

Buddhism Transformed

RELIGIOUS CHANGE
IN SRI LANKA

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PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS
PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY

this situation the cruel image of the mother that develops in the mind of the child can be projected onto Kālī. If confronted with the question, people will say that Kālī is not a demoness but a goddess. Yet the term "*deviyō*" is not spontaneously applied to her. In ordinary discourse she is referred to and addressed as Kālī Māñiyō or Ammā ("Kālī Mother"), never Kālī Deviyō (the "goddess Kālī"). By contrast Partinī is both Māñiyō or Ammā ("mother") and Partinī Deviyō ("goddess"). This suggests that Kālī, even more than Partinī, is tied closely to the infantile perception of the mother.

We are not suggesting, however, that the good mother image is totally moribund; it still exists but is no longer projected onto Partinī, since Partinī no longer can combine in a single image both the emotional and the practical. The loving mother is projected onto another omnipresent being in the public pantheon—the Buddha himself. The Buddha, as contrasted with Partinī, has little say over man's material interests: people do not ask him for health, wealth, or freedom from disease. The purely loving aspect of the mother can be canalized into the figure of the Buddha, who appears in the contemporary *Bōdhi pūjā* cult as the "mother Buddha."²⁸ By contrast Kālī, like the old Partinī, combines the pragmatic and the emotional. In this context it is surely inevitable that the sphere of Kālī's influence must widen. In this connection let us note that over the last few years "tutories" for coaching people for government examinations and for teaching English have mushroomed everywhere and have even reached remote villages. We would not be surprised if Kālī too follows the path of these tutories into the villages of contemporary Sri Lanka.²⁹

²⁸ See chap. 11.

²⁹ These tutories and typing schools (and at one time weaving and embroidery schools) serve an important unrecognized motive and function in providing an opportunity for sexually frustrated young men and women to flee home (temporarily) and seek the company of the opposite sex.

CHAPTER 5

Kataragama, a Center of Hindu-Buddhist Syncretism

The Popularity of the Shrine

In modern Sri Lanka the religious center that attracts the most indigenous visitors and is the greatest focus of interest and emotion is Kataragama, an ancient shrine situated far from any city in the scrub jungle in the extreme southeast corner of the island. Its annual festival, starting on the first day of the new moon (*pura pālavīya*) of the month of Āsāḷa (generally July–August) and ending with "water curting" and "water sports" on the morning after the full moon (*ava pālavīya*), is also the most important religious occasion of the year. The pageant of the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, which symbolically expresses the Buddha's suzerainty over the nation and its gods and which is held during the same season, is a great international tourist attraction, and hordes of Sinhala people, especially from the surrounding Kandyan villages, go to watch it; but that is nowadays more a cultural spectacle and an entertainment than an object of piety. Most religious festivals and places of pilgrimage offer entertainment as well as spiritual solace, and Kataragama offers entertainment too; but going there is considered a serious business. Moreover, Kataragama is now busy throughout the year and is visited by people of all social classes and all nominal religious affiliations. An extremely wealthy upper-class lady,¹ born an Anglican but now claiming to have "no religion," told us that whenever she and her husband planned to go "in a frivolous spirit" something went wrong; for instance, when her husband planned to be back for a certain horse race, an accident delayed them. One is not to presume that

¹ She is classed as a Burgher (a person of mixed indigenous and European descent), now married to a Sinhala.

one can time one's journey or otherwise control it without Skanda's help. On the other hand, her journeys when seriously undertaken always went well. Once a close relative had been charged with involvement in an attempted coup d'état. She promised Skanda, just in her mind, not by any overt act, that if he was released from prison within a certain time, she would walk the twelve miles from Karagama to Tissamahārāma. He was, and she did it, though (she claimed) she had never before walked more than the three miles of a golf course; nevertheless, she felt as fresh at the end as when she started.

The lady's walk is not the usual way of fulfilling a vow to the god of Karagama; it recalls the "sponsored" activities with which many people of good will in the modern West "earn merit" and raise money for charities. Traditional Tamil Hindu devotees might shave their heads or roll in the hot dust around the god's shrine; both they and Sinhala Buddhists might bring offerings. Nowadays one can witness more spectacular activities—firewalking, hanging from hooks, pulling carts by means of hooks fastened into one's back—though the motivation for these acts is not necessarily retrospective (fulfilling a vow) but may also be prospective (acquiring the power bestowed by the god's grace). Nevertheless, the point we are making is that there are very few households in Colombo where one could now feel surprised to be told at any time of year that family members were making the trip to Karagama. Christians have no official excuse in terms of their own affiliation. Muslims, on the other hand, have a shrine there to a holy man (*pir*) called Pālkuḍibāva, and they claimed to us that the mosque, which has local associations, was three hundred years old.² In this Muslim enclosure during the Āṣāḷa festival members of the Rifai sect cut themselves with knives and stick spikes into their skulls. Non-Muslims rarely enter this enclosure and play no part in its proceedings. On the other hand, some of the hook hangers in the main area are Muslims; and the mosque used to rent out the carts that hook hangers hire for their purposes—as one can see from the little green Muslim flags attached to the scaffolds.

Karagama is well endowed with Buddhist *sacralia*. Tissamahārāma, twelve miles away, is one of the traditional sixteen sites of Buddhist pil-

² For accounts of the Muslim shrine see Paul Wirz, *Kataragama: The Holiest Place in Ceylon*, trans. from the German by Davis Bera Pralle (Colombo, 1972), and M. C. A. Hassan, *The Story of Kataragama, Mosque and Shrine* (Colombo: United Printers, 1968).

grimage in Sri Lanka and is rich in historical associations. It is from this part of the island, according to national chronicles, that King Duṇḍuga-muṇu in the second century B.C. set out on his successful venture to reconquer his capital, Anurādhapura, and the whole island from the Tamil invaders. Another large Buddhist stupa, the Kiri Vehera, stands less than a quarter of a mile from the Karagama shrine (locally called Maha Dē-vālē, "the Great Shrine," though physically it is small), and the shrine itself stands virtually in the shade of a large *bō* tree. The shrine's popularity with Buddhists is recent. It was connected to Tissa by a paved road in 1949 and by bus in 1952. It was after this that Buddhists arrived en masse and soon came to outnumber Hindus. In 1973 the official estimate was that 800,000 pilgrims visited the shrine. This might be an exaggeration and our own estimate, admittedly tentative, is that about 550,000 pilgrims visited Karagama during the whole of 1973, which means about one in every twenty-seven people.³ However, the numbers visiting Karagama during the festival season vary from year to year, depending on political and economic vicissitudes.⁴

*The Atmosphere*⁵

The sacred area of Karagama is across a small river, the Māṇik Gaṅga, and is noted for its associations with the god and his mistress. As the pilgrim approaches the river he notices the large number of shops and stands selling *pējā vaṭṭi*, or trays of offerings, generally consisting of various kinds of fruit. The fruits and other religious wares are colorfully displayed, and the shops are decorated with the god's color, red. At another point of the river crossing are the *kāvāḍi* stands where one can rent a *kāvāḍi*, a peacock arch of the god. The devotee generally bathes in the river and joins a *kāvāḍi* group, who then dance all the way up to the god's shrine (and other shrines) to the accompaniment of exuberant dance music.

Once one crosses the river, itself a symbolic act, one is in the larger area of the Karagama shrine premises. The main shrine of the god is a small, unimpressive building; next to it is a yet smaller shrine for the god's elder

³ For details see Gananath Obeyesekere, "Social Change," pp. 377–96.

⁴ For example, in some recent seasons the numbers have been drastically reduced by political unrest.

⁵ This section has been reproduced with a few changes from Obeyesekere, *Madusa's Hair*.

brother, Gaṇeśa, and close to Gaṇeśa's shrine are two recently constructed shrines for Viṣṇu and the Buddha. The area of the main shrine is connected to the shrine of the god's mistress Vallī Ammā by a narrow street a few hundred yards long. The back of the main shrine is connected by a similar street to the ancient Buddhist stupa, the Kiri Vēhera, with its beautiful white dome dominating the landscape. On the left of the god's shrine, but physically separate, is the shrine of his legitimate spouse Dēvasēnā or Tēvānī Ammā. This shrine is of considerable importance for Hindus, but not for Buddhists. There are many other subsidiary shrines scattered over the sacred premises. The mosque is near the Vallī Ammā shrine.

The central drama of the annual festival is the grand procession that leaves the main shrine for the Vallī shrine every night for fifteen days. It celebrates the god's joyous union with his mistress Vallī Ammā. A notable feature of this pageant is that the god does not visit the shrine of his first wife and legitimate spouse, Tēvānī Ammā (Dēvasēnā).

The fortnight's pageant culminates with the ritual of water cutting, which ordinary people believe commemorates the washing of the deity's clothes, polluted by sexual intercourse. (Originally the rite was intended to control the element of water in the environment.) After the water cutting the assembled throng let themselves go. They sport in the water (*diya keliya*) and splash themselves and each other, and there is a cathartic and exuberant display of emotion. The pageant celebrates the god's passion and sensuality; it is a glorification of the life of the senses. So are the recently introduced *kāvaḍi* dances; the people dance before the god, men and women together in groups, young and old, many of them lost in ecstasy. In contrast with these is another feature of Kataragama: a number of penitents suffer in abject humiliation and self-torture before the god. These peculiar activities are no longer confined entirely to Hindus and Muslims; but for the most part the Buddhists remain awed spectators. For the typical Sinhala Buddhist the most significant aspect of the festival is the passion and the sensuality, the celebration of the god's illicit love life.

But Kataragama cannot be studied in isolation from the Buddhist part of the complex. The pilgrim pays the conventional homage to the deity, an offering of fruit, and then he goes to the Kiri Vēhera (the Buddhist stupa). To do so he must go past the back entrance of the Kataragama shrine premises along a street that connects the shrine with the Buddhist stupa. As soon as the pilgrim passes the gate he is confronted with beggars and destitutes lining the street to the Kiri Vēhera. Here are the lame, the

decrepit, bodies riddled with sores, the sick and the aged hovering near death's door.

The contrast in ethos is dramatic: the pilgrim is confronted with another aspect of worldly life—suffering, impermanence. He passes on and then comes to the shops of vendors selling almost nothing but white and red lotuses, Buddhist symbols of purity. Then he reaches the Kiri Vēhera, an impressive white stupa. The pilgrim now recites Pāli verses praising the Buddha and recalling the impermanence of all physical things, which are compared to the fading flowers with their evanescent scent. There is a very different atmosphere here—serenity, calm, stillness. The noise and bustle of the god's shrine are not heard here, not even the cacophony of the loudspeakers that the Sinhālas aptly call the “iron mouth.”

If the predominant color of Kataragama is red, the color of the Kiri Vēhera is white; if one place represents the celebration of the senses, the other celebrates their subjugation and transcendence. Underlying all of this is the powerful “myth model” of the Buddha's own renunciation of the world: his enjoyment of a life of hedonism; his confrontation with the four signs—sickness, old age, death, and the model of their transcendence in the yellow-robed mendicant; his final achievement of salvation—a calm, a blowing out, *nirvāṇa*. The pilgrim also has made his full progress: he crosses the river and leaves the everyday reality of mundane existence; from there he goes on to the passion and sensuality of Kataragama, then to the shock of life's suffering and misery, and finally to a realization of release from both passion and misery—all aspects of impermanence—into the serenity and calm of the Kiri Vēhera.

This relationship between the shrine and the temple is central to understanding Kataragama as a collective representation. Even the beggars' position in the appropriate street (*vāḍiya*) is not due to conscious design, but to the operation of myth models subscribed to by most Sri Lankans, including the beggars, who know where to place themselves. In the last few years this collective representation of Kataragama has changed with the extensive renovations and alterations at the premises. The embourgeoisement at Kataragama, for example, has pushed the beggars out of the streets into more segregated spots within the premises, but much of the collective meaning is still retained.

The physical layout of Kataragama has one unusual feature. The pilgrim must cross the river and enter the shrine premises: this forces him to pay attention to the god before the Buddha since the Kiri Vēhera, the Bud-

dhist part of the complex, lies well beyond the god's shrine (*dēvālē*). This seems to violate the norm that one must worship the Buddha before going to the *dēvālē*. But in spite of the distance to the Kiri Vehera the pilgrim in fact *can* pay homage to the Buddha before Skanda: the Buddha has been brought into the *dēvālē* premises. In the shrine room to the right of the god's shrine stands a large Buddha sculpture. And a Buddhist temple has recently been built almost at the very entrance of the shrine. Once inside the shrine's premises the pilgrim also has a chance to pay homage to the Buddha at the large *bō* tree behind the shrine of the god. This is supposed to be a sapling from the sacred *bō* tree at Anurādhapura, itself a sapling of the very tree under which the Buddha achieved Enlightenment; and hence the *bō* tree represents the Buddha himself or is at least a symbol of the Enlightenment. But in reality the physical layout practically forces the pilgrim to pay homage to Skanda before the Buddha. As he enters the premises he immediately faces the shrine of the god: it is not possible to ignore him and bypass him to go to the Buddha. One must at least smash a coconut on the rock slab in front of the shrine and acknowledge the god's awesome presence.

Kataragama: A Catalyst for Change

In the shade of the great *bō* tree behind the main shrine, during the final days of the Āṣaḷa festival, congregate the ecstatics and religious innovators, the *sāmi* and the *māññiṇī* ("mothers"). It is in their discussions that are forged and from that assemblage that are diffused both theories and practices of the new religious orientation of the spirit religion. For example, though the role is so new to their culture, there are now quite a few Sinhala *sāmi* who are acting as "leaders" at new-style firewalking ceremonies at various Sinhala shrines up and down the country. It is almost as if every Sinhala shrine that holds an annual pageant (*perabāra*) thinks it necessary to include firewalking. When we spoke to one such gentleman, the aptly initialled T.N.T. Sirisēna Dissanāyaka, at the end of June 1975, he was engaged as chief firewalker at a series of festivals for most of the following three months. In fact firewalking, like *kāvālī* dancing, has even been commercialized and is frequently staged at hotels and nightclubs to entertain foreign tourists, so presumably it now affords some people a living.

Kataragama has become a great melting pot of Sri Lankan society. It is

the one place where all the religions of the nation—Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant—meet and mutually influence one another. The different kinds of groups who congregate here are receptive to all sorts of new ideas, some transient, some lasting, some trivial, some profound. Let us give a trivial example. In 1979 we were completely taken aback when several firewalkers, including women, shook hands with us in the European fashion instead of using the South Asian form of greeting with palms together. They also shook hands with each other. Clearly the new custom had developed since our previous visit in 1977. It seemed very likely that the custom was picked up from foreign tourists both at Kataragama and elsewhere. They readily accepted the custom because the handshake seems conducive to the warmth and close camaraderie sought by the ecstatics. A more significant example we will discuss in Chapter 11: how in 1981 a young man performed a new Buddhist ritual known as the *Bōdhi pūjā* at the *bō* tree behind the main shrine. The traditional priests (*kaṇṇu-rāḷas*) of the god (not the new *sāmis*, mind you) were so impressed by this that they urged him to stay on and conduct the new ritual. One of the priests got the young man to perform a *Bōdhi pūjā* blessing for his own mother. The examples could be multiplied.

The strangest behavior is not only tolerated at Kataragama, but even encouraged—if it is given a religious dressing. People wear bizarre costumes; some talk to themselves; others let themselves go. Men and women cry, rage, laugh, dance; women in particular are constantly getting possessed. Visions are experienced both in dreams and in hypnotic states not only by ecstatics but also by ordinary devotees; some of them give rise to myths. People talk about their experiences, and others recount the strange experiences of others. Most of them pertain to the vision of the god, whom some see walking across the fire before his human devotees. For many others he appears as an old man. (Indeed, if any venerable-looking old man were to speak to a devotee, this might be interpreted as a direct vision of Skanda.) The Buddhist monk Siddhārtha told us that on three occasions the god appeared to him in a dream as a small boy and urged him to occupy the mountain of Vāḍaṇṭikanda! We shall see below that he has similarly appeared to the Venerable Ānanda Maitreya and to a Sinhala judge, whom he even persuaded to adjudicate against Hindu priests in favor of Buddhist monks. Such experiences and their continual recounting have their influence far beyond the boundary of Kataragama and set a decisive stamp on contemporary Sinhala religiosity.

At Kataragama ecstatic worship of the god takes two emotional directions. Joy, celebration, and catharsis are to be seen in the *kāvāḍi* dancing and the water cutting; tension and agony in the firewalking, rolling in the hot sands, and even more violent forms of self-mortification and mutilation. During the period for which we have good evidence, the last couple of centuries, the latter type of practice used to be confined to Hindu penitents and Muslim Sufis. To account for them, Buddhists had a myth (which may not be old) that the god was torturing Tamils to punish them for betraying him during the war between the Tamils and the Sinhala in King Duṭṭagāmuṇi's time.

However, during the period of our fieldwork this myth was fast losing its popularity because some Sinhala were adopting these uncomfortable practices. At the same time, the erotic character of the god's worship has intensified and involved increasing numbers of Sinhala people. The combined effect of these two developments has amounted to a virtual takeover of Kataragama by the Sinhala.

The invasion of Sinhala religious life by Tamil *bhakti* religiosity is a major theme in our account of cultural change. In this chapter we shall describe the past of Kataragama in myth and history, to draw the contrast with what has recently taken place. We shall then show how and why Sinhala have largely taken control of Kataragama's institutions, formal and informal. This will lead us back to the joyful and erotic side of the god's worship. That worship is a mass phenomenon, and we follow the pattern of the preceding three chapters by suggesting an explanation for it in the socioeconomic changes that have affected most of the Sinhala population, especially the poor.

One major feature of the Sinhala takeover we postpone, however, to Chapter 12. The background to the Sinhalicization of the firewalk is treated here as part of the recent history of the shrine, and we shall have something to say of the rank and file of Sinhala firewalkers. But the individuals who have led this takeover, as "leaders" (a technical term) of the firewalk, are mostly drawn from the middle class and to explain their background and attitudes we need first to describe Protestant Buddhism. An account of them and of the new mythology for which they are responsible therefore belongs in the book's concluding section, in which we illustrate and discuss how the new trends in the spirit religion and in Buddhism proper appear to complement and influence each other.

The Myths of Kataragama: Skanda and Valli Ammā

Those myths of the god Skanda with which people in Kataragama are familiar are basically common to South India and Sri Lanka and to Hindus and Buddhists alike. The Sanskrit myth that deals with the god's leading a divine army to conquer the *asura* ("antigod") Śūrapadma is barely known to Buddhists. For them the starting point of the mythological tradition is the god's coming to Sri Lanka and his falling in love with the woman of the wilds, Valli Ammā ("mother Valli"). Why did Skanda leave India for Sri Lanka? A pan-Indian myth has it that his mother Umā summoned him and his brother Gaṇeśa to circle the world and told them that whoever won the race would be rewarded by a golden mango. Skanda impulsively went around the world on his peacock vehicle, while Gaṇeśa simply circled around his mother. Naturally, Gaṇeśa, who is mama's darling, wins the mango, and Skanda, chagrined, leaves his mother and his legitimate spouse Devasēnā (known in popular parlance as Tēvānī Ammā, "mother Tēvānī") and comes to Sri Lanka. Here the myth tradition of Skanda's relationship to his illegitimate spouse Valli takes over.

This tradition is an ancient Dravidian one first recorded in *Narttinaī* 82.4, which is part of the bardic (*vaṅgam*) corpus of Tamil poetry compiled in the first few centuries of the Christian Era.⁶ The sacred geography of the god's erotic exploits is localized around various shrines of the god in South India (such as Palani) and at Kataragama. The standard version is found in the popular Tamil *Kaṇṭavapurāṇam* of Kacciyappacivācāriyar and is summarized by Shulman.⁷

Two daughters of Viṣṇu performed *tapas* ["austerities"] . . . to be wed to Murukaṇ. By the grace of Murukaṇ, one of them was born as the daughter of Indra and raised by his white elephant; hence she was named Tēyvayāṇai.⁸ After the war in which Murukaṇ defeated Śūrapadma, Indra gave his daughter in marriage to Murukaṇ. . . .

The second daughter was born to a deer impregnated by the lustful

⁶ Kamil Zvelebil, "The Beginnings of *Bhakti* in South India," *Temenos* 13 (1977): 233.

⁷ David Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 275-78. Reprinted with permission of Princeton University Press. We have omitted a few details and added a few words in square brackets.

⁸ This is a folk etymology based on *yēṇai*, "elephant"; in reality Tam. *Tēyvayāṇai* is undoubtedly derived from *Devasēnā* [Shulman's note].

glance of the sage Śivamuni, who was performing *tāpas* on Vallimalai. Seeing that the girl, who was born with bangles of fine workmanship on her arms, was not of her own kind, the deer abandoned her in the pit in which she had given birth, and there she was found by the lord of the Kuṇṇavar hunters, Nampi, who longed for a daughter. The hunter chief adopted her and named her Valli, since she was born in a pit from which old men scrape the roots of the *vallī*.

When Valli reached the age of twelve, she was sent to guard the ripening millet from a raised platform . . . ; she frightened away birds and beasts with a sling-shot and the cry of "*ālōlam*." To grant her grace, Murukan came from Kanṭavarai to Tanikāi. There he was met by Nārada, who sang the praises of Valli. Murukan sent Nārada away and placed within himself the grievous disease of love. Taking the form of a hunter, the love-sick god went to the millet fields and there beheld Valli. He said to her, "Lady, hear me—did Brahmā fail to provide those barbarians with knowledge, that they have made you sit here guarding the miller? Tell me your name; or, if you will not say, tell me the name of your village; or, if you will not tell me even that, then show me the way thither." As he was pleading, her father suddenly arrived with his retinue of hunters, and Murukan transformed himself into a *veṅkai* tree. Nampi gave his daughter some *vallī* roots, mangoes, honey, and the milk of a wild cow. Then the hunters noticed the new tree. "This tree was never here before; no good will come of it," they said, and made preparations to cut it down and dig up its roots. Nampi stopped them. "How did this tree come to be here?" he asked, scrutinizing the face of his daughter. Alarmed, Valli said, "I do not know how it came; it appeared, I think, like magic (*māyā*). I have been trembling at the thought that something that was not here before has sprung up so suddenly."

"Be not afraid; the tree came here to be a sweet companion for you," said the hunter, and left with his men. Murukan resumed human form and said, "Daughter of the Kuṇṇavar, I shall never leave you. How could anyone depart from you, who are like life to a body? My life is in your hands. Watching the fields is low, demeaning work; come with me, and the very women of heaven will worship you, and I will give you perfect gifts."

The daughter of the hunters understood. "I am but a humble girl who guards the fields of miller," she said, ashamed. "You are a leader

who rules the whole world. Is it not wrong . . . for you even to speak of embracing me?"

Suddenly the drums of the hunters were heard. Valli urged Murukan to flee; instead he transformed himself into an old ascetic. He bowed to Nampi, and the hunters' lord asked what he desired. "I have come to rid myself of age and my heart of its delusion; I wish to bathe in the Kumari (spring) of this, your mountain," replied the god. Said Nampi, "Father, bathe in that *tīrtha* ['sacred bathing place'] and be a companion to our daughter, who is all alone." He gave Valli fresh fruits and millet and departed.

The old man asked Valli for food, and, when she had given him from her honey and fruits, he complained of thirst. She told him of a spring on the mountain, on the other side of seven hills; he asked her to show him the way there. He drank from the spring as if parched by the heat; then he asked her to satisfy his desire. "You are saying things which must not be said; if the hunters knew, they would cause you harm. Are you mad, that you speak without understanding?" Saying this, Valli hastened away. Murukan, watching her go, thought of his elephant-headed brother Gaṇeśa. Gaṇeśa took the form of a wild elephant in Valli's path. She fled back to the arms of the old man: "Save me and I will do as you wish!" Murukan embraced her and revealed to her his true form.

Valli returned to the miller fields. Her companion noticed the change in her manner. Murukan appeared again as a hunter and asked the companion if she had seen a wild elephant go past. Guessing he was really seeking Valli, she told him to leave, lest the fierce hunters take his life. He threatened to mount the *mātāl* hobby-horse⁹ and ride through the streets of the village if he were not allowed to meet Valli; succumbing to this threat, the companion became an accomplice to their secret union.

When the millet was ripe, the hunters, preparing for the harvest, sent Valli back to the village. She pined for her lover, and her foster mother . . . and her mother noticed that she was not well. They locked her in the house and consulted women (skilled in divination).

⁹ According to the *śāstram* conventions, a rejected suitor might ride a hobby-horse fashioned from the leaves of the palmyra palm in a public place in order to shame the beloved into accepting him [Shulman's note].

"She is possessed by the spirit (*cūr*) of these mountain slopes," they said, not knowing her to be possessed by the enemy of Cūr.¹⁰ The hunters therefore held a ceremony of ecstatic dance . . . for Murukan. During the dance, the god descended upon the wild dancer . . . and indicated by signs that he had taken possession of Valli while she was out in the fields, but that her sickness would depart if he were worshiped. No sooner was this uttered than Valli arose restored; her foster mother and mother praised Murukan.

Not finding Valli in the fields, Murukan lamented and wandered over the mountain. At midnight he stood outside the hut of Nampi. Valli's companion saw him there and urged him to elope with his beloved; with her help the couple were united and fled the village.

In the morning they were pursued by the angry Kuṇavar, who found them in a grove. They showered arrows at Murukan, but at the crow of his cock they all fell dead. Valli mourned her relatives and, at Nārada's urging, Murukan revived them and agreed to their request that he return to the village and marry Valli in a proper ceremony.

The Vāddas, Sinhalas, and Tamils of Sri Lanka have all localized the myth in Kataragama. The idea that the events in the myth occurred at Kataragama is also well known in South India and has influenced their traditions. Zvelebil persuasively argues that in the earliest Tamil literature Skanda was known as Ceyon and later as Murugan (youthful), a deity associated with the mountain regions. It was much later that he was fused with the Sanskrit deity Skanda, alias Kumāra.¹¹ It should be noted that the Sinhalas have always interpreted Kanda not as a Sinhalization of Skanda, but as the Sinhala word for "mountain," and Sinhala mythology refers to his six separate heads being put together by his mother (or father) into a "mountain of heads" or *is-kanda* that then became the Sinhala folk etymology for "Skanda." The Seligmanns persuasively argue that Skanda was fused with the attributes of a popular mountain deity of the Sinhalas and Vāddas known as Kande Deviyō ("the god of the mountain") and suggest that the unimposing shrine for Skanda once may have been a

¹⁰ Cūr (Skt. Śrīpādma) is in the Tamil tradition the major enemy of Murukan [Shulman's note].

¹¹ Zvelebil, "The Beginnings of *Bhakti*," pp. 245, 249.

shrine for Kande Deviyō.¹² One might add that the identification may have been facilitated by other cultural conditions. Even in South India popular shrines for Skanda like Palani are located in mountains and (maybe more importantly) among mountainous or wild people. Many scholars have noted that the marriage of Valli Ammā, the wild woman, with Skanda on one level of *symbolic meaning* might well indicate an articulation of hunters ("wild people") into the larger society through the mythic and ritual order dominated by peasant cultivators. This union of people radically alters the Sanskrit orientation of the cult as expressed, for example, in the *Skanda Pūraṇa*. Note that in Kataragama the god is ritually offered venison, and at one time, it is said, was even given iguana meat. Before the Protestant Buddhist embourgeoisement of Kataragama after the fifties and its official conversion into a sacred city in 1961, venison and other meat of wild animals (except the peacock, which represents the god's mount) were freely available in Kataragama. Zvelebil clearly shows that the god's consumption of meat is an ancient tradition stemming from the period when he was more or less exclusively the god of South Indian mountain folk.¹³ It is after all Vādda women, sixteen in all, their breasts covered only with the drape of their saris, who attend the god on his furtive journey to his mistress. These women symbolize the Vādda lineage of Valli Ammā. The senior priests of the god's shrine also claim descent from the same lineage. Thus even today, in spite of Buddhization and Sanskritization, the cult maintains its association with "wild people" of the mountains. It is, of course, impossible to determine whether the myth of Skanda and Valli Ammā was diffused into the Vādda country from South India or whether it was a part of an ancient myth shared by the wild people of both South India and Sri Lanka and continued through oral tradition among contemporary Vāddas. It is clear, however, that this myth was *not* introduced into Kataragama by the recent South Indian plantation workers. A text in the nineteenth-century Nevill collection entitled *Kaṇḍa Sura Varuṇā* ("Praise of God (S)kanda") reiterates the basic myth quoted above. Nevill dates it to A.D. 1642 or 1542, though it could be later.¹⁴ This text describes the city of Palaniyā, the abode of the god, but betrays no aware-

¹² C. G. Seligmann and Brenda Z. Seligmann, *The Vāddas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), pp. 187–88.

¹³ Zvelebil, "The Beginnings of *Bhakti*," p. 230.

¹⁴ Nevill, *Sinhala Verse* 2: 188.

ness that Palaniya is Palani, an important shrine (city) of the god in South India.

Kataragama: A Synoptic History

The sources do not permit us to trace the vicissitudes of the Kataragama cult in ancient and medieval times, but the deity has long been known in Sri Lanka. The first clear reference to the god in the *Mahāvamsa* dates from the seventh century; while uttering incantations to the god, a prince angered him so that the peacock on which the god was riding pecked out his eye.¹⁵ We have heard the identical story told of a magician in the Kalutara District many years ago. This image of the god has changed little; then as well as now the god can give magic power to his devotees, but any slight lack of devotion or inadvertent irreverence will provoke his wrath. But up to the fourteenth century there is little reference to his popularity as a member of the public pantheon or as one of the guardian deities. Paranavithana in his discussion of the civilization of medieval Sri Lanka says that references to Viṣṇu (Upulvan), Sāman, Vibhīṣaṇa, and Skanda are found in the literature and inscriptions of the fourteenth century.¹⁶ The Lankā-tīlaka inscription of the mid-fourteenth century refers to images of this god and others to be installed in that temple. Other fourteenth-century references like the *Nikāya Saṃgraha* clearly refer to Skanda Kumāra along with Upulvan (Viṣṇu), Sāman, and Vibhīṣaṇa as the four guardians of the land.¹⁷ By the fifteenth century the deity is well known, and there are references to him in the *Sandāśa* (epistolary poem) literature of the time. This literature and popular religious songs also refer to a shrine dedicated to him in the fifteenth-century kingdom of Kōṭṭe, south of that city. From the sixteenth century onwards reference to Skanda increases, and there is no question of his importance in the Sinhala pantheon. The *Jinakālamālī*, written in Siam in 1516, refers to Khattagāma (i.e., Kataragama) as one of the guardian gods of Sri Lanka.¹⁸ It is also clear that by this period the

¹⁵ *Cūḷavamsa*, p. 193, chap. 57, verses 8–9.

¹⁶ S. Paranavitana, "The Civilization of the Period: Buddhism," in *History of Ceylon*, vol. 1, pt. 2 (Colombo: University of Ceylon Press, 1960), p. 765.

¹⁷ N. Madiyasse, *The Art and Architecture of the Gampola Period (1341–1415 A.D.)* (Colombo: M. D. Gunasena, 1965), p. 10.

¹⁸ Paranavitana, "The Civilization," p. 764.

god was known by the name of his central shrine at Kataragama. Earlier he was known as Kumāra or Mahāsena or Kanda Kumāra.

Let us briefly consider the importance of this deity in the Kandyan Kingdom (1474–1815). For Knox, Skanda is the "great God" "who striketh such terror into the Chingulaves, that those who otherwise are Enemies to this King [Rajasimha II of Kandy] and have served both Portuguese and Dutch against him, yet would never assist either to make Invasions this way."¹⁹ The awe in which Skanda was held was a continuous phenomenon. John Davy in the early nineteenth century also said that the god was not loved but feared and he could not get an artist to draw his picture.²⁰ His role as a god of war becomes prominent in the Kandyan period. In about the year 1765 the Dutch governor Falk, who was at least nominally in control of this region, wrote an account of Kandyan religion based on a questionnaire that he sent to Buddhist monks about religious matters, including the cult of the god of Kataragama. This account makes no reference to penances or firewalking, but describes the main procession in his honor, the visits to Valī Ammā culminating in water cutting and water sports.²¹ This account links the god to Buddhism, for he is said to have made obeisance to the Buddha and obtained his permission to help humans. The account also explicitly states that he is one of the "inferior gods."²² He is said to be a "god of the earth," living under the sea just above the world of the *asuras* ("antigods," an archaic category inherited from Hindu mythology). The Buddha ordained that "men should respect but not worship him, as one of the powerful inferior Gods."²³ But his shrine at Kataragama was obviously popular, since the king himself not only sent presents to it, but permitted his subjects to visit it in great numbers through pilgrim routes, well known even today though now little used. In the city of Kandy itself Skanda ranked with Nātha, Viṣṇu, and Partinī as one of the four guardian deities of the realm and of Bud-

¹⁹ Knox, *Historical Relation*, pp. 6–7.

²⁰ John Davy, *An Account of the Interior of Ceylon and of Its Inhabitants with Travels in That Island*, London, 1821, reprinted in the *Ceylon Historical Journal* 16 (1969): 169, 314.

²¹ "Kataragama Devīyo and the Ritual of Worship," Johnson manuscript no. 13 of the Colombo Museum, in P. E. Pieris, *Sinhale and the Patriots, 1815–1818* (Colombo: Colombo Apothecaries, 1950), pp. 695–701.

²² Elwood Upham, *Buddhist Tracts* (London: Parbury, Allen, and Company, 1833), p. 147.

²³ Pieris, *Sinhale*, p. 695.

dhism. Yet the Skanda shrine in Kandy has a curious feature: it is the only Sinhala shrine where a Tamil Brahman priest, not a Sinhala *kapurāḷa*, officiates. The reason for this apparent anomaly lies in a major feature of the Skanda cult, one which helps to explain its increasing popularity since the fifteenth century: the cult has been the focus of interaction between popular Hinduism and Buddhism.

The Brahman priest of the Skanda shrine, we believe, served very important religious needs of the court of Kandy, which became increasingly dominated by the South Indian Nayakkars of Madurai. Beginning with Rājasiṃha II (1635–1687), Kandy kings married South Indian princesses and soon South Indian Nayakkars became an influential aristocracy in the Kandyan court. In 1707 the kingship of Kandy passed completely into the hands of the Nayakkars. The Nayakkars embraced Buddhism, but it is likely that they extended their patronage to the popular South Indian god of their homeland, Murugan. Even Kīrti Śrī Rājasiṃha, the patron of the great Buddhist revival of the mid-eighteenth century, was also a Śaivite (and no doubt a Skanda devotee) in private life, since he used to daub himself with sacred ash in the Śaivite fashion.²⁴ Buddhist monks clearly resented this practice of the king, perhaps because they doubted his true allegiance to Buddhism. The pejorative remarks about Skanda by the monks who responded to the questions posed by Governor Falk in 1765 should perhaps be seen in this political context.

Other influences from South India strengthened the cult of Skanda. Immigrants such as the *karāva* and *śalāgama* castes, who mostly came from South India, may have increased its popularity. More important than these, we think, were priestly and ascetic devotees of the Skanda cult—the *paṇṭārams* and *āṇḍis*.

1. *Paṇṭāram* is a label given to a large number of groups in South India, including semitribal groups, the hill *paṇṭārams*.²⁵ However, some in Tamil Nāṭu belong to non-Brahman Śaivite castes of priests (*vellāla* and *palli*, according to Thurston) and tend to be vegetarians. There are also

²⁴ L. S. Dewaraja, *The Kandyan Kingdom, 1707–1760* (Colombo: Lake House Publishing Company, 1972), p. 111. See also K. N. O. Dharmadasa, "The Sinhalese-Buddhist Identity and the Nayakkar Dynasty in the Politics of the Kandyan Kingdom, 1739–1815," *Ceylon Journal of Historical and Social Studies*, n.s. 6, no. 1 (1976): 1–23.

²⁵ E. Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (Madras: Government Press, 1909), 6: 47.

mendicant *paṇṭārams* who come from a variety of castes; some of them eat meat, and others adopt a highly ascetic mode of existence, wearing matted locks and sandals with spikes.²⁶ Little detailed sociological information is available on *paṇṭārams*, but Dewaraja says that two well-documented waves of *paṇṭāram* immigration entered Sri Lanka in the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. According to Dewaraja these were high-caste *paṇṭāram* managers of Śaiva temples, who were absorbed into the Sinhala aristocracy.²⁷ Dewaraja also states that the title *baṇḍāra*, used later to designate Kandyan nobility, was derived from the term *paṇṭāram*. It should be noted that both Kandyan aristocrats and high-caste *paṇṭārams* claim that the terms *baṇḍāra* and *paṇṭāram* are both derived from the Sanskrit *baṇḍāra*, meaning "treasury."²⁸ According to Thurston a subcaste of the *paṇṭārams* served as priests of the Nāṭukōrtai Certiars, who both in India and in contemporary Sri Lanka are devotees of Skanda.

2. *Āṇḍi* are wandering mendicant devotees of Murugan. Thurston notes that some *āṇḍi* come from subdivisions of the *paṇṭāram*,²⁹ but others do not. King Rājasiṃha of Sitavaka (1581–1593), the apostate Sinhala king who espoused Hinduism, settled a large number of *āṇḍis* in the Hevāhāta area, but it is likely that they were, like the *paṇṭārams*, constant visitors to Sri Lanka. Place names like Āṇḍiambalama ("the resting place for *āṇḍi*") indicate their presence. The popular Sinhala folk play, *Sokari*, parodies and ridicules a figure known as *āṇḍi guru*. Skanda himself is known in Palani, his most famous South Indian shrine, as Palani Āṇḍi ("the *āṇḍi* or ascetic of Palani"). One of the Tamil operators of spikes in Kataragama today also has the surname Palani Āṇḍi and comes from a family of recent immigrants to a rubber plantation in the Galle District. It is clear that *āṇḍis* have been a continual presence in Sri Lanka and also without doubt at Kataragama.

If the Kandyan kings gave Skanda their patronage, the mendicants from South India would have brought with them the devotional and mortificatory aspects of Śaivite worship. But it is doubtful whether they could fundamentally alter the Sinhala Buddhist orientation of the Skanda cult. This orientation meant that: (a) Skanda was one of the four guardian gods and

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

²⁷ See also Thurston, *Castes and Tribes*, p. 49.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

a protector of Buddhism and the nation; (b) that he was an aspirant to Buddhahood, but unlike the other guardians, he had a long way to go to reach that goal; (c) the ritual specialists of the cult, outside the central shrine in Kandy, were Sinhala priests known as *kapurāḷa*, and Buddhist monks had no ritual role there; (d) self-mortification was not an official part of the formal cult, though individual South Indian mendicants practiced it; (e) the main ritual of the annual festival was the parade of the deity to his mistress culminating in water cutting and water sports and not, as almost everywhere in South India, the enactment of Skanda's victory over the antigods.

The central shrine at Kataragama was an important pilgrimage center in Kandyan times; also for the inhabitants of the Low Country this function was perhaps even more significant because the Portuguese had destroyed the great pilgrimage center for Viṣṇu in Devinuvara in 1588. Yet the impact of the cult on the popular level was in no way comparable with South India. In village life the deity propitiated in annual collective rituals was the goddess Pattinī. Kataragama myths were also sung at these rituals and he was formally propitiated, but he was not a central figure in these collective festivals nor was he associated, as Pattinī was, with the agricultural cycle. Probably then, as now, people who were confronted with difficult tasks made a "vow" (*bāra*) to him which they fulfilled at his annual festival at Kataragama. He may have had another attraction for Sinhalas. In the village the annual ritual dramas enacted the chastity of the goddess, her marital fidelity in the face of the fickleness of her consort. In the rituals at Kataragama we noted the enactment of the opposite theme: the consort deserts his wife for his mistress. The themes of village morality are overturned in the pilgrimage center. The deep motivational significance of this enactment has been discussed elsewhere.³⁰ By contrast the theme of Skanda's victory over *asuras*, so important for South Indian religiosity, meant nothing to Sinhalas on the level of either personality or culture. Even today Sinhala firewalkers we have interviewed are ignorant of this latter myth. Hindus have been unable to introduce the *asura* war into the dramatic enactments at Kataragama. Nevertheless they have invented their own myth: they have labelled the Buddhist stupa, the Kiri Vehera, the fortress of Sūrapadma, the *asura*!

The nineteenth century saw a dramatic decline in the popularity of the

³⁰ Obeyesekere, *Pattinī*, pp. 470–74.

cult. The Kandyan Kingdom, the last stronghold of Sinhala sovereignty, fell into the hands of the British in 1815. This crippled the cult of Nātha, the guardian of Kandyan sovereignty. Skanda was the god of war but his help had proved useless. After the conquest there were several rebellions against the British, the most serious one by Vilbāvē, who launched his campaign at the shrine of Kataragama in 1817 with the god's blessings. But Skanda failed again: the rebellion was easily crushed and the pretender executed. We noted that John Davy, a British army surgeon who visited Kataragama soon after the rebellion, around 1819, recounted the fear that people felt for the god. The shrine itself he found so decayed and neglected that he predicted the imminent demise of the pilgrimage and the cult: "The number of pilgrims now is annually diminishing, and the buildings are going to decay. In a very few years, probably, they will be level with the ground and the traveller will have difficulty in discerning their site."³¹

Demoralized by conquest, the Sinhalas did indeed neglect the Kataragama shrine throughout the nineteenth century. It is very likely that it was patronized by the few Sinhalas living in that remote area, as described by Leonard Woolf in *Village in the Jungle*, and by the Tamil people of the East Coast. Around the middle of the century, however, the cult got a fillip from the newly arrived South Indian plantation workers. These people, alienated physically, socially, and psychologically from their native land, sought solace in their popular deity, Murugan. They virtually took over the shrine in the latter part of the nineteenth century. In addition to these proletarians, the only group of people who regularly patronized the shrine was the powerful merchants and financiers of Colombo, the Tamil-speaking Nārūkoṭṭai Cettiars. These merchants had two major shrines for Skanda in Colombo, but like true devotees they felt obliged to make the annual pilgrimage to the central shrine at Kataragama. In any case the numbers at Kataragama were not large: government statistics collected by the British official in charge at the annual festival (for Tamil and Sinhala combined) were 3,500 (1871), 4,000 (1872), 6,000–7,000 (1873). These may have been underestimates, but people were afraid of a new scourge, cholera, in addition to the malaria that was now endemic in that region. The government reacted in 1873 by introducing restrictions that limited the pilgrims to a stay of four days, including the days of arrival and departure, and enforced their registration. The numbers dropped drastically:

³¹ John Davy, *An Account of the Interior*, p. 315.

1,200 (1874), 53 (1875), 44 (1877). In the next year the British Government Agent could state: "I hope this may be regarded as a defunct institution."³² The numbers were so small that in 1875 the annual procession could not be held.³³

In the early twentieth century the pilgrimage slowly rose in popularity, but not in proportion to the population of the country. In 1910, Leonard Woolf, at that time a British official in Sri Lanka, visited Kataragama and noted 3,000–4,000 pilgrims during the whole season, at a time when the general population was about 4.5 million. It was also a period when the government had relaxed the permit system (finally abolished in 1925). Cholera and smallpox were by then under control, though malaria remained a serious problem. These numbers were more or less constant till the early 1930s when, according to informant interviews, there were about 10,000–15,000 pilgrims annually, most of them Hindus from Sri Lanka or South India. In 1949 Kataragama was connected to the southern coastal road by a main road, and in 1952 buses were introduced on this route. Within twenty-five years, as noted above, annual pilgrim traffic was exceeding half a million.

The Hindu-Buddhist Confrontation at Kataragama

The shrine at Kataragama and the cult of its eponymous god have undergone many vicissitudes, but none comparable in quantity or quality to those of the last forty or fifty years. It is to this period, within living memory, that we now turn our attention. Since about 1950 most of the pilgrims to Kataragama have been Buddhists. One of our most reliable informants, an ex-official at the temple, put it this way: "In 1926 about 5,000 people were present at the final day of the procession, and one-quarter were Buddhists; in 1950 there were many more and the proportions were reversed." With the increase in popularity of the cult the procession also became more elaborate. According to the same informant, in 1926 the procession contained one elephant, two *damul* drummers, and the officials of the cult, but in 1936 an influential politician introduced Kandyan dancers, more drummers, and elephants and this process of elab-

³² *Administration Reports: Report of the Assistant Government Agent, Hambantota District* (Colombo: Government Press, 1975), p. 32.

³³ *Ibid.*

oration has been going on ever since. The main annual ritual of Kataragama has always been in Sinhala hands; the priests of the main shrine have been Sinhala, as have the lay trustee (Basnayaka Nilame) and the managers of the extensive properties owned by the temple. However, there has also been a Śaiva presence. The shrine of Dēvasēnā, who plays no role in Sinhala ritual, is Hindu and so are the shrines for a variety of Śaiva deities—Śiva himself, Kālī, and Gaṇeśa. (We have already noted the Sufi presence and a mausoleum for the Muslim saint.)

The Tamil Hindu visitors who came, both from India and from within Sri Lanka, brought with them their traditional Śaiva practices. Some of these, such as hanging oneself from a scaffold on hooks passed through the back, had been forbidden by the British administration in India, but never completely died out. Śaivas in many parts of India stick pins through their tongues, cheeks, the flesh of their arms and upper bodies; at Kataragama these pins commonly have the form of a spear, the god's emblem. They also walk on shoes crudded with nails pointing sharp end upwards.

Those who provide the paraphernalia for these ritual observances are still mainly Tamils. They own the scaffolds, the carts, the spears; and they both hire them out and fix up the devotees as they wish, passing the hooks or spikes through their flesh with such dexterity that one rarely sees any blood. In 1975 the cost of a cart was one-third of the takings or sometimes a cash payment of a few rupees. The takings come from clients who press around the cart puller once he is up on the main concourse and ask for oracles; to get a hearing they must put money in a tin can held by an assistant of the cart's owner. As for *kāvaḍi*, by 1975 most stalls were owned by Sinhalas. The arrangements for dancing *kāvaḍi* were as follows: the owner provided the band to play for each group of dancers and sent them off in groups of fifteen to twenty, whom he charged a few rupees each; if they wanted to go in smaller groups, it naturally cost more per person.

Perhaps the most spectacular Śaiva ritual associated with Kataragama is firewalking. Those who wish to walk the fire are supposed to register their names with the lay trustee the previous day. The lay trustee also appoints the "leader" (*nāyakaṇṇā*), also known as the "chief firewalker." This is a prestigious and coveted position. The leader is the last to cross; he is at the head of the fire trench and checks each firewalker as he or she is about to step onto the fire; he then permits the person to proceed by smearing some sacred ash (*vibhūti*) on the forehead as a blessing—a common Śaiva practice.

One could say that while formal control of the ceremonies has always been in Buddhist hands, the substance of what goes on at the shrine has for the most part been Tamil Hindu by culture—and until recently has been guided and executed by Tamil Hindus. The Tamil religious leaders were generally given the title of *sāmi* ("lord"). This title was given to priests of Murugan among the Tamil plantation laborers. The priests of the wealthy Nāṭṭukoṭṭai Certiar of Colombo were also known by this term.³⁴ Some of these *sāmis* resided permanently in Kataragama. Some lived in the main shrine premises, others in Sella Kataragama (where Murugan met Valli) and Vādhirikanda (where he first landed). These latter places were effectively taken over by *sāmis*, who built small shrines there. A few lived in caves dotted around the desolate mountains and forests of Kataragama. Kataragama is the only place in the Sinhala-speaking areas of Sri Lanka that is a locus of a non-Buddhist, Śaivite form of asceticism.

The Tamil *sāmis* of Kataragama have had an enormous influence on the contemporary religiosity of Sinhala Buddhists. Several of them were charismatic persons held in high esteem by Sinhalas who came under their influence. We have noted the case of Sangarapillai Sāmi, who influenced not only Venerable Siddhārtha but also a large number of senior Sinhala Buddhist firewalkers of today. Many older Sinhala *sāmis* we have interviewed were pupils of well-known Tamil priests; these Sinhala *sāmis* in turn have trained a whole generation of Sinhala priests and priestesses. In reference to the latter, one should remember that traditional Sinhala priests (*kaṇṇāḷas*) and exorcists did not accept the doctrine of divine possession by women. Not so with some of the Tamil *sāmis*; they, without hesitation, interpreted female possession as a sign of possible grace. The efflorescence of priestesses in contemporary Sri Lanka was made possible by the liberating influence of the *sāmis* of Kataragama.

The Tamil Hindus imprinted their piacular and emotional ethos on Kataragama. But they could only control its shrines and practices as long as Sinhalas refrained from coming there in large numbers. But Sinhalas started once again to patronize Kataragama in the thirties and we have noted that their visits increased dramatically after the main road was constructed in 1949. (It would be foolish to see the construction of the road as the cause of the deity's rise; it is the rise of the deity that was responsible

³⁴ For the role of the Nāṭṭukoṭṭai Certiar in Kataragama see Don Handleman, "On the Desuetude of Kataragama," *Man* n.s. 20, no. 1 (1985): 156–57.

for the road.) As we noted in Chapter 3, this rise was due to the inability of an increasingly educated populace to gain their legitimate goals (especially jobs), since the desired goods are scarce and their attainment without political patronage virtually impossible. As has happened the world over, they tried to achieve the new goals by traditional means—in this case the intercession of a deity. But why Skanda?

Of the deities of the traditional pantheon, Skanda is best suited to the new situation. He is par excellence the resourceful deity, the vanquisher of the *asuras*, the deity who could overcome obstacles. Furthermore, the actor's psychological and social relationship to the deity is very important. When frustrations accumulate it is comforting to place oneself in dependence on a strong authoritarian figure—be he natural or supernatural—who will act on one's behalf. Skanda is such a strong character: the ideology underlying his worship is based on filial piety; the son submits to the father, who then rewards him by granting his wishes and acting on his behalf. Moreover, amidst the confusion of rapid social change there seems to some to be no clear-cut body of norms defining the legitimate means for goal achievement. Others become willing to reach their goals by normatively nonsanctioned or even immoral actions, as Merton pointed out of American society.³⁵ Here again, Skanda fits in best. Unlike Viṣṇu, who is unequivocally a moral deity, Skanda is willing to do *anything* to help his devoted adherent. Hence he is the god of the politician, the businessmen, and big-time crooks in the city of Colombo. We have known of professional people competing with their colleagues for promotion who visit the Skanda shrine at Kataragama and dramatize their submission to the deity by rolling bare-bodied on the sandy floor around the temple premises.

We believe that what we have said here accounts for the preoccupation of even educated members of the elite with traditional forms of supernaturalism. Thus political leaders in Asia and Africa may resort to sorcery to destroy political opponents or use white magic for more positive political purposes. In Sri Lanka practically every politician—left and right—propiates the deity Skanda in order to win an election or ensure the national electoral success of the party. Prime ministers and cabinet ministers have been devotees of the cult. Before any general election large motorcade from the political parties visit Kataragama.

³⁵ Robert K. Merton, "Social Structure and Anomie," in *Social Theory and Social Structure* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1957), pp. 121–60.

But one question still persists. How did Skanda, who seemed discredited by defeat and was practically rejected by the Sinhala in the nineteenth century, resurface so dramatically in the middle of the twentieth? We think the Hindu *śāmis* of Kataragama have had a decisive role. They were responsible for resurrecting the prowess of the deity by their acts of asceticism and penance. Most important in this regard is the firewalk, which they introduced to Kataragama probably in the early part of this century. The Sinhala have forgotten Skanda's failure to defeat the British, a failure in any case largely eclipsed by Independence; meanwhile they have been confronted by an entirely new set of socioeconomic problems.

Political relations with the Tamils also took a new turn. The Tamil settlements in the hill country created an alien community in the middle of the Sinhala area. Traditionally Tamil and South Indian immigration was a well-known phenomenon; powerful caste groups like the *karāṇa* and *śālā-gama* came from the Tamil country and Kerala. But they were eventually assimilated into the Sinhala social structure. Not so the plantation Tamils; they retained their language, forms of social organization, and even kinship ties with their original home. To complicate matters further there were increasingly vociferous political demands by the older Tamil communities in the northern and eastern areas of the country for greater political participation in the nation state. These demands interacted with the increased Sinhala Buddhist national consciousness that was articulated around the turn of the century by the great Protestant Buddhist leader Dharmapāla. Dharmapāla saw the nation as an entirely Sinhala Buddhist one, with no room for Tamils, Muslims, or other ethnic and religious minorities. In this context the Sinhala Buddhist reaction to the Tamil Hindu presence was perhaps inevitable. This reaction meant emphasizing and legitimizing the Sinhala as well as the Buddhist character of Kataragama—the deity as well as the place. We are about to see, however, that in this process the Sinhala Buddhists assimilated the values of the Tamil religion.

The Buddhist takeover of Kataragama began in the early forties. We have noted (see Chapter 1) the takeover of Vādhāṇṇikanda by the Venerable Siddhārtha from the ascetic Sangarapillai Sāmi. It is not unknown for a monk to start a temple by an established shrine of the spirit religion and gradually to acquire control over its functioning. In this case, however, the monk absorbed the values of the Hindu priest. The Venerable Sid-

dhārtha retained the services of his Hindu *śāmi*, but when Sangarapillai died in 1963 his mantle fell on the new Sinhala *śāmis* of Kataragama.

Another group of monks has built a Buddhist shrine at the very entrance to the main premises of the deity. This temple, the Abhivānārāma, does a roaring trade from the offerings of the devotees who pray there—rarely to the Buddha, mostly to the gods! Finally the extensive premises of Sella Kataragama, associated with the erotic life of the god and his mistress, were taken over by another group of monks. Here the resident Hindu priests, assisted by powerful Hindu organizations, resisted and filed action in the courts, claiming the rights of trusteeship. Though many predicted their victory, they were mistaken. The god himself appeared before the Sinhala judge in a dream vision and ordered him to give judgment in favor of the Sinhala—which he did.

However, Sinhala control of the local institutions is not (at least, not yet) complete. Tamils still control some of the shrines, especially those near the main shrine. Moreover, Hindu pilgrims have hardly ever been physically harmed or intimidated on the sacred premises; the general atmosphere is one of tolerance and egalitarianism.

As Sinhala Buddhist monks have taken control of the sacred areas, the Sinhala Buddhist laity has adopted Tamil ritual forms. A few go so far as to have their bodies perforated with an array of small spears and hooks before putting on nailed shoes and pulling carts by using hooks passed through their backs. A great many dance *kāvuḍi*—the topic of our next section. A certain number—at most a couple of hundred per year—walk the fire at the annual firewalking, which is held on a night toward the end of the major festival.

We have explained above why we must postpone a detailed account of the Sinhala individuals who have led this takeover of the firewalking. Here, however, we complete our picture of the shrine's recent historical evolution by giving the background to that takeover.

Though not practiced in Kataragama until the present century, fire walking was well known in South India and was practiced by the Tamil speaking Hindus of the east coast of Sri Lanka as well as by the Tamil workers in the tea plantations. According to the traditions of the senior priests at Kataragama, at the beginning of this century minor firewalking rituals were occasionally performed by South Indian mendicants fulfilling vows. One of these mendicants, Anakutri Sāmi, instituted firewalking on a more regular basis in about 1912. In order to overcome the resistance o

the Sinhala priests, the ritual was performed as a personal vow rather than as a public proceeding. It did not occur annually; sometimes no firewalking ritual was held for several years. However, around 1926 Selliah Sāmi, another Hindu mendicant, took over the firewalking arrangements. From that time onward, firewalking probably occurred every year without interruption. Even so, the firewalkers were rarely more than seven in number, all Hindu males—women being excluded on account of their inferior ritual status.

That firewalking was not an old, accepted custom seems clear from the attitude of the Sinhala priests (*kapurāḷa*) at Kataragama. Their role was minimal; the firewalking arrangements were in the hands of Hindu *vāmis*. After walking the fire the devotee entered the main shrine, where the *kapurāḷa* gave him some sacred water. This was the practice till 1976 when, for the first time, an attempt was made to involve the *kapurāḷa* in the rites for lighting the fire.

The Hindu monopoly of firewalking was broken by a young Sinhala Buddhist now known as Vijeyaratna Sāmi, who became interested in the "occult sciences" in India. When he came back to Sri Lanka, he determined to test his occult knowledge by walking the fire at Kataragama. In 1942 he bravely crossed the fire pit without seeking permission from the chief firewalker, the mendicant Selliah Sāmi. The latter was outraged; he doused the fire and put a stop to the proceedings. However, the lay trustee of Kataragama, a Sinhala Buddhist aristocrat, reconciled the two. Vijeyaratna fell on his knees and asked forgiveness from Selliah Sāmi, who then with great magnanimity took Vijeyaratna as his first Sinhala pupil. While Vijeyaratna Sāmi was the first Buddhist to walk the fire, we shall see below that it was another Sinhala Buddhist, Murukuḍa Sāmi, who was responsible for converting the ritual into one dominated by Sinhala Buddhists.

To understand the dramatic nature of the Sinhala Buddhist takeover consider the following figures. According to a very reliable informant, in 1941, the year before Vijeyaratna Sāmi walked, there were not more than seven firewalkers, all Tamils. Murukuḍa Sāmi told us that in 1949 there were about thirteen, but only two Sinhalas. By the time Murukuḍa became chief firewalker (in 1951 or 1952) there were thirteen Sinhalas and fifteen Tamils. When he resigned in 1962 the numbers had increased, the largest being seventy-one persons. In 1973 there were about 250 walkers, of whom about 175 were Sinhala Buddhists. We checked on the social background of twenty-eight of them and found that only one came from a

peasant family, and even he was not a typical farmer but had brothers in government service.

The Sinhala Buddhization of the firewalk began to alienate the Tamils. This was exacerbated by the increasing political tensions between the two ethnic groups. Some Tamils began to organize their own firewalk at Sella Kataragama, a few miles away from the main shrine, while many increased their patronage of the firewalks in temples in the Tamil regions. In 1975 about 160 persons walked the fire and we could identify only a few Tamils. From this time onwards Tamils were conspicuous by their absence and the main firewalk at Kataragama had become an almost exclusively Sinhala Buddhist ritual.

The Bhakti Ethos of the Firewalk

Almost within one generation, walking the fire at Maha Kataragama (the main shrine complex) has changed from being an exclusively Tamil Hindu practice to being an exclusively Sinhala Buddhist preserve. Few Sinhalas are fully aware that firewalking in this sense is new to their culture. There is a traditional rite in Sinhala spirit religion called "firewalking" or, more strictly, "fire trampling," but it is quite different: essentially a priest stamps out some embers.³⁶ Though the same term is used for the new practice, there is no question of stamping out the fire at Kataragama. Wood is stacked about four feet high in a trench some thirty feet long and attendants keep brushing off the layer of ash that accumulates on top, so that the surface is red hot. The walkers go over one at a time at a pace and gait of their own choosing—the styles are completely varied.

The overwhelming majority of the firewalkers with whom we have talked over a fifteen-year period have stated that *bhakti*, "devotion" to the god, is absolutely essential. Moreover, these firewalkers are ardent *kāvaḍi* dancers—and betray no trace of Buddhist puritanism. They say that in the *kāvaḍi* one can combine both possession trance and *bhakti* devotion. This rank and file of firewalkers, unlike their innovating leaders, are generally of low socioeconomic standing and come from the urbanized areas of Sri Lanka. They have adopted the *bhakti* ethos of Hinduism and extol possession trance.

³⁶ For an account of the traditional firewalk see Obeyesekere, *Pattini*, pp. 41–44.

Why do these Sinhala people firewalk? Some are fulfilling vows—for example, if they or a family member have recovered from a serious illness—the sort of reason for which Hindus have long undertaken such arduous practices. But for most firewalkers these mundane vows are subordinate to a deeper motive—their devotion (*bhakti*) to the god. These are the new-style ecstatic devotees who constantly appear in the pages of this book. They are for the most part Sinhala Buddhist *sāmis*, or those aspiring to become *sāmis*; they come here year after year to seal a compact with the deity or to renew their power. For a variety of reasons, including situational factors, devotionism may commence with faith in a deity other than Skandā—Saman, Kālī, Hūniyam, Partinī. For example, while climbing Sri Pāda (Adam's Peak), a woman experienced a vision of Saman, the god of that mountain. Yet all firewalkers agreed that the gift of possession (*āvirūḍḍi*), be it by Skanda or any other deity, must be sanctioned by Skanda. It is Skanda who grants this boon to the devotee, who then must visit Kataragama in order to obtain the boon from the god himself. This means that, in all cases, Skanda validates the devotee's experience of divine possession as a genuine one. The firewalking experience constitutes the deity's imprimatur, divine authorization. He is the only deity in the Sinhala Buddhist pantheon who can validate the experience, since there is no theory of *bhakti*, no underlying philosophy or ideology that has yet developed in respect of the other gods. Kataragama is the locus of *bhakti* ideology. It is also here (and at other Skanda shrines that have recently developed on the same lines) that the free expression of *bhakti* religiosity is permitted.

The firewalkers clearly agree on one thing: all of them walk the fire to renew their power. Part of this power is the capacity to be possessed or imbued with the essence of the deity. It is also the power to utter prophesies, cure the sick, and banish evil spirits. Walking the fire gives the devotee *ākariṇa*. It is difficult to define this Sanskrit word, which literally means "attraction," "pull." The firewalkers often say it is "like a *kāṇḍama* ('magnetic force'); some refer to an electrical charge in the body, using the popular English term "current." *Ākariṇa* *balaya* ("power of *ākariṇa*") or *ākariṇa* *mālava* ("garland of *ākariṇa*") is the *iḍḍi* ("essential power") of the god reaching the body of the devotee. *Ākariṇa* can also come through other acts of devotion (e.g., meditation on the god, hanging on hooks); but for these Sinhala Buddhists, firewalking is the finest way, a combination of meditation and penance. *Ākariṇa* is what induces

trances at curing rites; thus it is imperative that this magnetism be maintained and renewed.

Inner devotion must be expressed in outer acts such as a pure life style, exemplified by vegetarianism. Whenever possible, there should be a special abode or shrine or at least a separate room in the household reserved for the deities. Lamps must be lit for them every evening. The firewalking sets the seal on the relationship between the person and the deity whom he or she especially favors. The deity in turn aids the devotee and reads her innermost thoughts and protects her in times of inner turmoil and personal travail.

Joy, Play, and Eroticism: A Cult for the Masses

What most Sinhala pilgrims derive from a visit to Kataragama is an experience rather less intense than that of the firewalkers and perhaps not so completely new to their culture. We have seen that the main public rituals—described already in 1765—are the enactment of Skanda's visits to his "secret woman" (*borā gāmi*) and the water cutting and water sports that form the festival's culmination. In many South Indian temples Skanda openly has two wives: their images are to either side of him in his shrine.³⁷ But for Sinhalas the relationship with Vallī Ammā has the glamour of adultery. In the evening procession of the god they are celebrating his illicit love life, and when his secret visits have passed successfully (as they must), they celebrate by jumping into the water and splashing around in joyous abandon.

This Sinhala core of the festival is, we believe, as intrinsic to Kataragama for Sinhalas even today as is the expiatory aspect for Hindus. The joyous, playful dimension of the god's cult is responsible for a word that is commonly uttered in Kataragama—*vinōḍa* ("joy," "diversion"). In ordinary language *vinōḍa* has secular connotations of pleasure, as for example

³⁷ Clothey in his account of the Skanda-Saṣṭi festival in South India says: "On the seventh day the festival is terminated. This day is highlighted in the evening by a re-enactment of the god's marriage to Devasena and Valli. . . . The god is rewed to his consorts." Fred W. Clothey, "Skanda-Saṣṭi: A Festival in Tamil India," *History of Religions* 8, no. 3 (1969): 236–59. See also Fred W. Clothey, *The Many Faces of Murukān* (The Hague: Mouton, 1978), p. 138. What is striking in Kataragama is the *absence* of celebration of Skanda's marriage with his legitimate spouse.

the *vinōda* I get when I see a show, attend a festival, go on a picnic. This word is simply transferred to Kataragama to describe the joyous ethos associated with the god's love affair so that devotees will often say that they came to Kataragama for *vinōda*. It is easy for Westerners, subscribing to the radical distinction between secular and sacred, to be misled by the use of this term to imply that Sinhalas go to Kataragama for *vinōda* (glossed as "entertainment") and *not* for religious purposes, as one scholar does.³⁸ In the Sinhala consciousness *vinōda* does not contradict the "sacred" aspects of Kataragama but is intrinsic to the latter.

Not only foreign anthropologists but also Protestant Buddhists look askance at this phenomenon, as the following newspaper excerpt suggests:

*An Appeal to Pilgrims
by A. B. Dionysius De Silva.*

... As a Buddhist and a devotee of God Skandha I have had the fortune to participate in the Annual Esala Festival for the past forty or more years regularly. I have to mention with deep regret that the faith and devotion of pilgrims have been degenerating annually and the pilgrimage is undertaken now more as a pleasure trip than a pilgrimage. This has resulted in many pilgrims having to experience more and more hardships and calamities after their return than getting the Blessings of God Karagama or accruing any merits.

Being a Buddhist religious leader who has cured free of charge many incurable ailments such as asthma insanity etc. and rendered relief from worries and tribulations, I have come across that "Deva Aprasadaya" or displeasure of Gods has come upon people for failure to fulfil their vows completely or for fulfilling them improperly.

The author then indignantly cites "drinking orgies, improper or forbidden behaviour or even taking beef, ham, bacon, pork, etc. . . . multi-coloured miniskirts and gorgeous shirts and bell-bottoms." He tells pilgrims first to visit the Kiri Vehera, then to visit the *bō* tree (by the Maha Dēvalē), and "having gained merit, bestow it on God Karagama by making any type of offerings at the Maha Devale."³⁹

³⁸ M. C. Hodge, *Buddhism, Magic, and Society in a Southern Sri Lankan Town* (Ph.D. thesis, Victoria University of Manchester, 1981), p. 299.

³⁹ *Ceylon Observer*, Thursday, 10 July 1975, p. 2.

It is rare that a person comes to Kataragama simply to have a good time, though a few, especially among the young, no doubt do. In the fifties a famous singer, Sunil Sānta, sang a song on Radio Ceylon in the style of the "poison verses" of black magic and used Kataragama's name; he lost his voice and hence his career as a result. By contrast in the mid-1970s a pop group called the Super Golden Chimes made a hit record called *Kanda Suriñḍuni*, "O Lord God of the Mountain," the words of which are a hymn of praise to the god Kataragama as they might be uttered by a pilgrim at the shrine: the refrain goes, "I have come to worship you, I have come to see you." The words alone could sound solemn, but the music is utterly secular, an extremely cheerful lilting dance rhythm. No divine retribution is known to have afflicted Clarence Wijewardene and his band presumably because, unlike Sunil Sānta, they did not use the lord's name in vain.

Kanda Suriñḍuni adopts a conventional genre. Its cheerful music and pious sentiments come from the practice of *kāvaḍi* dancing. This is a traditional devotional practice of Śaiva Hindus to honor Skanda. The *kāvaḍi* is an arch decorated with peacock feathers (real or artificial) that the devotee carries on his shoulders. It represents the peacock, which is Skanda's mount, so that by carrying it one becomes the vehicle of the god's vehicle. The dance honors the god by entertaining him and maybe was originally thought of as imitating the dance of the peacock. In any event, it is nowadays thought to imbue the dancer with the god's "magnetism," which in turn shows itself in the irresistible urge to dance.

Kāvaḍi dancing is today the most common and visible form of ecstatic religiosity in Kataragama, as well as in Skanda temples all over Sri Lanka. Every year thousands of men and women bear the peacock arch on their shoulders and dance ecstatically to the sound of drums and flutes. The music is completely nonreligious, often modern Sinhala or Hindi film music. The dance is based on *baila*, a swinging dance style (originating in Portugal) popular among the urban working class. Our investigations show clearly that *kāvaḍi* dancing was rarely practiced by Sinhala Buddhists until after the 1940s; it became popular only in the 1960s. Furthermore, the first to adopt *kāvaḍi* dancing were urban proletarians in Colombo and elsewhere. The lower classes "created" the new institution. This is often the case with radical cultural innovations; they spring from a relatively small, often low-status group, since such groups are comparatively unaffected by such constraints as shame or social disapproval. (Compare the development of colorful dress styles by blacks in the United States and the

West Indies or the sexual mores and life styles of the hippies in the sixties.) Once created, the innovation is accepted by the larger society, including the middle classes, if it serves their needs.

Thus today *kāvāḍi* dancing is enormously popular; it is the only instance we know in recent Sri Lankan history where men and women engage in communal dancing—not with a partner, but in a group led by a band of musicians playing secular music. The institution can be accepted by the larger culture since it is under the aegis of the powerful lord of Kataragama. Thousands of men and women—youth and old, belonging to every stratum of society—dance the *kāvāḍi*, thereby presenting a new kind of “cultural model” before the assembled populace. It is as if people are being acclimatized to the idea of close intersex communication and interaction, traditionally frowned upon by the culture. Many people, including some of the officials at Kataragama, are puzzled by the new phenomenon; they condemn the short skirts and swing music as immoral, holding up as true devotees of Murugan the Hindus from the north who practice a more sedate form of *kāvāḍi* with religious music. However, those Hindus have in turn become influenced by the Sinhala example.

What the Sinhalas did was to take over *kāvāḍi*, a Hindu Tamil *bhakti pūjā* associated with *bhojans*, or verses praising god, and develop it in a very Sinhala direction, influenced by the ethos of *vināda* at Kataragama. Like the ritual enactment of the Skanda-Vallī relationship, the *kāvāḍi* dance is compounded of eroticism and devotionalism, and like the former it has a hint of the illicit. After all, in spite of Mr. Dionysius de Silva (whose name could not possibly be symbolic) and the Protestant Buddhists who control Kataragama, groups of men, women, and children, who sometimes do not even know each other, dance together ecstatically in honor of the god, and some may even move out of the circle of dancers, lost in a possession trance. Moreover, over the last ten years, even small children carrying miniature *kāvāḍi* dance with adults. They are being socialized not only into the worship of Skanda but also into a more relaxed sexual ethic. It is not unusual nowadays to see a village woman or a middle-class marron swaying her reluctant buttocks to the swinging music of the *kāvāḍi* dance.

The erotic aspect of the main festival is then clear: the god is the lover, but his love life is with his mistress and not with his wife. (In Sri Lanka this theme is enacted only in Kataragama and in some Hindu temples on the East Coast. It is possible that Kataragama was the source of its diffu-

sion to South India.) Traditionally some Tamil couples have come to reenact their marriages before Kataragama, as they do in South India. Some Sinhala couples now do the same. We infer that this bestows erotic glamour on marriage, an institution that traditionally emphasized fidelity and procreation, not eroticism. The faces of the crowd attending the procession as Kataragama goes to make love to his mistress have fortunately been recorded for posterity by a sensitive camera.⁴⁰ They make extraordinary viewing. Eyes glisten with tears. Both men and women seem beside themselves with bliss. Yet no one seems to be aware that they are celebrating the violation of one of their society's most cherished norms.

Skanda has become a figure very like Kṛṣṇa in some sects of Hindu Vaiṣṇavism.⁴¹ Kṛṣṇa is a handsome youth of infinite erotic charm. Moreover, most of his lovemaking is with other men's wives. This religious tradition, which is more than a thousand years old, has found its explicit theoretical justification: it is adulterous love (*pārakīyā*) that is the most intense experience and hence the fitting model for the love of god, which should ignore all earthly and conventional constraints.⁴² The eroticism of Skanda has not yet found any such theological justification in Sinhala, probably because nothing could be further from the ethos of Buddhism.

What the *kāvāḍi* dance has done is to increase the level of joyous eroticism or *vināda* in a certain direction—into small groups dancing together to the sound of (often) secular music. We must now inquire into the social conditions that led to this new formation.

Economy, Society, and Eroticism in Bhakti

During the last decade, twenty to thirty percent of the labor force of Sri Lanka have been unemployed or drastically underemployed. Despite the free enterprise policies pursued by the present government since 1977, a recent analysis is grim: the poor are getting poorer.⁴³ “Even today 50 per-

⁴⁰ “Kataragama: A God for All Seasons,” Granada TV, England, 55 minutes.

⁴¹ Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*, pp. 282–83.

⁴² The classic text is the Sanskrit *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, composed in South India ca. A.D. 900, esp. book 10. See Friedhelm Hardy, *Viraha-Bhakti: The Early History of Kṛṣṇa Devotion in South India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983). See also chap. 13 below.

⁴³ For an excellent (and grim) account of rural poverty see W. Gooneratne and P. J. Gunawardena, “Poverty and Inequality in Rural Sri Lanka,” in *Poverty in Rural Asia*, ed.

cent of the country's population receive food stamps of some sort and are officially considered as belonging to households whose incomes are inadequate to meet the basic necessities of life."⁴⁴

The economic situation has had profound effect on the age of marriage. People are too poor to marry, which for Sinhalese normally implies setting up a household. Statistics show that between 1946 and 1971 there have been large and increasing numbers of never-married persons in the population. (Unfortunately we have no separate figures for the Sinhala or the Buddhist population.) Abeysekera has also pointed out⁴⁵ that the problem is worse in the wet zone, the densely populated part of the country where education and aspiration levels are highest—and consequently where the religious changes we are documenting are taking place. We append three tables from the 1971 census report.⁴⁶

What are the implications of these statistics for the widespread existence of sexual frustration? The census report states in respect of table 4: "The most striking feature to be noted is that the female age at marriage has risen from 20.7 years in 1946, through 20.9 in 1953 and 22.1 in 1963 to 23.5 in 1971 respectively, while that of the male had registered only a

Table 4

Mean Age at Marriage (1946, 1953, 1963, and 1971 Censuses)

Census year	Average age at marriage (in years)		
	Males	Females	Difference
1946	27.0	20.7	6.3
1953	27.2	20.9	6.3
1963	27.9	22.1	5.8
1971	28.0	23.5	4.5

Azizur Rahman Khan and Eddy Lee (Bangkok: International Labour Organization, 1984), pp. 247–71.

⁴⁴ Gooneratne and Gunawardena, "Poverty and Inequality," p. 247.

⁴⁵ Dayalal Abeysekera, "Being Realistic about Age at Marriage and Fertility Decline in Sri Lanka," *Ceylon Journal of the Social Sciences* 5, no. 1 (1982): 9.

⁴⁶ *Census of Population 1971, Sri Lanka: General Report* (Colombo: Department of Census and Statistics, 1978), pp. 99–101.

Table 5
Proportion of Women Currently Married and Never Married by Age Groups (1946, 1953, 1963, and 1971 Censuses)

Age of women	1946		1953		1963		1971	
	Currently married	Never married	Currently married	Never married	Currently married	Never married	Currently married	Never married
15–19	23.9	75.3	23.7	75.7	14.8	85.0	10.3	89.5
20–24	68.4	29.4	65.7	32.5	57.6	41.3	45.9	53.1
25–29	84.4	11.8	84.4	12.8	81.0	17.1	73.5	24.6
30–34	87.1	6.6	87.8	7.5	88.6	8.3	85.9	10.9
35–39	85.5	4.3	86.5	5.4	89.8	4.8	89.3	5.6
40–44	78.4	4.1	80.7	5.0	86.1	4.3	87.8	4.3
45–49	71.4	3.4	73.8	4.4	81.6	3.9	84.9	3.6

Table 6
Proportion of Men Currently Married and Never Married by Age Groups (1946, 1953, 1963, and 1971 Censuses)

Age of men	1946		1953		1963		1971	
	Currently married	Never married	Currently married	Never married	Currently married	Never married	Currently married	Never married
15–19	1.2	98.7	0.9	98.7	0.9	99.0	0.6	99.4
20–24	18.9	80.5	15.8	83.5	15.0	84.7	13.6	86.3
25–29	55.1	43.4	53.3	45.4	49.0	50.5	46.9	52.6
30–34	75.3	22.4	76.4	21.7	72.8	26.1	73.7	25.5
35–39	84.3	12.5	85.4	11.8	85.2	13.1	84.9	13.7
40–44	85.9	9.3	87.2	8.7	87.0	10.4	88.7	9.4
45–49	86.0	7.6	86.5	7.6	88.6	7.2	89.3	7.9

slight increase from 27.0 years in 1946 through 27.2 in 1953 and 27.9 in 1963 to 28.0 in 1971.⁴⁷ The mean age at marriage of previously unmarried women in Sri Lanka in 1975, according to the World Fertility Survey, was 25.1, a further rise.⁴⁸ There is some controversy about this figure and Dayalal Abeysekera has suggested that it should be around 20.0, though this we think is an underestimate.⁴⁹

Though the rise in the age of marriage is very significant if contrasted to a traditional society in which most people married in their early teens, it cannot provide a clue to the incidence of sexual frustration. One must consider the number of unmarried persons as given in tables 5 and 6.⁵⁰ For present purposes we shall ignore sex differences. According to the 1971 census, traditional early marriage is now practically nonexistent: 92 percent of [6.4 million] persons under the age of 19 were unmarried. While this is a significant finding, we cannot make inferences regarding sexual frustration from this datum, since the population is still very young. But in the 20-24 age group 68.7 percent (of 1,270,689 people) were unmarried; and in the 25-29 age group 38.6 percent of nearly a million people remained unmarried. These patterns were formerly unheard of in South Asia or for that matter in any traditional society. It is clear that parents are finding it increasingly difficult to find spouses for their children. The proportion of unmarried persons declined abruptly in the older age groups—18.2 percent in the 30-34 age group and 9.6 in the 35-39 group. It seems likely however that, unless dramatic economic development occurs, the older cohorts will in years to come include many more unmarried persons.

Consider the age group 25-44. Even on a conservative estimate these people would legitimately expect to be married. But of nearly three million people in this age group, 600,000 or 20 percent had never married. The same percentage obtains for the ages 25-54, if we include those who have been widowed (divorces and separations being rare in Sri Lanka). This amounts to about 800,000 people. Given the limited opportunities for the satisfaction of sexual needs outside marriage, the number of persons

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 99.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Abeysekera, "Being Realistic," p. 1.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 8.

⁵⁰ Abeysekera rightly points out that the crucial factor in the reduction of fertility in Sri Lanka is not the age at marriage but the large number of unmarried persons in the population.

in the contemporary population whom we may surmise to suffer from acute sexual frustration must be very large.⁵¹

For the parental generation the obligation to find a spouse for one's child is still very strong; but this is often not possible owing to unemployment or the inability to find a dowry. Nor can the children be expected to find mates for themselves, since intersex interaction among adolescents and unmarried adults is extremely restricted. The need to associate with members of the opposite sex is important for the children's generation not only because they suffer sexual frustration but also because, given their modern education, they often cannot intellectually justify the traditional arranged marriage. Furthermore, sex education in the schools only helps to exacerbate their frustrations. Yet no new institutions such as courtship, intersex communal activity, or dating have developed. It is difficult to expect these institutions to be developed by the middle classes owing to their conservatism and the rigidity of their mores, as well as their fear of social disapproval. In other words, there is both a social and a psychological need for the development of new institutions.

The *kāvaḍi* dance, originally a Hindu form, has been given a Sinhala meaning in response to socioeconomic change. This new cultural form illustrates the complicated interrelation between base, superstructure, and personality. The changes in the economic infrastructure affect rational decision making regarding marriage, which results in delaying marriage and increasing the number of unmarrieds in the population. Given the current conservative sexual mores, this situation produces sexual frustration that in turn is related to the development of the *kāvaḍi* dance. It is no accident that ecstatic dancing developed in a religious context, for this is the only context in which it would be generally acceptable. The *kāvaḍi* dance is not only a cultural and aesthetic expression of sexual frustration but also a protest against the domination of Protestant Buddhist moral norms. It might even herald a more relaxed sexual ethic in the nation at large.

⁵¹ The above analysis is taken substantially from Obeyesekere, "The Firewalkers of Kataragama," pp. 473-74.