims overlook the possibility that the Veddas (or *Wanniya-laeto*, the 'inhabitants of the forest') may have migrated earlier – but is rather rooted in the power struggle between the adherents of Buddhism and Brahmanism.

According to the *Mahāvāsa*, Buddhism reached Sri Lanka in the third century BC, during the reign of King Devānaṅpiya Tissa (247–207 BC), when it was introduced by the missionary-prince Mahinda, son of Emperor Aśoka. According to the chronicle, it was under Mahinda's initiative and guidance that the entire population of the country was converted to Buddhism, and Tissa established Buddhism as the state religion, though it was never so professed. Mahinda also founded the Mahāvihāra (the 'Great Monastery') at Anurādhapura, the capital. The form of Buddhism introduced by Mahinda was Theravāda, the exact nature of which is unknown.

The Period of Anurādhapura

From the third century BC to the tenth century AD, also known as the period of Anurādhapura, the Mahāvihāra came to acquire immense power and prestige, and its views were influential in matters concerning politics and governance. The relationship between the state and the Mahāsaṅgha (the monk-community of the Mahāvihāra) is best described in the following declaration by



King Mahinda IV towards the end of the tenth century:

The kings of Lanka who are Bodhisattvas are to serve and attend on the Mahāsaṅgha on the very day that they celebrate the coronation festival after attaining to the dignity of kingship. It is bestowed by the Mahāsaṅgha for the purpose of defending the bowl and the robe. (Dutt, 1966, p. 28)

Whenever the Sinhalese monarchy failed to 'defend the bowl and the robe', Buddhist monasteries were depopulated. The first significant instance of such a failure occurred from 43 to 17 BC, when the throne of Anurādhapura was occupied by Tamil rulers. Being fanatical Hindus, they wrought havoc on all Buddhist institutions and their misrule caused famine and cannibalism among the people, who, as reported by the chronicles, even resorted to feeding on the corpses of dead monks. The magnitude and fanaticism of the Tamil violence arouses suspicions that the state and the Mahāsaṅgha must have acted against the interests of the aggrieved, for only violence can breed violence. In terms of Buddhist ethics, it was perhaps their own *karma*.

Dissension also occurred within the monastic community immediately after Tamil rule, which eventually led to schism. Under the abbotship of a venerable old monk

named Mahātissa, a new sect was founded at a newly built monastery named Abhayagiri. Both the sects were Theravādin. In another development in the fourth century AD, there appeared an independent sect named Sāgaliya, whose monks resided at the Jetavanavihāra under the abbotship of Tissa. All through the Anurādhapura period there was dissent between the three sects, each vying for the political influence which would ensure the favour and patronage of the king.

The Anurādhapura period, which lasted for some thirteen centuries, ended in 1017, when the Brahmanical Cholas from south India invaded Sri Lanka, took the reigning monarch Mahinda V captive, and occupied the northern part of the island, changing the capital from Anurādhapura to Polonnaruva. They also looted and destroyed Buddhist establishments to such an extent that, when they were evicted in 1073, the victorious Sinhalese monarch Vijayabāhu found Anurādhapura pillaged and destroyed, with all its monasteries and *stupās* lying in ruins. The chronicle *Culāvaṇsa* (55.20) describes the Chola looting thus:

In the three fraternities and in all Lanka, they broke open relic chambers and carried away many costly images of gold, while they violently destroyed here and there all the monasteries. Like blood-sucking *Yakkhas*, they took all the treasures of Lanka for themselves.

(Dutta, 1966, p. 32)

The monastic community itself had decayed because no ordination had taken place for a considerable time. So severe was the plight of Buddhism in Sri Lanka that King Vijayabāhu had to request King Anawrahta in Pagan (southern Myanmar) to help him by sending pious monks from his own kingdom. Anawrahta, who had helped the Sri Lankan monarch to recover his throne, acceded to the request, and accordingly the monks from Pagan performed numerous ordination ceremonies, and replenished the Saṅgha.

But Anurādhapura's years of splendour were over, as Vijayabāhu retained Polonnaruva as his capital. Meanwhile a migrant Tamil population had been on the rise since the seventh century, and its numbers swelled

dramatically after the Chola occupation. Being staunch followers of Brahmanism, they exerted considerable influence during the rule of the Cholas. Even today, the Buddha or a Bodhisattva is worshipped concurrently with Brahmanical deities such as Skandha and Śiva.

From Prosperity to Disintegration

After years of internal trouble, King Parākambāhu succeeded in establishing peace when he ascended the throne in 1153. There followed 36 years of prosperity, during which Sri Lanka witnessed a phenomenal surge of splendour. However, within the monastic community decadence and dissension increased. A synod called c. 1165 failed to reconcile the differences, and hence the dissenting sects were forced to dissolve as corporate bodies.

It was also during this period that the relic of Buddha's Tooth acquired the status of a potent symbol of the close ideological relationship between kingship and Buddhism, and of the necessity for political sovereignty to acknowledge and seek the sponsorship and protection of Buddhism. That the temple housing the relic formed a part of the palace is a clear manifestation of the relationship (Tambiah, 1976, p. 97). But it should not be taken to imply the installation of a theocracy: the domains of kingship and of the monastic community, of the state and Buddhism, operated separately at 'normal' times, but in close co-operation during times of duress.

Buddhist revival during the Polonnaruva period, which began with Vijayabāhu's victory in 1073, came to an end in 1214, when Prince Māgha from Kalinga (Orissa in India), a sworn enemy of Buddhism, occupied Polonnaruva, and wrought worse havoc on the Buddhist establishment than the Cholas. According to *Culāvaṇsa*, temples, monasteries, and *stupās* were vandalized, and the Mahāvihāra at Anurādhapura was permanently effaced. Consequently, monks left Sri Lanka en masse for refuge in south India. Although the 21-year rule of Māgha, which ended in 1235, failed to crush Buddhism, it certainly drained its strength.

During the span of three centuries that followed, from 1235 to 1505, there was no central authority in Sri Lanka. However, a clear line of demarcation between the Tamils and the Sinhalese was beginning to emerge. The Tamils were gravitating around the kingdom of Jaffna in the north and east, with Nallur as its capital, and throughout they maintained close contact with the political power of Tamilnadu in south India. The Sinhalese political domination was in the central highlands (which later emerged as the kingdom of Kandy) and the plains of the south-west (later, the kingdom of Kotte).

The history of Buddhism during this time is marked by a general decline and loss of ground to the rising tide of Brahmanism, the main reason for which was the increasing influence of the Tamils, with Nallur as their political centre, which increased the flow of Tamil immigrants from the mainland. Consequently, there was interaction between the two religions, not on doctrinal or philosophical grounds but at a popular level. As a result, Buddhism began to accommodate many Brahmanical rituals of temple worship, and other religious practices.

Effects of Colonization

Towards the beginning of the sixteenth century, when the three distinct political spheres of Jaffna, Kandy, and Kotte had emerged in Sri Lanka, the European colonizers began to make their presence felt. First came the Portuguese (1505–1658), then the Dutch (1658–1796), and finally the British (1796–1948). Although the Portuguese occupied some coastal regions only, they passed themselves off as rulers of the whole country; and the fanaticism of their Christianity drove them to devote their energies to suppressing Buddhism as well as Brahmanism, leading to the destruction of images, temples, and monasteries.

The Dutch, who controlled most of the coastal provinces, were comparatively liberal. Consequently, some of the abandoned monasteries were repopulated during their rule. At the end of the eighteenth century, immediately before the British moved in,

Kandy was the only independent kingdom in Sri Lanka, under the rule of Buddhist Sinhalese monarchs. When the British asserted authority over Kandy in 1815, the entire island became a British colony, from which freedom was gained only in 1948.

Today, the monastic community exerts considerable influence upon state policies, and some Buddhist temples are even known by the name of the political party to which the monks profess allegiance. The conflict with the Tamils, for obvious reasons, dominates the political discourse of the monks.

Origin Myths: Pāttini, Devol, Kātārāgāmā

In contemporary Sri Lanka, the primary religion of the state is Theravāda Buddhism, which may be more accurately identified as Sinhalese Buddhism. The historical process briefly outlined above has led to the accommodation of a kind of polytheism in which demons and deities (all subservient to the Buddha) are propitiated through rituals and are looked upon as instruments whose help can be sought in times of crisis or celebration. In order to clarify the functions of Devol Māduā, it is necessary to investigate the myths of origin of the three deities who play key roles in the ritual. These are Pāttini, Devol, and Kātārāgāmā.

Pāttini, possibly of south Indian origin, is the most popular goddess among the Buddhists of Sri Lanka. She is propitiated especially at times of pestilence, when chickenpox and measles strike. Barren women also propitiate her for children, and other objectives behind the rituals in her honour are expulsion of evil from a community, attainment of prosperity and general well-being, and the wish for a plentiful harvest. Usually offerings are made to the goddess by Buddhist devotees on the fulfilment of their desired objective.

It is possible that the cult of Pāttini originated in the second century AD, when King Gajabāhu (174–96) introduced her to Sri Lanka. She enjoys a separate abode in temple precincts, and has a large number of rituals and ceremonies connected to her. She is also known as Sat-Pāttini (*sat* meaning

'seven'), for it is believed she was born seven times – from water, the tusk of an elephant, a flower, a rock, fire, a shawl, and a mango. Colourful tales have been woven around each of these births, such as the following recounting her birth from a mango.

It is recounted that in the orchard of King Pandi there came to grow an unusually large-sized mango. The puzzled king decided to satisfy his curiosity by shooting it down with an arrow, but none of his men could bring it to earth. There then arrived an old man (the god Sakra in disguise) who wished to try. The king humoured him, and was amazed when the old man succeeded – not only in bringing down the mango, but in splitting it in two. To the great astonishment of all, the split mango revealed a baby, the goddess Pättini herself. Another popular tale relates her unswerving fidelity to her fickle husband Kovalan (also known as Pālaṅga). There exist quite a few literary sources on the goddess in Sri Lanka, including the *Vayantimālaya* and the *Pättinihālla* (Kariyawasam, 1995, p. 58–9, 65–6; Raghavan, 1967, p. 125).

The cult of Devol appears to have been introduced in Sri Lanka when that of Pättini was already established. According to popular belief, Devol Deviyo, King Sri Ramasingha of Kuduppura City in India, had seven queens who bore him seven sons on seven consecutive days. When they grew up they were accomplished in many fields, but all had a common problem: their behaviour was so aggressive and rowdy that the subjects of the kingdom complained to the king, who had no alternative but to banish his sons.

The banished princes left as traders on a ship laden with rich merchandise. They sought to land at three spots in Sri Lanka, but failed each time due to inclement weather. When their ship was wrecked in high seas, the seven brothers and their men swam for seven days with no land in sight. Taking pity on them, the god Sakra sent a stone raft. The brothers boarded it, and sailed to Seenigama, which was sacred to Pättini.

However, the goddess was unwilling to let them land, and so she created seven mountains of fire. But Devol, the eldest of the seven

brothers, knew how to overcome the obstacle of fire, and so he managed to land at Seenigama. Then, with the help of god Kātārāgāmā, Devol was granted a boon by Pättini that he would receive offerings in the same ritual as the goddess, if in return he would cure all sickness in the land. After striking this peace accord with the goddess, Devol took up residence at a place nearby (later called Veragoda). There he married a local girl who bore him a son. Today, the cult of Devol is extremely popular and widespread in Sri Lanka (Raghavan, 1967, p. 134–5).

Of the three deities, Kātārāgāmā appears to enjoy veneration from the widest segment of Sri Lankan society, including Buddhists (who identify him as Skanda), Hindus (for whom he is Murukan), and even Muslims. His original residence was the peak of Waedahiti Kanda Mountain, which lies on the outskirts of Kātārāgāmā town, where according to one tradition, he had walked following his arrival aboard a stone raft on the south-eastern coast of Sri Lanka. However, according to the *Veddas*, Kātārāgāmā is Kande Yaka, the great mountain spirit and hunter-god who has been living upon a distant mountain peak since time immemorial, and who married a young and beautiful Vedda princess named Valli (Harrigan, 2002).

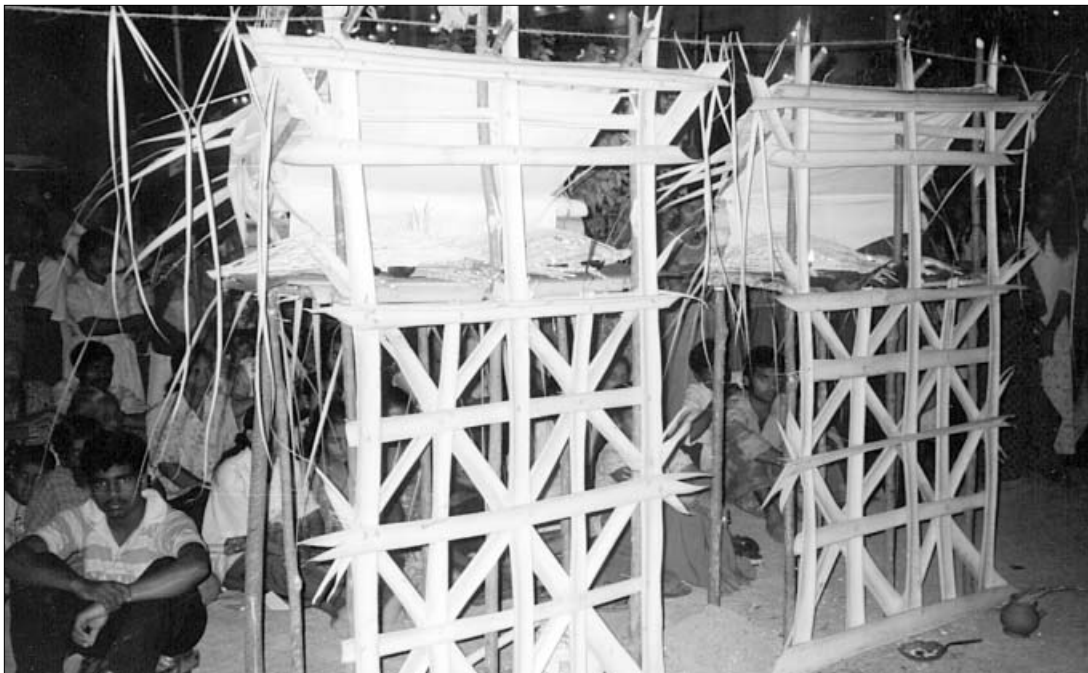
The Structure of Devol Māduā

A ritual, Tambiah reminds us, 'is a culturally constructed system of symbolic communication' which is 'constituted of patterned and ordered sequences of words and acts . . . expressed in multiple media' (1985, p. 128). The 'culturally constructed system of symbolic communication', as seen in the case of Devol Māduā, is deeply embedded in the historical and religious context discussed earlier. The following description is based on a performance given by Chandra Sena (the *kāpu māhātyā*, or leader) and his troupe, and was observed at the Buddhist temple of Subandrā Rāmāyā in Kotte on 4 January 2000.

The performance was given at one side of the temple courtyard, in a rectangular space, half of which was covered with corrugated tin sheets. There were a number of ritual



Above: the five-peaked altar for Pättini at one end of the performance space. Below: two *toranas* or altars dedicated to the gods Devol and Kätärägāmā at the other end of the performance space.



objects in the performance space, the most conspicuous of these being a *torana*, a five-peaked altar for Pättini, which stood at one end of the space (top picture above). At the other end stood two small *toranas* or altars standing on four posts, dedicated to gods Devol, and Kätärägāmā (bottom picture above). On its two sides, at the corners of the



Above left: the altar dedicated to the demon Sānni at one corner of the performance space. Above right: one of the two altars for *kāṭtrikā* demons. Bottom left: the flower altar for all the deities.



performance space, stood two altars, dedicated to the demons Mahāson and Sānni (above left). On the two longer arms of the space stood two more altars for demons, known as *kāṭtrikā* (above right). All these altars had lamps, and ritual objects placed as offerings. Further down one side stood the flower altar for all the deities (opposite).

The space described above had a distinct, 'sacred' quality, clearly demarcating the performers from the spectators. The spectators always remained outside the 'sacred space': they sat and stood mostly on three sides, leaving the Pāṭṭini *torana* side clear most of the time. Apart from lay-followers, even a few Buddhist monks were present. However, the 'divine potency' in the space seemed variable. During some episodes, such as Pāṭṭini Pūjā and the first part of Devol Godā Basimā,

'a certain seriousness and compulsion for precision' prevailed, when the spectators were not merely onlookers but like 'members of a congregation, whose lives [were] affected by how the ritual [was] conducted' (Tuan, 1990, p. 242).

During these episodes or parts thereof, the performance effectively created a 'timeless time – the eternal present' (Schechner, 2001, p. 71). Particularly in *Devol Godā Basimā*, where Pāttini resists Devol's intrusion with seven mountains of fire, 'the eternal present' was almost tangible and physical in terms of experience. However, during other episodes or parts thereof the performers intentionally subverted the 'seriousness and compulsion for precision', as though to ridicule or laugh at themselves. The most memorable moment of such subversion was the later part of the episode entitled *Devol Godā Basimā*, where Devol and Pāttini conjured hilarious comic moments as each tried to communicate with the other in their own tongue.

The variable degrees of 'divine potency' within the performance space diminished into the entirely 'mundane' as one moved away from it. The performers smoked, chatted, rested, or even snatched a brief nap when not required to perform, secluded behind Pāttini's *torana*. The spectators moved freely mostly in the direction away from the *Devol-Kātārāgāmā torana* end.



Above: Buddhist monks of the Subandṛā Rāmāyā Temple watching the performance. Below: the lead singer with the drummers.

In the early evening, children played as their elders chatted, especially during the episodes in which seriousness waned. Near the five-peaked altar for Pāttini sat a few senior monks on chairs – the novices beside them, looking on with a half-amused seriousness (above). Furthest away, near the road, I even saw a young couple deeply engrossed in a passionate embrace, completely oblivious to all the action that the divinities were enacting in the performance space.

Fourteen dancers, five drummers, a lead-singer (the *kāpu mātīyā* of the troupe) participated in the performance (below). However, it was only during some episodes that all were present. In these, about nine took turns





in dancing while the rest stood near Pāttini's *torana*, with the drummers, to sing. Some senior dancers and drummers also sang while they danced and played. In most of the segments, two to three drummers and six to eight dancers took part, the remainder resting in the space behind the *torana* and an adjoining dressing room. In all dances where deities were invoked, the dancers carried a *dālmurā*, a sheaf of areca blossom wrapped with a betel leaf, in their right hands (left).

Except for Dādi-munda in the Vā Hālā episode, Pāttini in the Pāttini Pūjā episode, and the devil in the Garā Yakum Nāṭimā episode, no character impersonation was observed in Devol Māduā. Occasionally one of the dancers would enter into dialogue with one of the drummers to introduce a comic effect, but the rest of the performance was in narrative style: the dancers danced to the song of the lead singer (with a choral accompaniment from some non-performing dancers and the drummers) and a vigorous rhythm played on the drums (below).

Left: a dancer with a sheaf of areca blossom wrapped in a betel leaf. Below: the dancers executing vigorous and acrobatic movement patterns.





Above: dancers dance in the foreground to music rendered by the lead singer and drummers in the background in the *Dālu Mūra Thabima* episode. Below: a relatively subdued moment in the *Kālā Pāndām Thabima* episode, where the dancers perform in a circle.

On the evening before the performance, a ritual called *Millā Kapimā* ('felling of the *millā* tree') took place, in which a dancer with an axe accompanied by a drummer, the *kāpu māhātyā*, and some singers, sang incantations to the gods and danced down to a *millā* tree (*Vitex altissima*). After turmeric water was sprayed around the tree, it was felled and brought back to the temple where the performance was to take place. There it was cut in pieces, and stored for lighting the fire for Devol in the Devol Godā Basimā episode.

The Performance Episode by Episode

The performance began in the evening, and ended on the following morning. It was composed of the following episodes:

1 *Pāhān Dālvōima*, the ritual of lighting oil lamps in honour of Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, and popular deities. The performers sang songs of praise and danced in honour of the Three Jewels and the deities.

2 *Dālu Mūra Thabima*, in which the *kāpu māhātyā* recited incantations and offered flowers and incense to the deities while the

dancers danced in honour of the gods. The *kāpu māhātyā* also recalled Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, and offered salutations (above).

3 *Kālā Pāndām Thabima*, in which the performers worshipped the gods Kātārāgāmā, and Devol with song and dance (below). At the end, an areca-nut tree, decorated with streamers and topped by a torch, was implanted at one end of the performance space,





between the two altars dedicated to Devol and Kātārāg-āmā (left). The areca branch was the *kāpā*, and is symbolic of the vow to hold Devol Māduā.

4 *Pidevini Dīma*, in which a dancer moved around the performance space and made offerings of fire to the devils by throwing handfuls of ignitable powder in the air, and lighting it with two torches (opposite page). At the end of the spectacular display of pyrotechnics, the dancer narrated a story of demons with the aid of a drummer, in which comic effects were achieved by means of mala-propisms.

5 *Biso Kāpā*, in which a group of dancers, led by one carrying the *kāpā* (the sacred areca branch), danced, and sang in

Top: dancers making offerings to the gods in the Kālā Pāndām Thabima episode. Bottom: the areca-nut tree decorated with streamers and a torch on top, implanted at the end of the Kālā Pāndām Thabima episode.



A dancer offering food to the devils in the Pidevini Dima episode.





honour of the goddess Pāttini, to the accompaniment of drummers (this page and opposite page, bottom).

6 *Torana Yāgā-ya*, in which the performers narrated, with dance and drumming, the construction of the *torana*, and its efficacy.

7 *Pāttini Pūjā*, in which the goddess Pāttini was worshipped. A male performer, dressed as the goddess, was led into the performance space under a canopy held by four stagehands, walking on a strip of white cloth and carrying her jewellery wrapped in a piece of golden brocade (opposite page, top). After she entered the performance space, she laid her jewels on a seat placed at the Devol-Kātārāgāmā end. At the other end stood four drummers and six dancers, playing their drums and singing in her honour as the resplendent goddess danced on a strip of white cloth spread in the middle (overleaf).

8 *Thelme*, which was the ritualized worship of twelve deities including Viṣṇu, Kātārāgāmā, Nātha, Pāttini, Dādi-munda, and Devol. In it, twelve dancers, dressed as twelve princes, danced in imitation of the deities, accompanied by songs in their praise.



Opposite page, top: a dancer carrying the *kāpā*, or the sacred areca branch. Opposite page, bottom: dancers executing subdued movement in the Biso Kāpā episode.



Right: entry of the goddess Pättini carrying her jewellery in the Pättini Pūjā episode.

Below: dancers swirling around the sacred areca branch in the Biso Kāpā episode.



A component of this ritual was the enactment of the origin of Devol Māduā.

Some troupes of dancers insert an acrobatic dance known as Pinūm after the strenuous dance of Thelme. However, the dance is not a ritual, and its inclusion is not imperative.

9 *Pidevini*, or the midnight offering of food for the devils, in which symbolic food, song, and dance were offered to them.

10 *Vā Hālā*, or the ritualized worship of the goddess Dādi-munda. As in Pāttini Pūjā, a performer in trance state appeared in the performance space as the god Dādi-munda. Drummers played their drums, and dancers sang songs in her honour as the goddess danced.

11 *Dolhā Pelepāliya*, or the Parade of the Twelve Gods, in which symbolic ornaments or accessories of the twelve gods mentioned earlier were carried under a canopy to the performance space. There the dancers danced to the rhythm of the drums with each of the twelve accessories, one after another, accompanied by songs in honour of the gods.

12 *Ambā Vidāmana*, or the shooting of the mango, in which a dancer mimed shooting a mango with a bow and arrow. The dance and accompanying song referred to the birth of Pāttini from a mango described earlier.

13 *Mārā Ipaddimā* (also known as Rāmā Māri-ima), in which dancers danced to a song relating how the goddess Pāttini's husband Pālaṅga was killed by King Pandi, how she brought him back to life, and how she burnt the capital of King Pandi in revenge.

14 *Devol Godā Basimā*, or the arrival of the god Devol (also known as Gini Pāgimo), in which the dancers danced to a song relating how Devol and his six brothers journeyed from south India to Sri Lanka; how he and his companions were shipwrecked; how he overcame other hazards he faced on the way; how he successfully extinguished, with the help of Kātārāgāmā, seven mountains of fire put up by the goddess Pāttini to resist his arrival in Sri Lanka; and how, at last, Devol and Pāttini, with Kātārāgāmā's mediation, resolved their differences. This episode con-

tained the 'fire walking ceremony', one of the most spectacular displays of the evening. In it, the performers represented the seven mountains of fire by just one in the performance space, lit up by the *millā* tree that was cut on the previous evening. Then one of them actually danced in a frenzied state on glowing cinders, accompanied by drums. A later part of this episode included hilarious moments when the god and goddess tried to communicate with each other – Devol in the supposed language of south India, and Pāttini in Sinhalese.

15 *Kurumbarā Pidevini Dīmā*, in which offerings were made to *kurumbarās*, or servants of Devol.

16 *Kiri Itiravimā* (literally, 'spilling of the milk', taken to be a good omen), in which the dancers sang a blessing for all the spectators as they danced to the rhythm of the drums. The blessing was sought from Pāttini, Devol, and Kātārāgāmā, particularly for those who were stricken with sickness, and generally for the well-being of the entire community.

17 *Devi Yānge Dāne*, which was the act of alms-giving. The performers offered rice and curry to Pāttini, Devol, Kātārāgāmā, and other deities, which had been prepared by the community. The rice and curry was served to the spectators as well, who ate it or carried it home in the firm belief that, blessed by the deities, the food would protect them from ailments and ensure their well-being. There was no song or dance in this segment.

18 *Garā Yakum Nāṭimā*, which was danced with the objective of expelling all evil from the neighbourhood. Two *gorok* trees, with three parallel branches tied to them, were implanted in the ground, and a masked dancer, representing Garā (the demon who destroys evil eye, evil mouth, and evil breath), danced on the branches, and on the ground.

19 *Deviyanta Pīndimā*, in which the performers sang a song offering their gratitude to Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, and all the gods, wished the spectators long life and good health, and danced to the rhythm of the drums.



Dance of the goddess Pättini in the Pättini Pūjā episode.

The Indeterminacy of Devol Māduā

Although Devol Māduā is usually referred to as a ritual (a convention that I have intentionally followed in this paper), on closer examination it exhibits a peculiar indeterminacy in the continuum of Schechner's Efficacy–Entertainment Dyad (2002, p. 71). As a ritual, the following characteristics can be easily identified. Its purpose is to effect change. It seeks to link to the transcendental Others (especially Pāttini and Devol), and to create, in a number of episodes, a 'timeless time'. In some episodes, the performers are possessed. The structure of the performance is to a great extent, 'traditionally' prescribed. The spectators 'believe' in the performance in varying degrees, and criticism is discouraged.

They do not, however, participate in the occasion. Certain episodes (or parts of them) are also meant to be taken 'for fun', and in these the performers are aware of themselves and clearly in control. Their virtuosity in dance and playing of the drums, as well as pyrotechnic skills, are also highly valued. Especially in these sections, the spectators appreciate the skills of the performers and individual creativity. And in certain episodes, criticism is open (most strikingly so in the comic scene between Pāttini and Devol).

It is this sense of indeterminacy, of unexpected transition from efficacy to entertainment, in terms of Schechner's Efficacy–Entertainment Dyad (2002, p. 71), that contributes to the fascinating complexity of Devol Māduā. However, for the purpose of this paper, I have chosen to narrow my focus down to particular social functions of the ritual and its interpretation as a culturally constructed system of symbolic communication which problematizes *dharma* in Sri Lankan ethnic conflict.

Before deliberating on these issues, it may be helpful to review the structure or form of Devol Māduā, because, as Turner (following Myerhoff) argues, ritual 'gives form to that which it contains – for ritual is in part a form, and a form which gives meaning (by "framing") to its contents' (Turner, 1987, p. 93). As shown in the diagram opposite, the nineteen

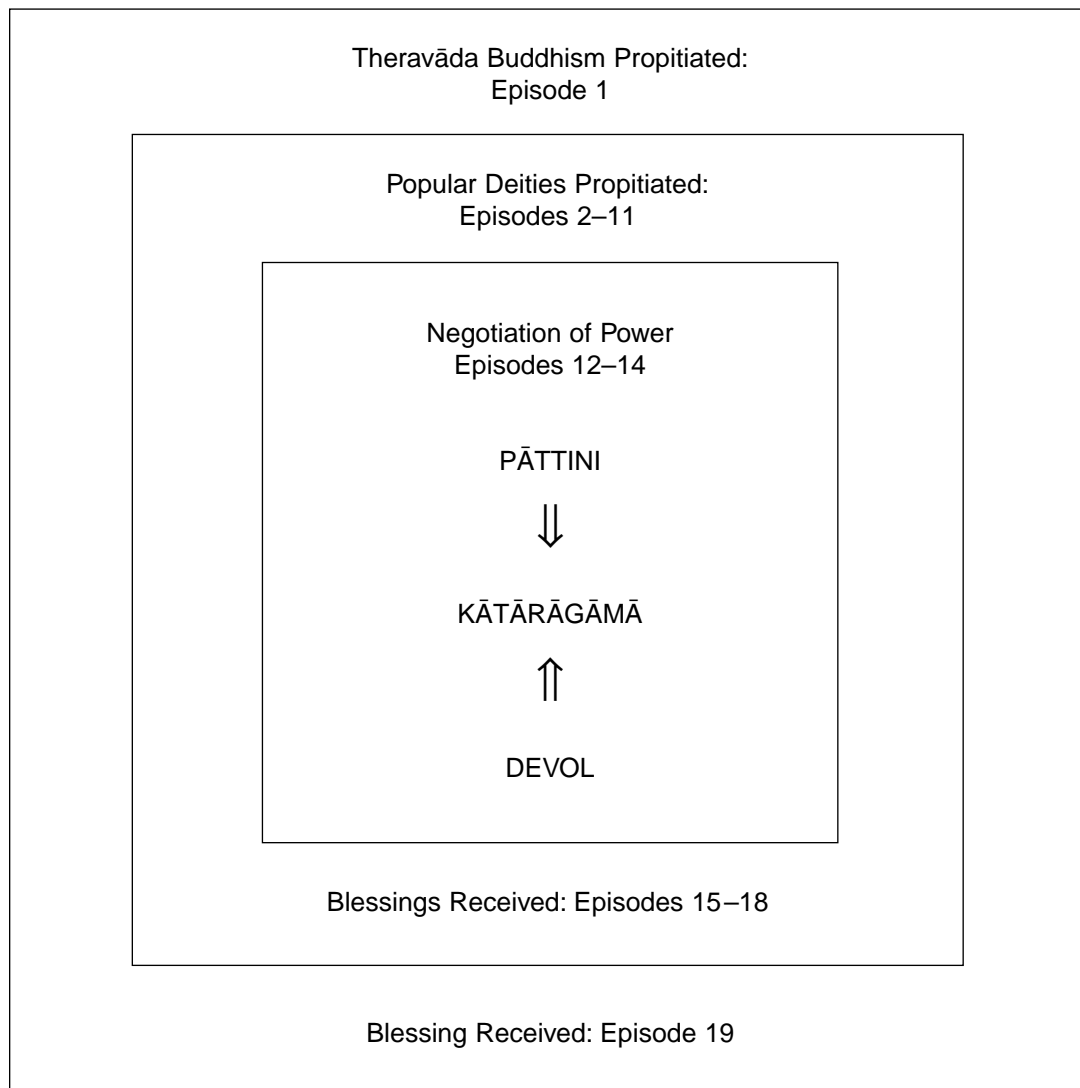
episodes of Devol Māduā may be seen as a set of three concentric frames. The outer frame, composed of the first and nineteenth episodes, is that of Theravāda Buddhism. By propitiating the Three Jewels (the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha), it 'legitimizes' the incorporation of popular deities who are unknown in the canonical literature – and, more importantly, it works as a perceptual mechanism which indicates how the inner frame is to be interpreted.

The intermediate frame of popular deities is composed of Episodes 2 to 11 and 15 to 18. Of these, Episode 2 serves to transit from the outer frame to the intermediate frame by making offerings to the Three Jewels as well as the popular deities. Episodes 3 to 11 serve to invoke, propitiate, and please the deities, while Episodes 15 to 18 serve to receive their blessing and expel evil.

The innermost frame, composed of Episodes 12 to 14, is the very core of the ritual as 'thought-in/as-action' (Schechner, 2002, p. 50). In the following sections, I shall attempt to show what 'thought' may be seen to operate as/in the 'action' of the ritual, particularly in the central frame. Before doing so, I wish to remind myself (if nobody else) that the encoding–decoding process in a ritual is, as Jennings suggests (after Lewis), paradoxical. The performers of a ritual put 'into a work of art in terms of feelings and thoughts more than the observer takes from it, and similarly, the observer takes more from it than the [performers] ever intended' (Jennings, 1995, p. 16). I am well aware that the analysis of the social function of Devol Māduā that follows reflects this paradox.

The Social Function of Devol Māduā

The performance I witnessed, according to the participants (Jayanathasiri, 2000), was organized by the Buddhist-Sinhalese community members of the neighbourhood, with the objective of propitiating the deities so that all forms of evil would be exorcized, and the members of the community attain prosperity and general well-being. It has also been noted earlier that the cult of Pāttini claims efficacy in fertility (both in harvest



and in children), protection from diseases (chickenpox and measles), expulsion of evil from a community, and the attainment of prosperity and well-being.

The cult of Devol also promises to cure all forms of sickness, which would make it superfluous since Pāttini is also efficacious to this end. It seems that Devol is accommodated in a pre-existing design and power structure, and that his actual 'power' is not named but well understood. This forms the very core of the ritual of Devol Māduā, as projected in Episodes 12 to 14, of which the first two are devoted to Pāttini – her birth, marriage, revenge for the murder of her hus-

band, and his subsequent revival. Having thus portrayed an efficacious deity, she is made to confront Devol in the fourteenth episode (Devol Godā Basimā).

It is here that the negotiation of power, mediated by Kātārāgāmā, is performed. Kātārāgāmā's mediation is significant since not only does he enjoy the widest following, but he is tinted with distinct Vedic associations (and hence the earliest wave of migrants). The confrontation between Pāttini, and Devol actually results in Pāttini's loss, as she is forced to accommodate Devol, who is to receive offerings in the same ritual as the goddess. Although this aspect offers scope

for an in-depth feminist discourse, I shall limit myself to probing the functional significance of the ritual, taking into account the historical context of Sinhalese Buddhism.

In terms of the historical context, Devol Māduā functions as a collective memory of the Sinhalese people. It is 'a way people remember'; it is indeed 'memories in action, encoded into action' (Schechner, 2002, p. 45). According to local tradition, it is believed that Devol Māduā originated in ancient times when an elaborate ritual was held to remedy an incurable headache suffered by King Seraman of Seramanapura (King Cheraman Perumal of Kerala: Raghavan, 1967, p. 135). If one is prepared to read the 'incurable headache' suffered by Seraman as a symbolic reflection of the ethnic conflict between the Tamils and the Sinhalese, the above account of the origin of the ritual indicates that the conflict has persisted for centuries.

The ritual itself problematizes the issue. Very much like Pāttini, the Sinhalese too are immigrants, if the legend of Prince Vijaya is to be given credence. The Tamils, as symbolized by Devol, formed a later wave of migration. Pāttini resists Devol, the new immigrant, and the two fight each other. Ironically, Pāttini forgets her past – for she too was an immigrant. Her violence reflects a strong racist mentality which seeks to maintain a pure identity of the 'Self' and to protect economic interests which are threatened by the intrusion of the 'Other'.

This is not, of course, particularly a Sinhalese phenomenon, but all too familiar also in the so-called 'developed' nations as well as other 'developing' countries. Pāttini thus reflects what may be said to be an 'inverted minority complex', which is reflected by a majority population living in perpetual fear of being consumed by a minority. In the case of Sri Lanka, the fear has a real basis – a sense of threat felt to be imminent both in terms of history (as discussed earlier) and geography (emerging from across the narrow Palk Straits where a sizeable Tamil population live).

If rituals are designed to help a people during 'difficult transitions, ambivalent relationships, hierarchies, and desires that trouble,

exceed, or violate the norms of daily life' (Schechner, 2002, p. 45), Devol Māduā is exemplary, for it seems designed to overcome 'difficult transitions' in Tamil-Sinhalese relationships which 'trouble and violate the norms of daily life' to such an extent that 50,000 people are already dead. As a 'bridge across life's troubled waters', 'devised around and to regulate disruptive, turbulent, dangerous, and ambivalent interactions' (Schechner, 2002, p. 57), it offers the only possible outcome to the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict, which is a peaceful resolution and co-existence – exactly what the action of Kātārāgāmā signifies.

This is more easily said than done, of course, especially in the light of the centuries of south Indian domination over the Sinhalese. Nevertheless, Devol Māduā is a striking example of how rituals may be 'used to manage potential conflict regarding power', and it may become 'a way for a people to connect to a collective, even mythic past, to build social solidarity, to form community' (Schechner, 2002, p. 77). I have consciously used the indeterminate 'may be used' in place of Schechner's definitive 'are used', because, as the toll of ethnic violence in Sri Lanka mounts, and as the Euro-American arms dealers gleefully gather a plentiful harvest over the corpses, the definitive function of a ritual seems to be (or perhaps has been intentionally) kept in abeyance.

Dialectics of Pacifism and Violence:

Devol Māduā offers fascinating insights into the oft-repeated characteristic of Buddhism (be it Theravāda, Mahāyāna, or Vajrayāna), which lies in its capacity to assimilate other religions. For the purpose of this study, however, I would like to restrict myself to relating the historical context discussed earlier to the Buddhist philosophy, and world view, and to examine how Devol Māduā is revealing when one seeks to uncover its underlying dynamics, particularly in terms of the dialectics of pacifism and violence that Buddhism faces in Sri Lankan ethnic conflict.

The pacifist face of Buddhism is derived from Buddhist canonical literature. Without

denying its validity, it must be acknowledged that Buddhist pacifism often reaches a point of glorified eulogy, as the following passage from H. Fielding Hall's *The Soul of the People* clearly projects:

There can never be a war of Buddhism. No ravished country has ever borne witness to the prowess of the followers of the Buddha; no murdered men have poured out their blood on their hearth-stones, killed in his name. . . . He and His Faith are clean of the stain of blood. He was the preacher of the Great Peace, of love, of charity, of compassion, and so clear in His teaching that it can never be misunderstood.

(Bartholomeusz, 2002)

Similar views are projected by Buddhist monks, as can be seen in the following excerpt from an essay by the head of the London-based Buddhist Vihara and Sangha Nayaka of Great Britain:

Buddhism never admits any means which justifies violence in any form or bloody revolution to bring about a just social order. It clearly defines as just those deeds that are free from violence and conducive to the welfare and happiness of the individual and society. (Vajiragnana, 1992)

In contradistinction to Hall and Vajiragnana's glorifying account, monks as well as laity in Sri Lanka are increasingly raising their voices for eradicating the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam by means of violence, arguing that 'preservation of the integrity of Sri Lanka is tantamount to "just cause" for war' (Bartholomeusz, 2002).

As the history of Buddhism in China, Mongolia, Tibet, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Korea, and Japan amply testifies, the rise and fall of Buddhism in a country has always been intimately linked with the political power of that country. The religion has always depended on a monastic class for its sustenance, which in turn has often depended on state patronage. When patronage has been wanting, as in the case of Sri Lanka during the Chola and Orissan occupations, the monastic class dwindled, causing decay in the religion. And in order to safeguard its existence the monastic community has always co-operated with the state, especially in time of crises. It is ironic that the prac-

tioners of Buddhism, whose philosophy is founded upon a recognition of the transience of life, have often tried desperately to hang on to permanence through political power.

This is not to deny that pacifism is engrained in Buddhism, but merely to point out that one of the unresolved contradictions within Buddhism concerns the relationship of *dharma* to political power. As Tambiah (1976, p. 40–2) explains, *dharma* in Theravāda Buddhism is conceived at two levels: 'the *dharma*, as cosmic law and as truth (the seeker of which is the renouncing *bhikkhu*'); and 'the *dharma* of the righteous ruler, which attempts to give order to this world'. In this scheme, the former encompasses the latter.

From Violence to Righteousness?

The total application of *dharma* in politics insists on non-violence and compassion in statecraft. However, practical and mundane considerations have led all great Buddhist rulers to renounce violence and apply compassion only after their empires were built. The *Anguttara Nikāya* recounts that the Buddha himself admitted that in his previous births he was many times a righteous king, but he renounced violence only after conquering by the sword (Hare, 1935, p. 54, cited by Tambiah, 1976, p. 45).

The most famous historical example of passing from violence and bloodshed to righteousness is that of the Emperor Aśoka (reigned 274–232 BC). Aśoka served as the 'pacification model' for many Theravāda kingdoms, in which 'the king represented . . . the propagator of Buddhist precepts, and as the overseer and guardian of the mortals of his subdued territory' (Tambiah, 1976, p. 46–7). Following this model founded on *dharma*, as Tambiah proceeds to show, Buddhist monarchs of Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand 'either turn[ed] themselves into absolute monarchs practising a degree of both liberality and tyranny unknown in India or suffer[ed] from the shifting sands of instability and disorder in their domestic, and external relations' (1976, p. 53).

The dialectics of pacifism and violence are revealed in the structure of Devol Māduā –

the outer frame embodying pacifism, and the inner frame violence. The transition between the two is the intermediate frame, where the performers as well as the participants propitiate the popular deities (Episodes 2 to 11), and then seek their blessings (Episodes 15 to 18). However, it is significant that the journey from the outer frame to the inner, then back to the outer frame, does not encompass violence leading to suppression of the 'Other' (i.e., Devol), but violence leading to accommodation of the 'Other'. Consequently, Devol is accorded a place on the same footing as Pāttini. Obviously, the transition is difficult, and has to be mediated by Kātārāgāmā who, representing the Veddas, was also an immigrant. Thus, the ritual embodies a problematic desire of accommodating the 'Other' (i.e., the Tamils), which, as the violence in real life testifies, remains unfulfilled.

Rituals, as genres of social action, 'confront problems and contradictions of the social process, difficulties arising in the course of social life in communities' (Turner, 1987, p. 94). What Devol Māduā confronts, or attempts to confront, is that the application of *dharma* in statecraft generates the contradiction of violence and pacifism. It proposes a definite process, which, as I have suggested, is set to work through the three frames. It is a 'declaration of form against indeterminacy' (Moore, 1977, p. 16–17, cited by Turner, 1987, p. 94), the latter in this case being the threat of possible chaos born out of violence. However, it is another question as to how efficacious the ritual is, because violence continues in Sri Lanka, riding its waves of peaks and doldrums.

Perhaps the notion of the 'indigenous people' itself is a fictive construct manufactured by the demagogues of nationalism, who serve only the Third World bourgeoisie. And perhaps the value of Buddhism lies not in the application of *dharma* in statecraft or in upholding the indigenous-national ideology

of the state. Functions of state and Buddhist philosophy are too far apart to attempt any kind of synthesis. If ritual is transformative, and is to be an expressive act 'with the underlying conviction that such performance will or may be causally effective' (Beattie, 1977, p. 35, quoted by Jennings, 1995, p. 14), perhaps someone – somewhere in the 'Island of Dharma' – should heed Kātārāgāmā's mediation.

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