

THE ĀSALA PERAHĀRA IN KANDY¹

That they may therefore honour these Gods . . . they do yearly observe a solemn feast and general meeting—Knox.

Perpetual fire-laughing motion, among the slow shuffle of elephants — D.H. Lawrence.

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Although the procession of the Tooth Relic (Daladā Perahāra) in Kandy as we see it to-day dates back only to the period of Kirti Sri Rājasingha (A.D. 1747-1780) there have been throughout the history of Ceylon processions and festivals of magnitude, which could be considered the precursors of the present Perahāra. These have centred round Āsala (Sk. Āsāḍa) festival possibly of Hindu origin and the festival of the sacred Tooth Relic of the Buddha, which now combine to constitute the Āsala Perahāra in Kandy. The full-moon day of Āsala is significant too as the date on which the Buddha at the Deer Park, Benares addressed the Panchavaggiya monks and set in motion the wheel of His doctrine. But this event can safely be considered to bear no relation to the now unified Āsala festival and the Daladā Perahāra. According to certain traditions² the birth of Viṣṇu and the overcoming of the Asuras by his god armies took place in the month of Āsala. It is possible that this myth of origin of the Āsala Perahāra is very ancient and would have been fostered by the ancestral Aryan immigrants. A second and perhaps more significant and widespread belief regarding the origin of the Āsala Festival is the myth of King Gajabā. Gajabā (174-196 A.D.) hearing of the Chola invasion of Ceylon during the time of his father Van-kanāsika Tissa and the taking away by the Cholas of 12,000 captives, summoned his Herculean soldier Nīla, the impact of whose massive iron rod cleft the waters of the ocean transforming for the two what would have been a voyage into a walk, and brought back not only the 12,000 subjects but also 12,000 Chola captives, the golden anklets of Pattini, the sacred utensils of the four Dēvālas and the Bowl Relic of the Buddha.³ The meaning of this rationalisation for our purposes

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2. Davy, 1821, 170. Millāwe, Dissāwa of Wellassa: 1817.

3. Pridham: 1849, 329.

is that the Āsala festival of Ceylon has throughout history been a festival devoted to the annual ceremonial worship of gods, where taking the divinities themselves or their symbols in triumphant procession through the streets of the capital city seem to have been the principal feature.

The early festivals connected with the Tooth Relic, which were performed independently of the festivals of the gods seem to have taken place on the occasion of its annual removal temporarily from the Maligāwa to the Abhayagiri monastery as required by Sri Mēghavanna (A.D. 352-377) during whose reign the Relic was brought to Ceylon by prince Danta and princess Hemamāla and who received it with much honour and festivity.⁴ Fa-hien who visited Ceylon a few years after the arrival of the Tooth Relic witnessed this annual festival and has left for us an excellent record.⁵ Ten days prior to the festival the King grandly caparisoned a large elephant on which a clear spoken man was mounted and sent out to make the proclamation that all and each who wished to amass merit for themselves make arrangements for a festival in honour of the Tooth Relic, by making the roads smooth, adorning lanes and by-ways and providing abundant stores of flowers and incense. The king got the painters to paint 500 births of the Bodhi-sattva and the pictures decorated the sides of the road to Abhayagiri through which the Relic was taken in procession. The people performed services incessantly for the Relic during the 90 days of its tenancy at the Abhayagiri monastery. Another great festival in honour of the Tooth Relic was held by Parakramabahu I (A.D. 1153-1186) when it was brought to Polonnaruwa.⁶ *Daladā Sīrita* (History of the Tooth Relic), a prose work of the 14th century prescribes festival procedure on the occasion of its public exhibition. The festival in honour of the Tooth Relic, like that of the gods, was customarily held once a year but droughts occasioned special expositions and resultant festivals.⁷

During later times, although it is certain that the Tooth Relic was far from being neglected in the sense that the meticulous details of behaviour prescribed in the *Daladā Sīrita* as if the Relic were none less than the Master alive were very much observed, the vicissitudes of history prevented sustained adherence to elaborate ceremonial on its behalf. Often, when a Sinhalese prince frustrated an advancing invader by resorting to the favourite military device of retreating to a barrier-territory (*durya*) he took away with him the Tooth Relic, a veritable symbol of sovereignty and obviously, festivities had during such times to be cut short. There is no evidence to believe that Daladā festivals of the type witnessed by Fa-hien were held after the Polonnaruwa Period. It is very likely that due to the power of Hinduism and god worship, and the general decline of classical Sinhalese civilization the festival in honour of the Tooth Relic lost its original magnificence.

4. *Mahavamsa* Ch. 37 V. 92-97.

5. Fa-hien. Tr. Legge 105-7. I am closely following the translator.

6. *Mahavamsa* Ch. 74 V. 181-248.

7. "... also the making of offerings thus to the Tooth Relic when rains fail. . ." (Vāsi novasnā kala mema lesin daladā pūjā karanuvā isā . . .) — *Daladā Sīrita*.

Mention was made earlier that it was during the time of Kirti Sri Rājasingha that the Perahāra assumed its present form. A festival in honour of the Tooth was amalgamated with the Āsala festival of the gods and a Perahāra of the Temple of the Tooth, surpassing the Perahāras of the four Dēvāles was made to head the latter. Taking of the Tooth Relic in procession through the streets, in the same way as the gods were taken was a completely new innovation and amounted to the acceptance of a Hindu pattern. It will be remembered that the former Daladā festivals consisted of either expositions or excursions to a customary destination. The innovation was, ironically enough, a result of the revival of the Buddhism under Kirti Sri. In the public eye the Perahāra signified religious prestige and the Perahāra of the Maligāwa was now to head the other Perahāras and was to be the most magnificent of all. According to one legend the innovation was the result of the instructions of the famous Sangarāja of Welivitiya, although according to another, it was the result of the agitation of the Siamese monks who were shocked at the pageantry in which the gods were taken in procession with none for the Buddha. Since then the Āsala Perahāra of the gods became a Daladā Perahāra, with the Perahāras of the gods occupying a secondary position. The Perahāra that Knox⁸ vividly records is one which took place before the Daladā Perahāra was amalgamated with the Dēvāle Perahāras and made to take the lead in it.

The Perahāra ritual complex which was called the Āsala Keliya⁹ begins with the installation of the Kapa pole. A few days before the new moon of August representatives of the four Dēvāles go to a young jak (*Artocarpus integrifolia*) tree¹⁰ which has borne no fruit and clear the ground around the tree. It is fumigated with the smoke of burning resin and smeared with the specially prepared sandal. Flowers, betel and a lighted lamp are kept at the foot of the tree and the deity whose abode perchance it may be is implored to leave. Afterwards the tree is felled¹¹ and the trunk cut into four parts which are distributed among the four Dēvāles, Nātha Dēvāle getting the first and Viṣṇu, Kataragama and Pattini Dēvāles getting the second, third and fourth parts respectively.¹² Each of these parts is carried in procession to the accompaniment of drumming and music and at the dawn of the New Moon day of August (formerly July) is planted inside the Dēvāle premises. Formerly the place where the Kapa was planted used to be in the open close to the Dēvāle and soon after the planting of the Kapa (*kapsituvima*), a roof was erected over the Kapa which was covered with cloth and the place decorated with flowers, coconut leaves and coconuts. But now the Kapa, which has diminished much in size is planted inside the Dēvāle itself where a special elevation signifies its position.

8. Knox, 1681. 78-79.

9. In a folk verse attributed to the famous Moratota monk the festival is called *Āsala Devkeliya*, the play of the Gods in Āsala.

10. The Kapa was called the Āsala Kapa and according to some a real Āsala (*Cassia fistula*) tree was used in early times before it was substituted by the lactiferous jak tree.

11. The procedure for felling a tree for the Kapa is described in a Sinhalese verse book called *Maimataya* which follows the Sanskrit *Mayamata*.

12. This is the order in which the Perahāra is arranged too.

For five days from the day of the erection of the Kapa the Kapurāla of each Dēvāle take around the Kapa every evening¹³, accompanied by music and drumming, flag and canopy bearers and spearmen, the sacred insignia of the gods (*ranāyudha*). This takes the form of a little procession in each of the Dēvāles and is referred to as such (Dēvāle Perahāra). On the fifth day the insignia are taken out of the Dēvāle premises and borne inside a dome like structure called the *ranhīlige* on an elephant's back, and accompanied by dancers, drummers and the Basnāyaka Nilame and his retinue of each Dēvāle, the Dēvāle Perahāras come at the appointed hour and assemble in front of the Temple of the Tooth. In the meanwhile the functionaries of the Temple of the Tooth should have been making arrangements for their own Perahāra. The Relic bearing casket which is a substitute for the Tooth Relic is placed inside a *ranhīlige* by those functionaries whose traditional and sacred duty it is to do so and the *ranhīlige* is tied on to the back of the caparisoned Maligāwa elephant. The Maligāwa Perahāra takes shape and after customary observances joins the waiting Dēvāle Perahāras in front and gives the lead in moving on. The Perahāra thus consisting of the Maligāwa and the Dēvāle Perahāras marches through the prescribed streets and is called the Kumbal Perahāra.¹⁴ On the fifth day of the Kumbal Perahāra starts the Randōli Perahāra which is an expanded version of the Kumbal Perahāra to which are added the palanquins (*randōli*) of the four Dēvāles. These contain the ornaments of the goddesses, sword and pitcher of each Dēvāle. On the full-moon of Āsala (that is the 5th day of the Randōli Perahāra) about half an hour after its break up, the Perahāra, reassembles and makes its way to Asgiri Vihāra¹⁵ where the casket is placed and the Dēvāle Perahāras return to their respective Dēvāles. Later in the night the four Dēvāle Perahāras bearing the insignia and the *randōli* make their way to the water-cutting site at Gātambe-tota. At the river the Kapurālas of the four Dēvāles are led in a decorated boat some distance in the stream where they cleave the waters with the sacred sword and collect a pitcher full at the place where the sword touched the water, to be stored in the Dēvāles for one year and fed back to the river at a similar ceremony the coming year. The pitchers and the swords are kept back in the *randōli* and on their way back the Perahāras stop at Ganēsha Kōvil, Kandy, where the assembled crowds receive the blessings of the gods in the form of a *tīlaka* of sandal paste on the forehead (*parahada*, Sk. *Prasāda*). In the afternoon the Perahāra of the four Dēvāles is formed again to go to Asgiri Vihāra and join the Maligāwa Perahāra. Thus the full procession is formed again and the Day Perahāra (*Daval Perahāra*) as it is called, takes a prescribed route and goes back to the Maligāwa where at the prescribed auspicious moment the casket is replaced at its original sanctuary.

13. Formerly this used to be twice a day. (Millāwa, Dissava of Vellasa *op.cit.*)

14. Coomaraswamy seems to confuse the Dēvāle and Kumbal Perahāras. (Coomaraswamy; 2nd ed. 1956, 38).

15. This practice reminds one immediately of the ancient custom of the removal of the Tooth Relic to the Abhayagiri Monastery.

The Dēvāle Perahāras adjourn to their respective Dēvāles. For seven days after the day Perahāra, Waliyak-nātuma which is a shortened Kohomba-Kankāriya is danced at the Viṣṇu Dēvāle,¹⁶ and with masked dancing on the seventh day the Āsala Keliya comes to an end.¹⁷

The foregoing is a very general account¹⁸ of the Perahāra and cannot be an exact account of any particular Perahāra. Moreover we find that the Perahāra has been constantly changing with regard to detail, sometimes even important detail. For example, during Kandyan times two Perahāras were held, one by evening and one by night, at least during the Randōli Perahāra.¹⁹ The dance of the *balibat* caste after the Waliyak-nātuma and their partaking of a ceremonial meal afterwards and the whole complex of ritual associated with the uprooting of the Kapa and its being thrown into the river are all now forgotten.²⁰ If neglect of duty has led to the dropping off of certain elements expediency has given rise to abbreviations and substitutes. Recently, flags perhaps took the place of the representatives of the provinces who once never failed to avail themselves of the opportunity to march in the Perahāra. At the water cutting the boat has never been ready for the last 25 years or so and the Kapurālas have had to take perilous steps down the steep river edge, and in the act of fulfilling their sacred duty precariously to stoop, while the drums were reverberating a safe distance away. Innovations have also taken place, for example, the recent introduction of Ves dancing to the Perahāra.²¹ A comparison of the accounts of Knox, Millāwa Dissava, Pridham, Davy, Lawrie, Coomaraswamy etc. shows among other changes, the change in the composition of the Perahāra. A modern observer would find several gaps in the Perahāra in comparison with any one of the Perahāras recorded by the above observers. For example, according to an old Sinhalese account²² of the revived perahāra of 1828 (in which the Governor Sir Edward Barnes participated in the manner of the Sinhalese monarchs and George Turnour was present) the van of the Maligāwa Perahāra consisted of the following:

16. Formerly this used to be danced in all four Dēvāles. Millāwa, *op. cit.*

17. Formerly the people of the *balibat* caste danced for seven more days. Millāwa: *op. cit.* Ralph Pieris: 1956.

18. A detailed account is not considered relevant for the present paper. Such account, however are available in Knox (1681, 78-80), Millāwa (1817), Davy (1821, 170-174), Pridham (1846, 328-334), Lawrie (unpublished), Coomaraswamy (2nd ed. 1956, 38-39). Some of these writers would have borrowed from one another, or from a common source.

19. Knox *op. cit.*, 79 " . . . they ride all round about the City once by day once by night "

20. Millāwa, *op. cit.*

21. Ves is a sacred dance. The *ves-tattuwa*, the magnificent head dress of the Kandyan dancer is a sacred object guarded by a system of taboos. As a form of dancing Ves is considered fit for the gods. Nugawela Dissava, Diyawadana Nilame who introduced it to the Maligāwa section of the Perahāra, about 25 years ago is supposed to have prescribed it in the moving Perahāra, around the Casket alone. Today however the secular authorities are the foci of attention of the majority of the Ves dancers. The introduction of Ves into the Perahāra gave a freshness of life to the renowned dance. Ref. George Keyt: 1935.

22. Reproduced in *Prabhāsodava*, Vol. 2, Nos. 7 and 8, July and August, 1935 pp. 227-228 and 259-262 respectively. Lawrie's unpublished account seems to be very faithful translation of this.

1. Peramunē Rāla carrying the *lĕkam miti*, riding the Yahaletānne elephant.
2. Gajanāyaka Nilame carrying the symbolic goad (*ankusa*) and his retinue following, with the elephant flag.
3. Kodituwakku Nilame and his retinue, Kodituwakku soldiers and flag.
4. Dissava of Four Korales and retinue with the sun and moon flag.
5. Dissava of Seven Korales and retinue with lion flag.
6. Dissava of Matale and retinue with white flag.
7. Dissava of Sabaragamuwa and retinue with the (yellow) silk flag.
8. Dissava of Four Korales and retinue with Bherunda flag.
9. Dissava of Walapane and retinue with peacock flag.
10. Dissava of Udapalata and retinue with lotus flag.

The corresponding section of the Perahāra in August 1963 was as follows:

1. Flags and *uw atu*.
2. Peramunē Rāla with *lĕkam miti*.
3. Drummers, dancers and musicians.
4. Gajanāyaka Nilame carrying symbolic goad.
5. Drummers, dancers and musicians.
6. Kāriyakarawana Rāla led by numerous dancers on either side, and retinue.
7. The Relic bearing casket on Maligāwa elephant's back.
8. Diyawadana Nilame led by numerous dancers, drummers and musicians on either side, and retinue consisting of Gandahaye Vidānes and others.

Here provincial representation was forgotten. The flags were both old ones and cheap new ones. The old ones no doubt were those of the provinces but they had been haphazardly selected with little knowledge as to what they represent. All possible provincial representatives probably marched with the Diyawadana Nilame. The Kodituwakku department was absent and the Peramune Rāla and Gajanāyaka Nilame were the respective solitary representatives of their large and important departments. According to Knox²³ the Kapurālas carrying the insignia of the gods rode on elephants' back, but now the *ranhīlige* carries the insignia and the Kapurāla walks in front of the elephant bearing the *ranhīlige*. Of the women participants of the Perahāra "of such casts or trades as are necessary for the service of the Pagoda, as Potters and washer-women",²⁴ "all the Beauties of Zelone" and "Thousands of . . . Gentlewomen" only two *ālatti-ammās*²⁵ remain to follow the *randōli* on the *Randōli Perahāra* nights and later to join the Kapurāla in chorus at the Waliyak Nātuma.

The extinction of old elements and the substitutive new elements would have undoubtedly harmed the original integral symbolism of the Āsala Keliya. This makes it extremely difficult, at least at the present state of our knowledge to understand fully the meaning of the Āsala Keliya. The present Perahāra consists of

23. Knox, *op. cit.*, 79.

24. *op. cit.*

25. *Ālatti* lit. blessing; *ālattiamma*, "woman who blesses". These women are the only female employees in temple service, holding Māligawa land for consideration of their services.

layers of elements that were added to it at various points of its chronological depth. Thus a holistic interpretative analysis of the present day Āsala Keliya is almost impossible and such attempts will only yield highly imaginative and unverifiable theories of the type that constitute some of the ethnological and archaeological writings of this country. Armed with this admission of the difficulty to arrive at definite conclusions, we can look for certain possible meanings of the Āsala Keliya elements, since caution takes us nowhere.

In a very broad and general sense of course, the Āsala Keliya is what the anthropologist calls a rite of intensification, that is a rite where the whole community participates for the common good. The gods are taken out of their sacred confines and led through the streets of the capital city for the purpose of gaining their goodwill which results in prosperity for all. The goodwill of the gods is both a return for the honours paid to them and a magical result of their contact with the land and the wider population.

The *kap-siṭuvīma* was explained by an informant²⁶ as an act "always done as preliminary to some good undertaking". For example before building a house.²⁷ The excessive reverence paid to the Kapa is suggestive of enlivening of the Kapa poles by the respective gods; the festival is an occasion for the gods to descend to the world of men and reside in the Kapa poles. At the conclusion of the festival the Kapa poles are ceremonially uprooted and thrown into the river in the same manner as the clay gods, amidst weeping, are thrown into the river in similar Hindu festivals like the Durga festival.²⁸ The little Perahāras that go round the Dēvāles each night for five days at the four Dēvāles probably came to be called Dēvāle Perahāras only after the time of Kirti Sri, for prior to that period all Perahāras were Dēvāle Perahāras. Nor could they have been named so due to their going round the Dēvāles because as late as 1817 or possibly 1846 the little Perahāra went round the Kapa and not the Dēvāle as in fact they do today, but in so doing automatically they go round the Dēvāle too, for the Kapa is now installed inside the Dēvāle. About half an hour after the conclusion of the Kumbal Perahāra and the Randōli Perahāra each night a little procession similar in constitution to the Dēvāle Perahāra goes round the Dēvāle thrice, before the day's ceremony concludes for the Dēvāle. This is probably what is left of the night Perahāra which was once a magnificent spectacle.²⁹ Another possible explanation is that after playing a subordinate role in following royal command in the grand Daladā Perahāra, the Dēvāles asserted their independence by resorting to a Perahāra of their own, a practice which would have undoubtedly appealed to the provincial lords who were the lay authorities of the Dēvāles (Basnāyaka Nilames). The water-cutting, which by no means is the most spectacular of the Āsala Perahāra elements, at least from the point of view of one important myth of origin, is its element *par excellence*. For the Āsala Festival as mentioned earlier,

26. The Kapurāla of Nātha Dēvāle, Kandy.

27. *Maimataya* requires the planting of a Kapa as preliminary to building a house.

28. This meaning of the Kapa and the illuminating Indian parallel was suggested to me by Professor Ralph Pieris.

29. The night Perahāra did not carry the Relic casket (*Millāwa, op. cit.*)

is legendarily commemorative of the victory of the gods over the Asuras, the powers of good and prosperity over the powers of evil and adversity. Viṣṇu, having slain his Asura opponent washed his sword in river waters. It is also possible that with the passage of time, the Gajabā myth was imposed on a pre-existing Perahāra and water cutting added as commemorative of the iron rod and the parting of the waters.³⁰ ✓

That the Perahāra is related to a war-like drama of heroism and of victory is suggested by the unique show of military strength the Perahāra is, for the Perahāra consisted of the armour of the gods, the king's elephants led by the chief of the elephant stables (Gajanāyaka Nilame), the king's artillery led by its chief (Koḷituwakku Nilame), the whip crackers, the royal guard and the chiefs of the provinces and their militaristic retinue with their flags and banners in proud array, marching to the valour inspiring rhythms of the war drums (*gaman hēvisi*). The men dressed up like giants that Knox observed "go dancing along agreeable to a tradition they have that anciently there were huge men, that could carry vast Burthens and pull up Trees by the Roots, &c." immediately remind us of Nīla and his miraculous exploits (Knox: 1681, 126). The Kapurāla carrying the insignia of the gods on his shoulder appeared to Knox's shrewd eye as riding "with all the triumph that King and Kingdom can afford, through all the Streets of the City" (Knox: 1681, 79). All three gods that were carried in procession when Knox saw the Perahāra are those associated with military triumph — Viṣṇu (whom Knox calls Alut Nuwara Deviyo) and Pattini who are legendarily connected with heroic episodes already referred to and Kataragama who is none less than the god of war himself. The carrying of water to the devales after the water-cutting, which has led some writers³¹ to connect up the water-cutting ritual with attempts to ensure rainfall, is possibly a comparatively recent innovation, an example of the intervention of time to obscure old meanings and to give new meanings to the Āsala Keliya. The participation of the women of the temple, ladies of the court, young girls and young married women of the nobility, the covered palanquins (*randōli*) containing swords and pitchers and their following the insignia during the evening Perahāra and "preceeding them" by night, the cutting of the water with a peculiarly shaped sword and the collection of the water in the pitcher — all this would neatly fit into a story of sexual symbolism but for the fact that these events are most probably isolated in a

30. Pridham (1849) who suggests such a relation says that "the painted stick of Knox appears to be commemorative of the wonder-working rod of Gajabahoo" (p. 331). The "painted stick" however resembles an arrow rather than an iron rod and is explicitly named the golden weapon (*raṇāyudha*). For the water cutting, what is used is not the raṇāyudha but a peculiarly shaped sword. All this is a matter of detail and is unrelated to the possibility that water cutting is commemorative of Gajabāhu's crossing the seas on foot.

31. La Sha: 1958. And more dogmatically Raghavan: 1962, 125. However the presence of a most certain rain causing object in the Tooth Relic, the power of which to the believer was a proven fact, makes it difficult for us to accept altogether the theory that water cutting had rain causation as its objective. Taking the water and keeping it in the Dēvāle may still be suggestive of rain causing ritual but certainly not water-cutting. This type of analysis assumes a static ritual complex for which assumption we have no conclusive evidence.

time dimension and are therefore lacking in complete interrelatedness. The vastness of the ritual complex, its immense time depth, the resultant confusion of symbols and the general lack of evidence makes definite conclusions impossible at present.

If the symbolism of the Āsala Keliya is obscure, its sociological meanings could be determined with some degree of definiteness. What strikes the sociologist to begin with is the reflection in the perahāra of the socio-political structure of the wider community. The presence of the king, the adigars, the chiefs of the great departments of the central government like the Mahalēkam, Kodituwakku and kuruvē, the provincial leaders like Dissaves, Kōrales, Atukōrales and Vidānes seemed to sum up in the Perahāra the politico-administrative structure of the community. At the social level the Perahāra in its provision of room for diverse castes like the cultivator, washermen, potter, and drummer, reflected the society's caste-based hierarchical system.

In the constitution of the Perahāra is seen the reflection of the religious system of the Sinhalese which has been called "Sinhalese Buddhism"³² (Obeysekera: 1963) and the "curious marriage of Hinduism, Buddhism and indigenous super-naturalism" (Ryan: 1951, 211). The Perahāra of the Temple of the Tooth and those of the Nātha, Viṣṇu, Kataragama and Pattini Dēvāles represent Buddhism and god worship respectively, indicating the path of the transformation of Buddhism to suit "specific plebian"³³ religious needs" (Weber: 1958, 237). Not only did the Sinhalese, contrary to the tenets of true Buddhism start worshipping the Buddha after having transformed him into a super-deity, they also created an elaborate pantheon of gods and goddesses possessing power proportionate with their weakness, who would intercede in their physical and psychic distress. Ancient Buddhism was a "religious technology of wandering and of intellectually schooled mendicant monks" (Weber: 1958, 206), an extremely radical form of salvation striving, "an ethical movement without a deity, without a cult" (Weber: 1958, 206). Such a creed lacking in provision for mass religiosity of necessity could not constitute religion for the majority. "Wherever the promises of the prophet or the redeemer have not sufficiently met the needs of the socially less favoured strata, a secondary salvation religion of the masses has regularly developed beneath the official doctrine" (Weber: 1947, 274). Buddhism grew to be a world religion after taking the course that all salvation formulae took: while Mahayana developed a Bodhisatva saviour and "attained a high point of cult mechanism and joined it to the transformation of the entire world into an immense magical garden" (Weber: 1858, 255), Hinayana in its different homes developed different pantheons, the Sinhalese one of which consists of the Buddha occupying a presidential position and the gods Nātha, Viṣṇu, Kataragama and Pattini occupying a sub-ordinate position.

32. I am indebted to Gananath Obeysekera for the framework for understanding the religion of the Sinhalese as a unity. Obeysekera, *op. cit.*

33. i.e. religious needs of the laity.

All provincial chiefs were obliged to take part in the Perahāra and perform their services annually. For this purpose they made their way to Kandy during the Āsala Keliya time, along with their retinues, carrying the symbols of their identity, like flags and banners, and all ready for an occasion of great pageantry. Reference was made above to the composition of the old Perahāra which illustrates the part played by these provincial visitors. This periodic getting together of leaders from all parts of the country, leaders who had political, administrative and judicial powers was of great importance from the point of view of national political integration. The Perahāra afforded an excellent opportunity for the king to inquire after and comprehend the provincial situation. The disobedient could be punished and the loyal rewarded indicating exemplary behaviour from the point of view of the central government. The chiefs who were not sure of their loyalties did well to make up their minds, having experienced the impressive display of royal power to which they themselves, competing with each other to excel, contributed in the last analysis. Some kings³⁴ availed themselves of the opportunity for the assertion of central power against provincial separatism quite liberally. In an age when transport was difficult the political value of the local chiefs visiting the King annually can hardly be exaggerated.

The chiefs also took pride in their positions and would have welcomed the occasion to display themselves. The thousands present would have been undoubtedly impressed by the unique show of pageantry and strength.³⁵ The stately appearance of the King himself in the Perahāra as it sometimes happened, or his dramatic disclosure on the octagon by the removal of the curtain that obscured him would have elicited loyalty of a rare quality. The expression given to political power was backed and legitimised by the sacred symbols of the official religion that were conspicuously present. The symbols of common reverence and a common ideology thus served the function of binding heterogenous strata.

The Perahāra in reflecting social stratification and by giving it ceremonial expression, sought to reaffirm its legitimacy. The Perahāra was the result of the functions of a variety of castes, higher and lower. Successful completion of the portion of work of each caste promoted solidarity within the caste and at the final pageant the castes were brought together promoting inter-caste solidarity. The Perahāra thus provided for the fission and fusion of status categories necessary for organised social life. The unprecedented gathering generated a group feeling, a transcendental social factor *sui generis*, something like the "violent super-excitation of the whole physical and psychic life" that Durk-

34. Pridham, *op. cit.* 331.

35. "The several national festivals, besides fostering the attachment of the people to their national religion, served also to stimulate political allegiance by means of pomp and pageantry. At the Āsala Perahāra, for instance, the governors of the various *dissavanis* and *rata*, accompanied by their retinues, appeared in the capital at the same time and participated in a spectacular festival and procession lasting several days and nights. The four great festivals, celebrated annually at the capital, tended to enhance national unity and political allegiance" — Ralph Pieris: 1956, 126.

heim speaks of (3rd. imp. 1954, 216), an ever renewable social experience which had a cathartic function. In sum, the Āsala Keliya in enacting the social and political status quo intensified and legitimised it, thus contributing to its continued existence.

Particular elements of the Perahāra have undoubtedly changed or dropped off as inevitably the case should be, obscuring its ancient meanings as mentioned above, but the broad institution continues, even after hundred and fifty years of colonial rule and the far reaching changes that have taken place in the socio-economic structure of the land. The surprising persistence is due to the system of extensive land grants of *Vihāragam* and *Dēvālagam* where under the direction of the Radala aristocracy a complex system of service tenure operates. Land is held on the legal condition of performance of temple service giving rise to the Weberian situation where religious duties have ultimately come to be official obligations of status groups.³⁶ Although the broad system of *Vihāragam* and *Dēvālagam* still does remain, due to changes in the tenure of land necessitated among other factors by plantation agriculture, general colonial exploitation and the alienation of land, temple services have ceased to function in the smoothness in which it functioned during Kandyan times. Sale of temple land has led to the new owner paying a temple commutation charge in lieu of services which have thus come to be performed on a contractual basis in place of the basis of status, as in the case of the torch-bearers of the Perahāra, who each night after the Perahāra queue up at the office of the Diyawadana Nilame to receive their wage. The general decay of the system has provided the courage for some to evade responsibility. For example, as mentioned earlier, the boat at the water-cutting has not been ready for the last 25 years or so. At the water-cutting in 1963, tired Kapurālas waited indignantly in the cold of the dawn till the labourers cleared up the bush for the former to step into the river. With the loosening of feudal ties and the spread of liberal ideology the latent conflict between the lay and spiritual authorities, the Basnāyaka Nilames and the Kapurālas, on certain occasions has come somewhat to the open. A young Kapurāla, suspected to be a Communist, and having as much faith in revolutionary politics as in his god, told me how once he asked the dancers not to pay respects to the Basnāyake Nilame (by worshipping him) in the Perahāra, and once how he nearly stopped the dancers from taking part at all. Kapurālās, aware of their supreme authority inside the Dēvāle inner chambers (*atul kaṭṭale*) have found the changing circumstances favourable for the assertion of their positions.³⁷ The water-cutting affords them an excellent opportunity to enhance their solidarity, for, although certain Basnāyake Nilames are required to join the water cutting, of late they have preferred the enjoyment of their dawning slumber to archaic duty. At the water-cutting in 1963, the Kapurālas lost no time in starting their chat and addressing each other in kinship terms (*ayiyā, malli*, etc.). Obviously communal barriers were forgotten, for the Swāmi of the Kataragama Dēvāle

36. Gerth and Mills: 1947, 283.

37. The Kapurāla of Kataragama Dēvāle has resisted the encroachments of the Basnāyaka Nilame and has gone to courts.

addressed an elderly colleague as elder brother (*loku aiyā*). It was a most revealing little assembly, for, spurred by the neglect of duty by the lay authorities, preparing a ceremonial boat and decorating the site apart, and by not having even cleared the bush for them to reach the river bank, unanimous and prolonged condemnation of the system of temporal authority ensued.

With further liberal legislation and the eventual liquidation of temple land, it is inevitable that the feudal service tenure system will someday in the future cease to exist. The Temple of the Tooth, and the four Dēvāles will undoubtedly adjust themselves to such a situation. It is very likely that in such circumstances, the central government through an agency like the Ministry of Cultural Affairs will have to conduct the Āsala Perahāra, for the Maligāwa would not be in a position to afford it on its own.

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