

KATARAGAMA

THE HOLIEST PLACE IN CEYLON

Paul Wirz

Translated from the German by

Doris Berta Pralle



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With illustrations and photographs

by the author

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von Paul Wirz

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TRADITIONS AND LEGENDS

Many strange traditions are connected with Kataragama. Hinduism and Buddhism both take part in it; and even Islam is associated with the holy place. However, it is difficult to decide today, which of all the traditions are based on historical facts and which are free inventions and poetic licence. So hazy and sometimes contradictory, are the records about the origin of the sanctuary, that today it is hardly possible any more, to separate historical facts from legendary stories. Buddhism found its way into Ceylon towards the end of the 4th century B.C. This was very much later than Vijaya, who, coming from Western India, landed in Ceylon with a 600 man retinue and thus laid the foundations of Sinhalese rule. At that time the sanctuary of Kataragama must have already existed though not in its present form. It can therefore, be called pre-Buddhistic without doubt, and the claim to Kataragama brought up again and again by the Ceylonese Buddhists as if this sanctuary were in fact of Buddhist origin, becomes quite unfounded.

The legend connected with Kataragama has been laid down in the epic heroic poem, *Skanda purana* (Purana-legend), originally in Sanskrit. It goes back, as one would imagine, to the fifth century before Christ, while the Tamil version is supposed to have originated in the eighth century. The centre of this legend is Skanda or Subramanya, but generally called by Sinhalese, Kanda Kumara or Kataragama-deviyo, God of Kataragama. As the second son of the highest God Siva, he was destined to play a much greater part in the world of men than any other deity.

There are still more names associated with this God. As with most Gods, he, too, has many names which are used in different regions according to the occasion and type of ceremony. Generally in Ceylon and particularly in Kataragama there is the familiar description, *Muruga*, which implies youth, tenderness and beauty. But peculiarly enough, this name is not to be written, but only spoken. Why this is so I was not able to find out.* *Kuha*, *Nethra Sutha*, which means "Son born from the eyes", *Kartikeya*, "The one coming from the Pleiades", *Gangeya*, "Born out of the Ganges",

* The name is not permitted to be written, as it is far too holy. In this connection it is best to quote from Goethe: "Because it was a solemn word, because it was a spoken word."

Agni-bu, "The Fire-born", *Sanmugam*, "The one with six faces", are his other names which all point out the origin of the deity.

His birth was supernatural and happened according to legend as follows:

For a long time the *devas* (Gods) and *asuras* (Titans) fought each other and there was a time when the Gods were defeated by the latter. Under the guidance of Indra they deliberated on how to shake off the yoke. They gathered around Siva and asked him for assistance. He listened to their complaint. He had five faces and each of them had three eyes which now flashed angrily. A sixth face with a further three eyes developed and simultaneously a spark shot forth from each middle eye so that the beings of the three worlds, the Gods, the Titans and the Humans trembled with fear. Indra caught these six sparks and handed them to Agni, the God of fire, so that he could use them as weapons against the asuras. These were too hot for him, so that he was not able to hold them. He therefore flung them in to the Ganges from where they came to lake Saravana. Here the six Virgins, the Karthika (Pleiades) lived. They kept the sparks with them and they developed into lovely children in their care. One day Siva came with his spouse Uma to the Saravana lake where they caught sight of the six children. "Whose children are these?" Uma asked her husband -- "They are our own", Siva replied. While speaking these words Uma went towards them and gathered all six into her arms and they became a single being with six faces. Thus Skanda, the God of war, was born.

He grew up and became an unusually beautiful, strong young man whom the Gods chose as their leader. He chose a thousand warriors from among them, who henceforth formed his retinue. Each was provided with a lance with a flaming blade. He then went out with his army to defeat the Titans. In this way the lance became the symbol of the God with which he is always represented or which is venerated in his name. In gratitude of the victory over the asuras, Indra gave his daughter Deva Sena to him as his wife after which both of them went to Kanda Velpu and lived there together happily for a long time.

So much for the legend of Skanda's birth and his victory over the asura.

There is still another version of this legend relating the supernatural birth of Skanda.

This legend is included in the *Siva-purana*. It is told, that after mortifying himself and doing penance, the asura Taraka urged Brahma to do him a favour. Brahma consented: Only one of Siva's sons should be able to kill him. This was at a time when Siva had no wife. His wife Sati had burnt herself in Daksha's fire of sacrifice. Taraka knew that Siva was leading a strictly ascetic life and doubted that he would marry again. After receiving the favour from Brahma he became so presumptive that Indra had to hand over his white horse Ochchairsava to him. Kubera gave a thousand sea-horses to him; the seven Sages were compelled to give the cow Kamadhenu, which was able to fulfil all wishes; the sun lost its radiance through Taraka's actions, the moon always remained full and even the wind obeyed his orders.

The Gods assembled and decided to slay Taraka. This could only happen if Siva begot a son. Therefore, Siva had first to get married again. Sati was born again as Uma, daughter of Himalaya. She was persuaded to go to Siva and to beg his affection. But Siva was still sunk in meditation and took no notice of the girl. In desperation Indra applied to Kama, the God of Love and implored him to go to Mount Kailas to stir Siva's passion. Kama followed this advice. His wife Rati (Passion) and his friend Vasantam (Spring) accompanied him. They came to Mount Kailas and to Siva who was still absorbed in meditation. He sat on a tiger skin and his eyes were closed. He stayed completely motionless. All nature too was quiet and motionless; it seemed absorbed in devotion to the highest God. Then Uma came near him with flowers she had picked for Siva, in her hands. At the moment when she was about to put the flowers into Siva's hands Kama released his arrow. He hit Siva, who woke from his meditation. He looked for the cause of the pain inflicted on him and just managed to see Kama making off with his bow. He then opened his third eye and Kama was burnt to ashes by the radiated glow. But the arrow that had been dispatched had ensured that passion had been kindled in Siva. He saw Uma next to him in full youth and grace offering him the flowers in her hands. At that moment he desired her as his wife. However, many years passed before he married her. But the marriage remained childless. Then the Gods turned to Agni, the God of fire for help. Now Agni, on his part, went to Mount Kailas just after Siva and Uma had cohabited. Agni transformed himself into a dove. He managed to catch a little of Siva's seed which he wanted to hand over to Indra. On

his way he dropped it into the reeds growing along the bank of the Ganges. Immediately a boy arose from it who was as glorious and beautiful as the moon and who radiated a light like the sun. He was called Agnibhuva, Skanda and Kartikeya. A further name was Sara Janma, which means "The one born in the reeds".

It so happened that at the place where the boy came into being, six princesses used to bathe. These six girls were the Pleiades. They saw the boy in the reeds and each girl wanted him for herself. Each offered her breast to him. Thus the child got six faces. following this tradition he was also called Shashtimatriya, which means "Owner of six mothers". In reality the child had no mother at all. He arose alone from the seed of Siva. In this manner, the Gods' wish was fulfilled. Now Siva had a son, whose task it was to fight the asura Taraka and to make him harmless for good. This task he fulfilled excellently and his only weapon was a lance (*vel*). Thus the lance became the true symbol of the God. In songs of praise too, the lance is mentioned. "*Vel, vel, veti-vel*"—this means "Lance, lance, victorious lance"—thus sing the children taking part in the procession in Kataragama. We shall return to the deeper meaning of the lance later on.

This episode, the fight between the deity and the asura, is often performed dramatically during the temple festivals. It happens similarly during the yearly festival in Jaffna. On this occasion, two huge figures are constructed who represent the Kataragama-God and the asura. The two figures run towards each other and in this way the fight is re-enacted.

FURTHER LEGENDS ABOUT SKANDA

Years went by. One day a Vedda-chief living in Parana, four miles off the present-day Kataragama, while searching for wild yams found a small girl in the middle of the jungle. Her mother was a doe, the father a hermit who withdrew to the jungle and lived a pious life. The Vedda took the girl into his cave and adopted her, as his wife was childless. They called her Valli-amma or, in short, Valli, as she had been found among wild yam creepers (*valli*)—and so she grew up.

The messenger of the Gods, Narada, also called Brahmaputra (Brahma's son) came on his way through the three worlds into the area of Kataragama. There he met Valli-amma and was highly taken up by her gracefulness. He told Skanda about her and he at once decided to go in search of Valli-amma. He did so in the disguise of a beggar who went towards the Vedda's cave to ask for food. Valli-amma was alone and she handed the old man some honey and yams. After he had eaten she asked him to go to the river near by to quench his thirst. But the old man asked her to accompany him to which she eventually agreed. Then he confessed to her his love and asked her to become his wife. Indignant about his presumption, the girl decided to leave the unknown man at once. However, at the same moment an elephant broke out of the jungle. It was Skanda's brother, the elephant-headed Ganesha, whom Skanda had asked to hide himself in the jungle and to frighten the girl. The girl, frightened to death, begged for the old man's protection, whereupon he emphasized his love and extorted from her the promise of marriage. This had hardly happened when the elephant withdrew and the old man transformed himself into a young man. Marvelling at the whole incident, Valli threw herself at his feet and asked his pardon, as she had at first treated him so rudely. Now she also learned who the young man was. The marriage was consummated but Skanda got into difficulties over it.

When the Vedda and his wife, who had adopted Valli-amma, returned to the cave, they didn't find the girl there any more. They searched for her with the help of other tribesmen in the surrounding jungle and eventually found her with Skanda, whose wife she had become. The Veddass tried to kill the seducer of the girl, but they did not succeed. Skanda was far stronger than they and in a short

time killed a lot of people with his spear. Valli-amma was very enraged at this and decided to leave Skanda. The affair, however, took a favourable turn, when Skanda called back to life all the Veddass he had killed. Peace was then restored and the young couple settled down on the top of one of the neighbouring hills. In memory of this event, this peak is visited even today by pilgrims during the annual festivities.

When Deva-Sena, Skanda's first wife, who is also commonly called Theyvanai-(or Thevani) amma, heard that her husband had married a second wife and had settled down on a hill in south-eastern Ceylon, the jealousy that flared up inside her left her no peace. She complained to her father and asked him to intervene. By some means, Skanda was to be made to return to Kanda Velpu again. To achieve this, Indra got in touch with a wise man named Kalyangiri, who knew about making *yantras*. With the help of one of these Skanda was to be captured and brought back. But when Skanda felt that something was to be attempted against him he called his second wife Valli-amma and the Veddass, in order that they make the *yantra* and the spell, cast by Kalyangiri, ineffective. This too was achieved and they succeeded in seizing the *yantra* and in transforming its creator into a *lingam* of mother of pearl (*muti-lingam*). Following this, he was given the name of Mutulinga-swami.

Skanda was now free again and continued living on top of the hill with Valli-amma. His first wife, however, would not put up with this and, since she saw no possibility of getting back her husband, decided to emigrate to Ceylon. She was not going to renounce her rights easily. Escorted by numerous Brahmans she reached Ceylon where she settled down in the present day Kataragama and eventually succeeded in getting her husband and Valli-amma to give up their dwellings on top of the hill and with her settle down in Kataragama.

In this way Kataragama, where Skanda and his two wives settled down, later on was venerated by the Hindus and Veddass living in the area. The Buddhists also joined this veneration later. Temples were built in honour of Skanda and his two wives and so Kataragama became, by and by, a leading place of worship. Kataragama itself owes its name to the deity. It is an abbreviation of *Karthigeyagrama*, which means "The village of Karthigeya or Karthikeya" i.e. one of the names of the war-god himself.

As was to be expected the North Indian sage Kalyangiri became the subject of many legendary traditions of which there are different versions. Today one sees in him the actual discoverer of the deity of Kataragama, who stayed in concealment in this area for such a long time.

Sad about the deity's long absence from India, he believed that it was incumbent on him to bring him back to that country again by some means. He himself went to Lanka and to Kataragama, where he hoped to meet the God. In order to achieve this he submitted himself to strict penance and chastisement, renounced sleep and for twelve years led a strictly ascetic life. During this period a Vedda-boy and Vedda-girl used to look after him and to supply him with his most essential needs. One day when he was sitting meditating in front of his hut, overcome with weariness, he fell asleep. But soon he was woken up by the Vedda-boy for apparently no reason. Angry about this, Kalyangiri bitterly reproached the boy. "This is the first time that I slept in years," Kalyangiri told the boy and scolded him. The boy stammered a few words of apology and decided to leave the old man. He ran into the forest and the girl joined him. Kalyanagiri followed them and met the two on a small island in the middle of a stream. Kalyanagiri was completely confused when the boy transformed himself into the radiant God himself and the girl into his wife Valli-amma. After twelve long years his wish to meet the God was fulfilled at last. The spell-bound Kalyangiri threw himself at the feet of the deity and asked him to return to India. As was not otherwise to be expected Valli-amma stepped between the two and the deity paid no heed to the old man's request. The holy couple decided to stay in Kataragama and thenceforth Kalyangiri stayed close to them. Subsequently Kalyangiri made the *yantra* which later on was to become the sanctum sanctorum of the temple built at this place.

Kalyangiri, so says one version of the myth, is supposed to have died a natural death in Kataragama and to have been transformed into a muti-lingam only after his death. According to another version, this transformation took place during his life time.

However, this may be, we know today, that Kalyangiri was a wise man from northern India who lived in Kataragama at the end of the 16th century or the beginning of the 17th century, when the Portuguese had already set permanent foot in Ceylon.

This man supervised the temple in Kataragama at that time and

was buried in Kataragama after his death. Later a small temple, the Mutulinga kovil was built in his memory and stands immediately next to the Valli-amma temple, but is separated from it by a road. The entire legendary episode of this pious man, therefore, seems to be of later conception and his existence to have been set back into legendary time.

After his death Kataragama became a regular and often-visited pilgrims' resort to which Kalyangiri's presence in Kataragama and his alleged meeting with the deity contributed no little.

His pupil and successor was Jaysingiri-swami, a contemporary of the British Governor Brownrigg, who, together with the military doctor John Davy visited Kataragama in 1816.

There, too, is still much talk today about another holy man who originated like Kalyangiri from India and came to Kataragama to be close to the deity. His name was Swami Kesa Vapuri of Kesopuri. He was born of eminent Brahmin lineage. In Ceylon he is often called *Palkudi Bawa*, because he lived only on milk and *pala*, which means fruits of the forest. His home was Allahabad. He had come to Ceylon in the beginning of the last century and had settled down in Kataragama. For a long time nobody knew about him, until he was one day "discovered" by another pilgrim from northern India named Surajpuri swami. He died in 1898 in Colombo at a great age. His body was taken to Kataragama and buried there in a mausoleum.

SKANDA'S MOUNT AND ATTRIBUTES

With this, however, the traditions connected with Skanda and his two wives are not yet over. It would take too long to relate all the various episodes connected with the hero. I will mention here only how he got his mount the peacock.

The most frequent and popular representation of the war-god is associated with his name Muruga or Murukan: a tender child of about three years attired with all his jewellery, precious bracelets and trinkets of all kinds, with the spear—his weapon—in the right hand and the peacock—his mount—in the left hand. But most often the peacock stands clinging to his side so that the deity is not sitting properly on the bird's back, which representation again is considered rare. According to this legend this mount (*vahanam*) sprang up from an asura defeated by the deity but whom he generously promised to spare, so that in future he could serve him as a mount. To this suggestion the asura agreed, whereupon the deity transformed him into a peacock on whose back he seated himself.

A very beautiful figure of the deity in his tender childhood years can be found in the Vaitisvaran temple near Tanjore (South India).

There are also frequent representations found, which show the deity with the six faces. One face, so it is said, radiates light that like lightning dispels the darkness; the second expresses compassion and pity for the humans; the third goodness and gentleness towards the peaceful; the fourth shines beautifully like the moon but explores all furtive things; the fifth blesses the victims of the field of battle; the sixth eventually is the one of the kind husband, who shows his benevolence to the poor Vedda-girl. Thus each face has its expression and its special look corresponding to the manifold nature of the deity.

Pictorial representations of the young deity also appear often with the two wives on his side, as for instance on one of the seven curtains that close in the inner sanctum of the big temple in Kataragama. One is inclined to see in these two women figures and the spear the personification of lust, will power and achievement, while Skanda himself is supposed to form a kind of trinity as son (Sutna) with the father (Siva) and Sahti, the mother. About this however, opinions are divided.

In the eyes of the astrologers he is nothing other than Mars identical with the war-god of the Romans and the Greeks. It is also not impossible that Muruga originally was a local deity who was later on identified with the war-god Skanda.

The external symbol of the deity is, as mentioned before, the lance (*vel*). With the lance Skanda defeated the asura whereupon he planted the weapon on a hill near Kataragama. An iron lance can still be seen there today and in it the pious pilgrims see the symbol of the deity himself rather as Christians see the symbol of the Saviour in the Cross.

Actually, however, there lies a deeper, esoteric meaning behind the lance and the myth about the victory over the asura. The lance is the symbol of strength and energy and consequently also of redemption. The asura whom the deity defeated, is the symbol of viciousness, hate and self-glory. It is therefore, really incorrect to designate Skanda as the "God of War". Those who have recognized the deeper meaning of the myth never use this designation. What he was really fighting against was in fact viciousness and evil in general.

The lance, too, as far as its outer shape is concerned is only to be interpreted symbolically. If we look at it more carefully, we find it is made up from one vertical shaft and from two side arms projecting from the upper end, which first diverge and then meet again. The shaft is the "self", that stands there alone and without any support. The two lateral off-shoots express the longing for the deity and correspond with the opened mouth which wants to receive food, or the two arms, which are pointed upwards and are asking for mercy. The combination of both expresses that the longing is stilled,

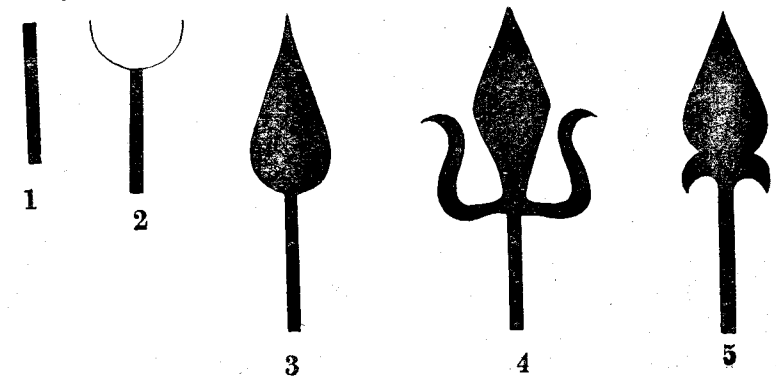


Fig. 1

or in other words the *atman* has become one with the deity. (Fig. I 1-3).

Some pilgrims when they go to Kataragama provide themselves with an iron lance which may be regarded as a votive offering. The small silver lances with which they allow their cheeks and tongues to be pierced are votive offerings as well. Often the end of the needle is not provided with one but with three points. The trident is the weapon of Bahirava, an emanation of Siva.

In front of the Maha-devale a big lance is put up—a so-called *naga-vel*. On both sides of the laurel-leaf shaped point two *nagas* are fixed, their heads sideways and averted from the point. (Fig. I 4) The shape of lance shown in Fig. I 5 had possibly also developed from the Naga-vel. It displays beneath the point too short, downward pointing, hook-shaped attachments.

THE YANTRA OF THE KATARAGAMA DEITY

No sculptural representation of Skanda can be found in Kataragama, which is rather surprising. When Davy remarks, though: "Of all Gods, the Kataragama God is the most feared..... and such is the dread of this being that I was never able to induce a native artist to draw a picture of it", it is definitely not true and one can easily see for oneself when entering the Maha-devale in Kataragama, because there is and was always a painted representation of the deity. Furthermore, coloured pictures of the different deities are being sold in Kataragama as well as in other places, among which Skanda, too, is represented. Also bronze representations of the deity were easily to be got in Southern India, at least in earlier times. Today though they have, like bronze figures in general, become rather rare.

This does not contradict the fact that in the Maha-devale at Kataragama there is actually no sculptural representation of the deity. The only symbol is the lance (vel). One of those, as we have seen, is put up in front of the Maha-devale and also at the other temples and sanctuaries and can often be seen placed in the ground. Many pilgrims bring an iron lance with them, which they leave in Kataragama as a votive offering. The silver needles with which they allow themselves to be pierced through cheeks and tongue are likewise nothing else but small lances, which therefore, are symbols of the deity himself. To the not-so-well-to-do who cannot afford to procure one or more of these needles, the same are lent for a small fee by swamies staying on the right bank of the Menik Ganga. While formulas are recited, they are pierced at once through cheeks and tongues. In this case suggestion plays an important role.

Arriving at the Maha-devale the pilgrim or penitent really has nothing to see. The front room of the temple, which may be entered by anybody, is sober and bare. Three differently coloured curtains separate it from the room behind, the Sanctum, which can only be entered by the two highest priests, the *maha-kapurala* and the *devini-kapurala*.

On the front curtain the deity is painted with the two wives and their mount, the peacock. In the most holy room, in the rear is the sanctum sanctorum, a small box or-relic container which contains

the precious *yantra* made by the Mutulinga-swami. Nobody except the two highest priests have ever seen the object which (they say), is supposed to be of gold leaf. Of what kind the *yantra* itself is, is equally unknown. Some allege that it only represents the hexagon, formed out of two triangles placed on top of each other, the diagram of Skanda. Thus this *yantra*, up to a point, takes the place of a representation of the deity and is being treated and worshipped in precisely the same way, as is done in other temples with representations of deities, though with the difference that the people will not under any circumstances see the relic. Why this is so will possibly never be determined. This small box containing the *yantra* plays, of course, the main role during the processions on the occasion of the big festivity. This precious object is the heart of everything. Every evening it is brought by the *devini-kapurala* who is completely covered in a long white cloth, out of the most holy room of the Maha-devale on to the back of a prepared elephant. Soon after, the latter is led in solemn procession around the different temples up to the temple of Valli-amma about 300 metres away. Here the box with the *yantra* is taken inside the temple by the *devini-kapurala* with the same solemnity and is kept in it for about a quarter of an hour. This temple, too, contains two rooms parted from each other by two curtains; of these the one behind, the sanctum, is only to be entered by the two highest priests, since it serves as the depository for the relic on each occasion. This is repeated every evening during 10 successive nights, the last time being on the full-moon night which forms the culmination point of the whole festivity. During this full-moon night the small box with the *yantra* is left until dawn in the temple of Valli-amma. This is the "Wedding night" of the deity.

The taking across of the *yantra* to the temple of Valli-amma and the leaving of it there for a certain time is nothing other than the symbolic union of the deity with his *shakti*. This is also always customary in other Hindu temples.

Little—very little—is known about the relic, and the little that is known is not even established with certainty, being either legend or perhaps oral tradition. No wonder that many still maintain that the whole story of the *yantra* is only invention or sly deception by priests to make the gullible people believe in something. No human except the *Maha*—and the *devini-kapurala* has ever cast an eye on the "precious relic", who can then maintain, that such exists at all?

In the older reports, too, the *yantra* of the Kataragama-deity is mentioned only incidentally. The government official of the Uva province, Mr. Baumgartner, who visited Kataragama in the year 1897 during the big festivity reports that at the taking of an inventory at the Maha-devale no relic was found. It is possible, of course, that on this occasion the *yantra* had been completely overlooked, as one perhaps mainly expected to find a statue of a god in the sanctum, or otherwise the *yantra* had been taken away into safety in good time. Significant in any case is that Dr. Davy mentions clearly an idol, which, during his visit to Kataragama in the year 1819 was kept hidden in the jungle because of the insecurity prevailing at that time. However, this statement has to be accepted with caution, as we do not know what kind of idol he refers to.

THE CLAIMS TO KATARAGAMA BY THE BUDDHISTS AND MOHAMMEDANS

It is strange that besides the Hindus, Buddhists and even Mohammedans claim a right to Kataragama. Indeed, even the Veddas see in Kataragama a holy place of their forefathers—Skanda's romantic adventure with the girl born from a doe and brought up by the Veddas being the connecting link.

One could actually say that all religions are represented in Kataragama and that all are getting on well with each other. All ritual differences seem to be resolved out here; all are reconciled with each other and even the feeling of caste is completely forgotten.

Apart from this, however, there exists, especially between the Hindus and the Buddhists, a certain rivalry, each seeking to prove its own claim to the shrine of the Kataragama deity. On this account representatives of these two religions put forward all possible evidence that it was their religious followers who erected the main temple in Kataragama in the first place and that the others were to be looked upon as later intruders. This fight for the exclusive rights and privileges is even today not settled. From time to time it flares up again in all its viciousness and nor does it lack in profusely written arguments or writings, which analyse the question in dispute sometimes to the point and sometimes less so*. All this makes and throughout has made the atmosphere here in Kataragama completely different to other holy places in India visited by pilgrims, penitents and ascetics with which are connected and associated through legends one or another of these deities. The Buddhists at all times claimed a right to the different shrines at Kataragama. For this they mainly refer to historical fact which goes back into the sixth century before Christ. At that time Kataragama already had one rather primitive shrine. This possibly was only a hut where later on a temple made of stone was built. According to legend Kataragama belonged to the sixteen places in India and Ceylon where Buddha rested in deep meditation. This took place in Kataragama on the occasion of his third visit to Lanka.

According to the Buddhist Annals the King Maha Sen together

* It may be here mentioned the small brochure which appeared in 1948: *The Holy Shrine of Lord Skanda at Kataragama*. A few facts relating to the Shrine and an appeal for the restoration of its management to the Hindus, published by the Vivekananda Society in Colombo.

with the Buddha is supposed to have stayed at Kataragama or Kajaragama, as the place is called in the Pali-handscripts, around the year 569 B.C. Several years later, Vijaya is supposed to have built a temple in honour of Kadirai Andavar, the God-king, in that very place.

Then again we read from the *Mahavamsa* that Devanampiya Tissa ordered a branch of the Bo-tree, which the daughter of the King Asoka, Sanghamitta, had brought from India, to be planted in Kataragama, as the place was dedicated to Gautama Buddha.

After that, Kataragama became a place of pilgrimage frequently visited by pious Buddhists. It is also fairly certain that Kataragama was one of the earliest settlements of the Sinhalese. Already in the third century before Christ, a Kshatriya clan had settled down there. The dagoba, called Kiri-vehera, which lies half a mile west of Kataragama is also supposed to date from this time. The building, though, was presumably only completed in the first century before Christ. Tiles which fell from the top showed markings in letters of the Brahmi-script used at that time. Some inscriptions, too, have been preserved. These go back to the second century A.D. One is engraved in a six foot long stone plate and the other into one measuring four feet. In these mention is made of extensions and completions to the *vihara*.

As far as the big sanctuary of Kataragama is concerned, it is supposed to lead back to the Sinhalese King Dutthagamani (or Dutugemunu). He is supposed to have built it out of gratitude for the victory that he gained over the Tamil King Elala with the help of the deity. Elala had made Anuradhapura his capital while Mahanaga, Dutthagamani's great-grandfather, had fled to the south of the Island and had established a new kingdom which was named Mahagama. From this time onward this city formed the seat of the Sinhalese kings. Later on this place developed into the present day Tissamaharama. For fully seventy-eight years Tamil kings, besides Elala, had been occupying the entire northern part of the Island. It was left to Dutthagamani to make an end to this state of affairs. In a dream he is supposed to have received instructions to make a pilgrimage to Kataragama in order to ask for the help of the deity. Without hesitating he left for Kataragama, meanwhile making a vow, that if victory was bestowed on him he would build a place of veneration to the deity. This was subsequently done.

He got a protective roof of branches, which he cut himself with

his sword, made over the lance which Skanda had fixed into the ground near Kataragama. In its place, later on, the *Maha-devale* was built. Thus arose, next to the old Kataragama, a new one which very quickly developed into a proper place of pilgrimage. Thenceforth it was visited by pious Buddhists. The Hindu-pilgrim though, continued to visit the old place of veneration of Skanda and Mount Vedahitiya Kanda, on top of which the deity had lived, while they paid no sort of attention to the new place. Dutthagamini's acts of heroism are extolled in the Sinhalese poem *Kanda Upata* (Kanda's birth), but strangely the episodes of Dutthagamini, as far as they concern the visit to Kataragama and the pledged vow, are not to be found mentioned in the *Mahavamsa*. It is therefore quite possible that it is a legend that developed later.

Supported by this tradition, the Buddhists tried and still try to justify their claim to the temple of Kataragama. Because of this they additionally point out the custom continued to the present day, whereby all temples of Kataragama are kept under the care of Sinhalese priests (kapurala) and that the supervision too is carried out by a Sinhalese Basnayake, except of course the temple of Theyvanai-amma, who, as we have seen was a daughter of Indra. The Hindus on the other hand maintain that many centuries before this and even before the birth of Buddha, and indeed before the arrival of the Aryan Sinhalese in Ceylon, there was a sanctuary of the deity in Kataragama. The shrine of Valli-amma too, so they say, goes back to the pre-Buddhist time. Valli-amma and Valli are Tamil designations, and her shrine is supposed to have been founded by Hindus, namely Veddas, who had accepted the Hindu faith. Valli-amma was, of course, as the tradition relates, adopted by the Veddas; therefore neither the Sinhalese nor the Tamils had a direct interest in erecting a shrine for her. As to who was right of the two, we cannot, of course, examine further here. Much has been written about this and the discussion on this subject is even today not concluded. The fight about sole rights to the temples of Kataragama goes on inexorably and a satisfactory solution will possibly never be found. It is, of course, well known that the Buddhist Sinhalese always venerated the Gods of the Hindu pantheon and in certain regards also follow the rites of the Hindus. In all Buddhist shrines one still finds portraits of Hindu deities who have their assigned place beside the representations of Buddha. It is also known that Sinhalese kings often married Tamil princesses and, though they

were Buddhists, participated in the rites of the Hindus. All this may have contributed to the fact that from ancient times Hindus and Buddhists considered the temples and shrines of Kataragama common property.

Soon after the death of Dutthagamini, Kataragama declined in importance, and was almost forgotten until nearly the beginning of the 11th century. We hear about another Sinhalese king, Dappula I., who reigned over Rohana around the middle of the 7th century A.D., but was also well liked in Anuradhapura, and he allowed a cloister to be built in Kataragama in the year 642 so that the Buddhist bhikkus should henceforth have a home there. While Skanda, as we have seen, was ardently venerated by the Buddhists, he is according to another Sinhalese tradition, alleged to have been an ordinary human, a prince, who is supposed to have lived in Kataragama around the years 569 to 543 before Christ. A further tradition presents him as a Tamil juggler, who is supposed to have descended from the Palamai mountains in Southern India. Through his tricks he is supposed to have successfully deceived the people so that later on he was venerated as a God. It was only after the 11th century that Kataragama again acquired its former importance, and then quickly became a more and more frequented place of pilgrimage. Thousands of people from Ceylon and India made annual pilgrimages to this place, and it was considered equal to making a pilgrimage to Benares, Puri, Rameswaram, etc. It was an achievement worth striving for and would not stay unrewarded. The largest number of people, however, made and still make pilgrimages to Kataragama, because when they fall into trouble or were overcome by illness they pledged a vow. If the deity helps them they will make a pilgrimage to Kataragama, and make penance in this or that way: e.g. pierce themselves through cheeks and tongue with silver needles, let iron hooks be put into their backs, run on nail-shoes to the great sanctuary and all the other temples, roll on the dusty road to the temple or a certain number of times around the whole temple area, or otherwise walk over the fire on the last night.

Hundreds and thousands are still making pilgrimages to this great sanctuary, filled with thoughts of the mercy of the deity. They avoid neither trouble nor hardship, neither sacrifice nor pains, to reach their destination and spend a few days or even some hours in the nearness of the deity.

I do not wish, however, to speak about this here, as it will be reported in detail in a later chapter.

Today Kataragama is one of the most holy places of the Hindus as well as of the Buddhists. It takes, in fact, a very special position among all the places of pilgrimages in Ceylon and India. It is difficult to say why this is really so. Benares, Puri, Ramesvaram, Tiruvannamalai, to mention only a few, are also the annual destination of many thousand pious people. It may be that this is due to its position as the furthest South of the lower Indian subcontinent in which Ceylon could be included. Kataragama forms, as we have already seen earlier, the southern pole—the Kailas the northern pole of the axis; both are situated on the same meridian. (Fig. II).

Three festivities take place in Kataragama every year. The first is the *Esala perahera**, the main festival of Kataragama, which starts with the new moon in July and lasts about two weeks. It is heralded by the *magul perahera*, which is held for ten successive nights. In these, the love-affair of the deity with his beloved and their union are symbolically demonstrated. After the last night follows the so called water-cutting-ceremony, which always takes place in the morning of the full-moon day. Concerning the meaning of the latter, mention will be made in later chapters. The entire festival consists of a dramatic staging of the legendary traditions of Skanda, especially concerning the episodes that happened in Kataragama.

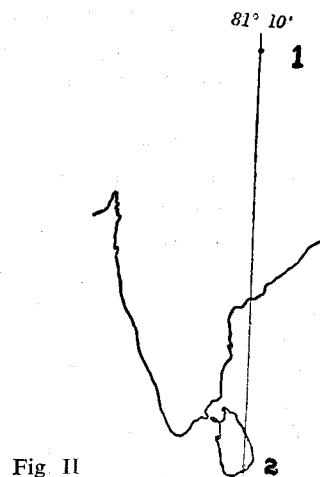


Fig. II

* *Esala* is the name for the summer months June and July.

The second festival is the *ilmaha kachi*, a festival that lasts three days. The third festival is called *aluth aurutha*. It is held in April and coincides with the new year festival of the Sinhalese and Tamils. It lasts only one day. Naturally it is, above all, the first mentioned festival that mainly interests us as it is without doubt of highest importance.

Many kinds of roads lead to Kataragama, only two of which can be used by cars. One leads directly and the other by a large detour from Tissamaharama to the small and still famous jungle-village. From here a jungle road leads northward to the town of Buttala, another eastward to Pottuvil, situated along the coast, a third eventually in a westward direction to Tanamalvila.

The main road which the majority of pilgrims use is the direct road from Tissamaharama which is twelve miles long. A few years ago it was closed for motor vehicles, at least during the *Esala perahera*, and one not liking to walk was compelled to rent a small zebu cart or an ox-cart. Most pilgrims prefer to travel by night in order that they arrive in Kataragama early morning because of the excessive heat prevailing during the day, especially during this season. While in earlier times travelling by foot was considered meritorious because of the trouble and hardship not to mention wild animals, people travelling by foot are now becoming less from year to year. For these, however, facilities have been created everywhere nowadays. Everywhere free hostels are available to the pilgrims; everywhere there is drinking water too and there is certainly no shortage of boutiques where tea and refreshments can be had. Kataragama itself, one can almost say, becomes during these two weeks a town, though of most primitive huts, barracks and a few little houses built out of clay or stone. Of these the largest number are hostels (*chetties*) for pilgrims where thousands of people gather during these few days. During the rest of the year, though, Kataragama makes an absolutely sad impression. Hardly a dozen people stay permanently here. These are mainly the *kapuralas**. Above them is the *Basnayake*† who therefore is really the chief. He occupies

* By a *kapurala* or a *kapuva* is meant a priest who is the head of non-Buddhist temple a so called *devale* (Sinhalese) or *kovil* (Tamil) and who carries out its rituals. He may at the same time still be a Buddhist, but has nothing to do with the Buddhist temples (*viharas*). He represents the old pre-Buddhist religion, a mixture of Hinduism and old demon-belief, the priest of principals of the different temples.

† The title *basnayake* is a combination of the Dutch “*bas*” (master, head) and the Sinhalese *nayaka* an abbreviation of *nayakaraya*, which means somebody who carries out an occupation. One could describe *basnayake* in the following way: A man who carries out the duty of a master or overseer.

the largest and best house in the place, which is situated close to the temple area, but stays in Kataragama only during the big festivities. All kapuralas are Sinhalese and are alleged to be descendants of the old *pujaris*.* Only the shrine of Theyvani-amma is under the supervision of a Hindu priest from Benares. This goddess, as is well known, is a daughter of Indra.

There are eight kapuralas, of whom one is of higher rank and holds the title of *maha-kapurala*. They are all under the Basnayake, who too is a Sinhalese. This fact has up to now always heated much anger among the Tamil and the Hindu, but the Sinhalese are holding on to this privilege tenaciously. It would be fruitless for the Hindus to urge for a change in the supervision of the temples of Kataragama, although they did not fail in making several such attempts. The Tamils only too gladly mention that prevailing conditions are quite scandalous, that the temple supervision is not carried out in a proper manner, that there can be no mention of repairs to the shrines and that the charities given in the form of alms are misappropriated by the kapuralas and even by the Basnayake, instead of being used for the maintenance of the temples and the building of hostels for the pilgrims.

The Sinhalese, though, for their part complain that exactly the same can be said with regard to the Buddhist Budh Gaya, and that it is not less scandalous that these revered places of Buddhist faith should be under the supervision of a Hindu priest.

As with most Hindu temples there are also a number of so-called *alathi-ammass*† attached to the shrine of the Kataragama deity. Alathi-amma means temple-girl corresponding to the devadasis of the South-Indian temples, who, it is said, are descendants of Valli-amma. Their number was originally twelve, but today, however, there are only eight as a rule. It is their duty to accompany the nightly procession on the occasion of the Esala perahera and when it is over to perform a dance which is supposed to put the deity into high spirits.

In addition, a few Vedda men or boys have to be always present at the Esala perahera. This is an ancient custom, which is clung

* The designation *pujari* derived from *puja* (the honour to carry out the ritual prescribed by the Hindu religion).

† *Alathi* is the name for a small bronze oil-lamp, with which the girls are provided. Before the perahera begins the girls light their lamps from large candlesticks in front of the Maha-devale. With these lamps they walk with the procession directly in front of the elephant. After the last perahera they dance for a fairly long time in front of the temple of Valli-amma, in which the relic is kept for the whole night, to please the godly couple.

to even today. Since there are hardly any pure Veddas any more today, one has to be content with men of mixed origin, who come from the area of Bintenne.

Very little is known about the arrival of the Mohammedans in Kataragama, but it is certain that the mosque is not very old. It is a simple building, more like a hut, which at the same time serves as a residence for the high priest.

There is a talk about an Islamic saint called Hoyathu, who came from the north of India to Ceylon and to Kataragama, where he settled down for good. He built himself a house, in which he lived and where he carried out his religious exercises. Out of this building—it has most possibly been renovated and re-built repeatedly—the present day mosque and residence of the priest arose.

Another holy man was Kamria Nabi. He, too, came from northern India. He is supposed, so one legend states, to have discovered a hidden spring in the proximity of the present-day mosque. The water, when drunk, is supposed to give immortality.

The following reports show that Kataragama has been visited frequently by Mussulmans from northern India, but strangely enough never by those resident in Ceylon.

In 1872 another pious man, called Jabbar Ali Sha, came to Kataragama to pay homage to the Hoyathu Nabi. He, too, came from northern India—from Lucknow. He died in Kataragama and was buried there. A rather magnificent grave was built for him in the immediate proximity of the mosque. Today it forms the actual centre of worship for the Islamic pilgrims that come to Kataragama. Small green flags, with the white halfmoon, adorn this place.

Another grave in the same place is of later date. It was built for the highest Islamic priest in 1945. His name was Meer Sayed Mohammed Alishi Bawa, who came to Kataragama in 1910 and died there thirty-five years later.

At the time of the Esala perahera many pious Islamites come to Katargama, but they always stay within the area allotted to the Moslems. They obviously never visit the shrine of the Hindus and the Buddhists and they neither take part in the peraheras. Every day, they arrange for a procession around the mosque, inside which the usual services take place. Besides the high priest there are several priests of lower status who bear the office of “leader of the prayers”.

The Moslems, too, are skilled in piercing needles through the

various parts of their bodies and in addition make it a habit to inflict upon themselves bleeding wounds with sharp knives, daggers, swords and similar instruments, which is never done by the Hindus. Spittel knows various stories regarding this and he paints for us lively pictures of the scenes at which he was present. All this, of course, has as little to do with the Kataragama-god as the mosque which was built there. They merely think, that they have to occupy themselves in some way on the occasion of the great festivity of Kataragama, in order not to be inferior to the Hindus. Therefore, they just do it in accordance with their religion and in a manner related to it. The instruments used are needles of different length and knives, daggers and swords of many kinds. Compared with these the silver needles and the hooks of the Hindus are mere toys. At the time of the great festivity one can see many strange things in the area around the mosque. Spittel tells of a dervish who pierced his scalp with a long needle and even pushed a needle into the outer corner of the eye so that the whole eye ball bulged out. This particular dervish and others did things that Hindus would not even consider. Spittel calls these "holy men" of the Islamic faith, who submit themselves to torments of this nature, simply dervishes without stating clearly, what is meant by it; whether in other words, these are people who belong to a special sect or whether anybody of any sort can submit himself to these torments.

One also learns from Spittel's descriptions, it is not only in Kataragama, but also in other places including even Colombo that these practices at times take place. He paints for us a picture, imprinted in his mind, of the "religious ceremony" of an Islamic sect, called moplal, which he had the opportunity of attending in Colombo. The ceremony was held in honour of a holy Mohammedan called Sultanul Arifin Seyid Ahamad Kabir Raffiah, because of which it was just called *Raffiah Rathib*. In a garden under a white cloth spread into a canopy, two rows of men were seated with tambourines (which they used instead of drums) in their hands. At the head of each row a priest (*maulana*) was seated, one of whom was of higher rank. Placed on a cushion lay the *rathib*, a collection of hymns, which are sung during such occasions. Now and then an old man started a song and beat the rhythm to it, whereupon the others joined. In this manner it went on for quite a while. On either side of the priests candles and oil lamps were lit and in a brazier incense was being burned. On the side lay a whole collection of instruments

for immolation: Needles, knives, daggers, etc. A young man, whose upper body was bare and whose head was covered with a red cloth, seized one of the knives and handed it to the Seyid. The Seyid examined it for its sharpness spoke a formula over it and handed it back to the young man, who at once gave it for "blessing" to the second "priest". After this was done, he began first slowly, then faster and faster finally in a frenzy, to jump forwards and backwards. Then he suddenly started to make cuts in his body with the sharp knife in his hands, but no drop of blood was to be seen. Finally, he inflicted on himself a bleeding wound, which was however, of a very harmless nature.*

* Spittel, page 312 onwards

THE TEMPLES AND SHRINES OF KATARAGAMA

In order to understand better, it may be as well to mention once again all the temples and shrines that there are in Kataragama. Without exception, they are all small, plain buildings and nowhere near those temples that southern India can boast of. They are all built of stone, only the Valli-amma temple showing structures of wood. No kind of adornment, or architectural peculiarities are to be seen. In vain will one look here for monuments which would even vaguely remind one of the South Indian temples. There are no representations of deities adorning the inside or outside of these buildings. All is sober and bare and unattractive. They have been left exactly as they were built and it is unlikely that anybody in the future will get the idea of making any changes on them, or contributing in any way to their beauty. But these facts do not lessen either their holiness or the great holiness of the place itself in any way. On the contrary, Kataragama as far as its holiness is concerned, and about this all agree, occupies the very first position and is therefore superior to many a gorgeous temple of southern India.

The holiest of all the temples is the *Maha-devale*, or as it is also called the *Maha-kovil*. It is dedicated to the great deity and it holds within it the holy object, the *yantra* of the deity. This temple is the first that has to be visited by the pilgrims. It is the largest of the temples in Kataragama. In reality, however, it is a very modest building. Its foundation is quadrangular and its walls, completely bare of adornments are covered with a flat roof. The interior is filled with smoke and soot of the oil lamps that are permanently burning and the camphor that is burnt in fantastic quantities inside and outside the building during the festivities in honour of the deity. As already mentioned, there are no sculptural representations of the deity in any form inside the temple. There is, on the other hand supposed to be a small image of Isvara or a karanduva in an adjoining room. It is kept in a round container, which stands on a platform.

A particularly holy object is the *kalana madima*, a large arm-chair made out of clay, which stands on a platform. It is covered with a leopard skin and on it lie different ceremonial instruments. This was the arm-chair of Kalana Natha, the first priest of this temple.

It is said of him that he had been a very pious man and that after his death he went straight into heaven. Each of his successors has the right to sit down on this chair once and this only immediately prior to his death. Therefore, this privilege is yet to come as far as the present priest is concerned.

There are two entrances to the temple, the large main entrance which can be locked with a folding door, and a small side entrance on the right side of the building. The main entrance faces east as is the case with many temples. Originally, the building was only half its present size. Later it was extended in the rear. In earlier times a room was added, which is supposed to contain the grave of the earlier mentioned Kesopuri. The style of this modern addition with its pairs of columns, however, does not agree with the original *Maha-devale* in any way nor, by the way, has it any connection with it. The interior of the temple is divided into two parts. These are not partitioned by walls, however, but by curtains. There are three curtains, each of a different colour. Originally there are supposed to have been seven of them. Only the front one is visible. On this are represented the deity with the two women and the peacock. These curtains correspond to the three spheres or the three aspects, which serve to demonstrate the volitions and actions of the deity. The first aspect is the exoteric, the purely popular; the second is the esoteric, that occupies itself with the symbolism; the third aspect is the mystical about which it is not possible to have further discussion. According to this last aspect there are no legends in our sense; they are on the contrary much closer to our Western conception of the truth.

The curtains have been donated by wealthy people and whenever a new curtain has to be provided there are always patrons who will gladly contribute the necessary money.

Behind the curtains is the most sacred part which only the two highest priests, the kapuralas, are allowed to enter. Before doing so they first have to wash their hands and feet and dress themselves in a clean white loin-cloth. In addition, they have to tie their mouths similarly with a clean white cloth, because the holy relic is kept in this room and must never be soiled under any circumstances.

When the oldest part of the building was erected is not known, but it is without doubt of rather early origin. Originally it is supposed to have been only a modest hut, in which place the proper temple was built later on.

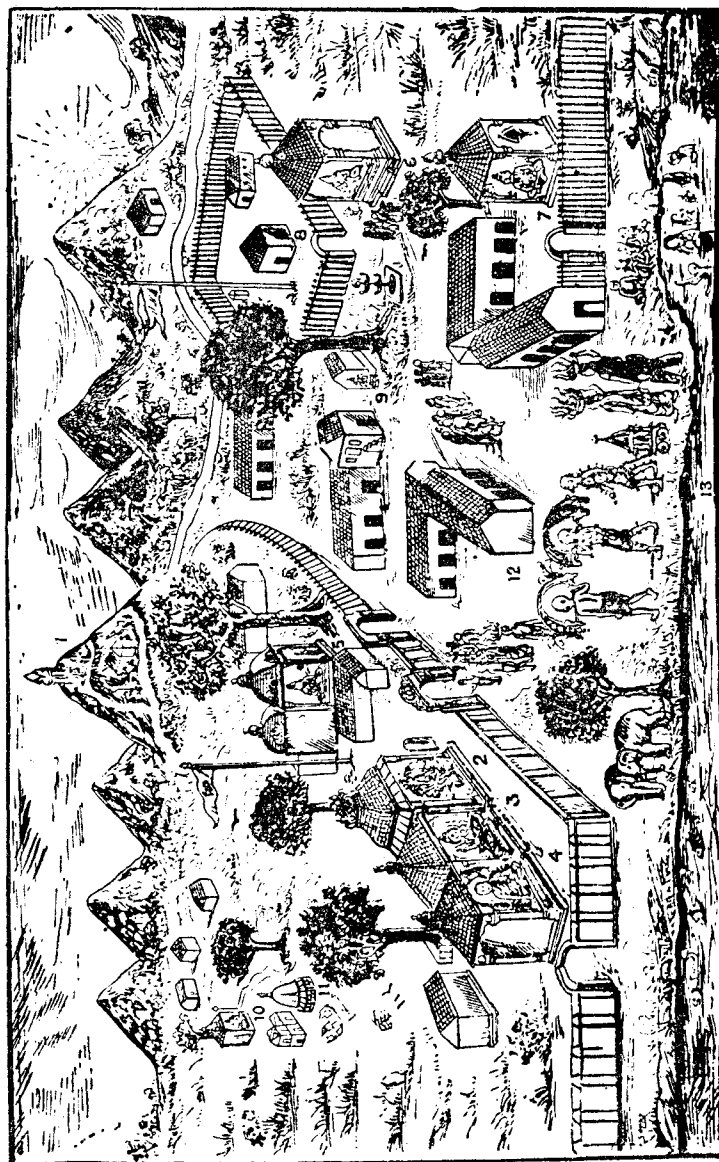


Fig. III
Kataragama (according to an old Indian print)

1. Kataragama—Peak or Vadahitiya-kanda, one of the seven hills of Kataragama.
2. The Maha-devale.
3. The Ganapati kovil.
4. The Perumal kovil.
5. The Theyvanat-amma kovil.
6. The Valli-amma kovil.
7. The Mutulinga-swami kovil.
8. The Mosque.
9. The Kannakai-amma kovil.
10. The small kovil.
11. Dagoba.
12. Dwelling of the Basnayake.
13. The Menik-ganga.

So great is the holiness of the temple, that no kind of alteration and no kind of repairs are allowed to be carried out on the building, unless the deity should order the highest priest in a dream to do so. Should this happen the priest goes to the Basnayake and conveys his dream to him.

Towards the side of the main entrance of the temple may be found a tall stone socle, a kind of tower with a bell. It is struck to let the people know that some religious activities have started. It is struck for the first time early in the morning at five o'clock when the temple door is being opened. Immediately after this the first *puja* takes place. The second *puja* is between six and seven o'clock. After this the preparations for the *perahera* are started. As soon as it starts getting dark the elephant is led into the temple-yard to be dressed. The bell-ringing indicates that one has to come to the temple-yard. A partition built of bricks, called *vasana-medai*¹ serves for dressing the elephant. It is flanked by two rows of steps from which the back of the elephant may comfortably be reached. The devini-kapurala, after placing the relic in a small wooden box fixed on top of the elephant, also uses these steps to seat himself on the back of the animal. Immediately after this the animal is fumigated by a kapurala and then the procession starts to move.

Immediately on the left of the Maha-devale, and separated from it by only a narrow passage lies the temple of Ganesha or Ganapati, as he is commonly called in Ceylon. He is the brother of the Kataragama-god. The Hindus call this temple Manica Pillaiya. It is much smaller than the Maha-devale and also simple and without any adornment. Inside the temple a small stone representation of the elephant-headed deity may be found. A single entrance leads from the temple-yard into the room which is blackened by smoke and soot. From the ceiling a brass plate which bears the Tamil hieroglyphics O M² is suspended. Further to the left of the Ganesha-temple there is another small temple which is dedicated to Vishnu. The Hindus call it Perumal-kovil. There are two pictures inside this, representing Vishnu and Skanda. Strangely enough this temple has a statue of Buddha in addition and this is the reason why the

1. This designation is most possibly a combination of *Vāsana*—fumigate, to perfume and *medā*—on this day, at this time—. To fumigate the elephant, after he has been made ready and the relic has been placed in the box fixed to his back, is the most significant act.

Buddhists try to claim a certain right to this temple. According to them it is supposed to have been a Buddhist sanctuary throughout. It was built in the immediate proximity of the big Bo-tree now growing behind the temple, which allegedly is one of the oldest objects of Buddhist association in Kataragama. There is a square stone pillar in front of the building, which is covered on all four sides with incised inscriptions. This stone dates back to the Sinhalese king Dappula V, who ascended the throne in 918 A.D. Originally, it was kept about one mile south of Kataragama and therefore, had nothing directly to do with the locality. Kataragama is not mentioned in the inscription at all. Only in 1916 the stone, broken into two pieces, was taken to Kataragama by Buddhist priests and put up in front of the Perumal-kovil. The total height is about one and a half meters. It is strange that, apart from the inscriptions, there is a snake and a hand mirror depicted on one side of the stone. An exact description of this stone, including a translation of the inscription can be found in the fifth volume of the *Epigraphia Zeylanica*.

Walking around the Buddhist sanctuary one comes to the Bo-tree, mentioned earlier. It is supposed to have grown out of a branch, brought by the daughter of Asoka from India and which was planted here by Devanampiyatissa, the king at that time. Under this tree pious Buddhists hold their devotions during the full-moon nights.

Another, slightly smaller Bo-tree grows behind the Maha-devale.

There are still three small temples to be mentioned, which are attached to the western wall of the temple area. All are of about the same size and also simple and without any adornments. The one situated to the left is dedicated to Patinidevi, the one in the middle to Managara-deviyo and the one situated to the right to the goddess Kali. Immediately next to the latter lies the western gate. Through this one gets to the Kiri-vehera, the *dagoba*, that lies about half a mile away. If one leaves the temple area through the northern gate one finds on the immediate right the temple of Theyvanai-amma which, therefore, lies outside the temple yard. This temple, too, is blackened by smoke and soot. Oil lamps burn day and night in it and here, too, pilgrims burn camphor which they bring along with them. For this purpose there is an iron bowl which is fixed to an iron shaft and is let into the ground.

Finally, the last small temple of this holy area, the Palni-devale, has to be mentioned. It lies immediately next to the one mentioned

before, but is significantly smaller. This kovil, just like the Maha-devale, is dedicated to Skanda, but is called Palni-devale in memory of the deity's years of adolescence spent in Palni.

Now we leave the temple area behind us and follow the second main road, which is closed in on both sides by tea and grocery boutiques, restaurants and rest-houses for the pilgrims. After about 200 meters we arrive at a spacious square, into which the other main road also leads. A large, shady *Kohomba* tree*, adorns the corner where the two roads meet. In close proximity stands a wonderful bronze chandelier. It is of unusually large size with many oil lamps, which are lighted during the perahera. The temple of Valli-amma is situated opposite this chandelier. It is larger but like those mentioned earlier an extremely simple building. There is some good work in its upper part. Here, too, no images are to be seen in the interior, but the room is parted by curtains, just as in the Maha-devale. Again the rear room, where the relic is kept every evening for a short time during the perahera, is the most sacred. The front room is used by the kapurala for carrying out the ritual; if it is open, the pilgrims are allowed to walk in and out of it freely. Like at the Maha-devale there is in front of the temple a small construction with some steps. The elephant is led up to this during the perahera, so that the kapurala can descend with the relic from the back of the animal without difficulty and also mount it later on. Here, too, on the right is a socle of brick which carries a bell. Every evening when the perahera arrives this bell is rung.

On the right hand side of this temple lies the area of the Mohammedans. Here the only large building is the mosque. This, too, is of extreme simplicity and obviously has no images inside. One of its doors, which leads into a small room—they say—cannot be opened any more since the death of the last Muslim saint. Nobody is supposed to know what is inside the locked room. It looks as if the Mohammedans tried to imitate something corresponding to the Maha-devale. There is a bunch of peacock feathers in front of the door, which are dedicated to the Kataragama-god. Some insist that these feathers have been brought to the mosque to attract the Hindus and to get contributions from them in the form of money. The Hindus actually do come to the mosque because of the peacock feathers and they believe that the Muslims, too, venerate the Kataragama-deity. Some bring small silver arrows or lances with them.

*. *Azadirachta indica*.

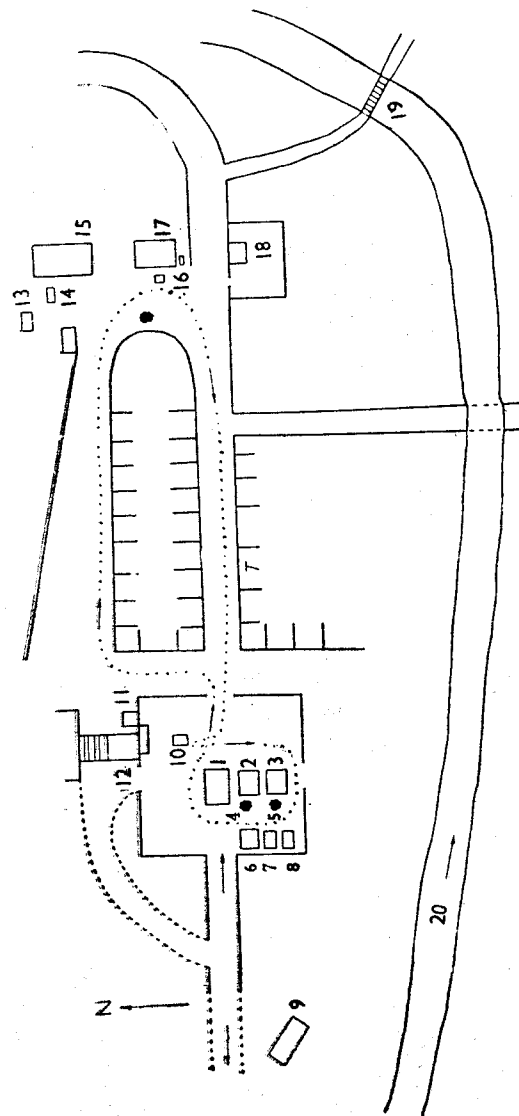


Fig. IV

- 1 Maha-devale or Maha kovil.
- 2 Ganesha-temple (Ganesha kovil).
- 3 Vishnu-temple (Perumal kovil).
- 4 Bo-tree behind the Maha-devale.
- 5 Bo-tree behind the Vishnu-temple.
- 6 Temple of the Goddess Kali (Kali-amma kovil).
- 7 Temple of Mangara deviyo (Magara kovil).
- 8 Temple of Patini devi (Patini kovil).
- 9 Buddhist Cloister.
- 10 Vasanamedai.
- 11 The small kovil of the deity Skanda (Palni kovil).
- 12 Temple of Theyvanai-amma (Theyvanai am na kovil).
- 13 Grave of Jabbar Ali Sha Mahubut.
- 14 Grave of Meer Sayed Mohamed Alishi Bava.
- 15 Mosque.
- 16 Vasanamedai.
- 17 Temple of Valli-amma (Valli-amma kovil).
- 18 Temple of the Mutulinga-swami (Mutulinga-swami kovil).
- 19 The Bridge.
- 20 The Menik Ganga.

They offer these to the highest as priest an "offering", for which in return *vibhuti*—holy ash—is given to them. The mosque in Kataragama actually is of certain importance to the Hindu pilgrims. This is verified by the fact, that the hoisting of a green flag with a white half-moon on top of the mosque signifies, so to speak, the fact that the main festivities are about to start. This mosque, by the way, is the only one in Ceylon and India, to which Hindus also are permitted to visit.

Some distance away on the left of the mosque lies the stately burial ground of Jabbar Ali Sha and a little further behind this lies the grave of the Islamic priest, who died in 1945. Large shady Kohomba trees adorn these holy places.

On the right of the Valli-amma temple is the road, which runs parallel to the river. Immediately opposite lies the temple of the Mutulinga-swami. This building, like the others, is of extreme simplicity. Unlike the Valli-amma temple it is surrounded by a wall. Inside this temple is supposed to be the grave of this holy man, though legend says that he was transformed into a mother-of-pearl lingam. It is actually stated that there is such an object inside the Mutulinga-swami temple; but nobody appears to have seen it yet. There can be seen only a rather crude copy of this lingam, out of which the head of a man projects. It is painted on a piece of cloth, which decorates the inside of the temple. The present priest, who supervises this small temple is supposed to be a direct descendant of the Mutulinga-swami. The dagoba, called Kiri-vehera, has already been discussed in detail in an earlier chapter. It is, so state the Buddhists, the oldest building in Kataragama, and was built in 300 B.C. by king Maha-naga (or Mahagama). But there are others who ascribe it to king Dutthagamani.

They say that it has been built on the very spot where Buddha on his third visit to Ceylon is supposed to have preached to the devas. Whether as in all other dagobas, there is a relic inside it is still an unanswered question, and possibly will never be answered. The Hindus, however, insist that long before the building of the dagoba a Hindu-sanctuary of the Kataragama deity existed. Therefore, they say, they alone have the correct title to the temples and shrines of Kataragama. Even the hill, on which the dagoba was built, is supposed to be connected in a legendary way with the Kataragama-god. Its real name was *Suran-Kottai*, which means "fortress of the Suran" (asura), who is supposed to have entrenched himself here.

For many centuries already the dagoba itself has been in a state of decay. The bricks of which the outer covering was made, and which have dropped off, have long since found their use elsewhere. That does not prevent the Buddhists from still honouring it as a great sanctuary and Buddhist pilgrims from visiting it when they come to Kataragama. They do so especially during the full-moon night of the "big festivities". The Kiri-vehera, so say the Buddhists, belongs to the sixteen sacred places of Ceylon, where Buddha is supposed to have stayed. A few years ago work commenced on restoration of the decayed outer cover, but many years will pass before it will be completed. No injustice is done to the Buddhists if the Hindus accuse them of great indifference and neglect. Exactly the same happened to an old, broken down building, which is continuously occupied by some Buddhist Bhikkus and therefore has the significance of a cloister. Coming from Kataragama it lies on the left side of the road.

Still mention has not been made of all the holy places of Kataragama that are visited individually by the pilgrims. Four miles west lies the so-called *Sella Kataragama* or the "small Kataragama", where a small sanctuary in honour of Ganesha can be found. This small temple lies immediately next to the *ganga*, whose water is here wonderfully clear and fresh. In other ways, too, this area is especially attractive. Virgin jungle surrounds this holy place. Within it many kinds of wild animals and even elephants roam unbothered and undisturbed. The episode between Skanda and Valli-amma, who was frightened by Ganesha, the brother of Skanda, and then protected by Skanda, happened here according to legend.

This small temple was built later in memory of this event and in honour of Ganesha.

Half way to Kataragama lies "Valli-amma's cave". Its walls of rock are covered with a slimy, white secretion. Valli-amma is supposed to have churned milk here every day and that is how the walls got this peculiar appearance.

According to the belief of the people, Sella Kataragama has a very special significance. Many Sinhalese and Tamils come to Kataragama to get married. After the ceremony, the young couple pilgrimages to Sella and spends their first night there in memory of the romantic adventure of the deity. This wedding night spent here in Sella will be, so they believe, a blessed one.

The Kataramalai, too, the hill of Katara or Kartikeya, is visited

with greater devotion by pilgrims during the Esala perahera. On the top of this hill, which can be seen from far away, the deity planted the lance into the ground after he defeated the dangerous asura. Pilgrims usually climb this hill during the early morning hours, after first taking a bath in the Menik Ganga. Immediately after this they proceed on their way in wet clothes. This, they say, is supposed to please the deity very specially.

Finally there is still to be mentioned the *Vedahitiya Kanda*. This is the hill, where the deity lived for a long time together with his beloved.

THE WORSHIP OF THE KATARAGAMA DEITY

As we have already seen, Skanda who later on became the Kataragama deity was originally an Indian deity. He is chiefly worshipped in southern India, but there by the name of Subramanya. In consequence of a love affair he went to Ceylon close to the present-day Kataragama. The fact that the deity turned away from India and that he moved away to another country, contributed largely to the start of a gradual decline in his veneration in the country of origin. In Ceylon, on the other hand, his cult soon established ground and was cleverly consolidated by the priests.

The earliest reports about the Muruga-cult can be found in a Tamil epic which is often quoted by its followers. To understand the religious and historic meaning of this poem I will have to add some explanations here. In the area occupied by the Tamils there were at that time three literary academies, which had been created by the Pandyan kings of southern India. In these institutions the greatest men of letters of that time used to gather. They occupied themselves with expressing their opinions about the newly published literary works and subjected them to severe criticism. It depended on them whether they were to be made accessible to the public or not. In this way the academy supervised the entire literary activity of that time. It is said, that the origin of this academy dates back into the dim past and was in fact, a divine one. Siva himself was its patron and his son Skanda the chief representative. Both deities, so they say, are supposed to have come down to earth from time to time to engage themselves in literary matters and to make a selection of the best works. The two oldest academies are supposed to have been in Madura (which has nothing to do with the present day Madura) and Kapadapuram. Both these places were capitals of the Pandyan-dynasties, but were later on swallowed by the sea.

In India the deity Skanda is worshipped in many places. All of them are situated in the south, in the area of the Tamils. One of the most important shrines is in Tirupparankunram on a hill about five miles southwest of Madura. "He (the deity)," so goes one of the songs of praise, "lives on top of a hill west of the great town." "He lives on top of the hill, where swarms of bees are sleeping on the stems of the lotus, among the wide muddy fields,

but at dawn visit the honey-filled *neital* flowers and at sunrise start, their song among the sweet-smelling blossoms....."

Three further shrines are Tiruchendur on the south coast, about thirty six miles from Tinneveli; Avinankudi; the present day Palni (Palanimalai), about the same distance from the well-known hill resort Dindigul; and finally Tiru-Erakam, the present-day Swamimalai, a hill near the well-known place of pilgrimage called Kumbakonam. There are in addition a few small shrines to be mentioned, which are situated among the hills and forests and which are under the supervision of the local populace.

The worshipping of Skanda in Ceylon has experienced no fundamental changes for the approximately twenty-four centuries since the introduction of Buddhism. In every Buddhist temple the Kataragama-deity has its shrine too, or there is at least a representation of him. During all the religious festivities and ceremonies of the Buddhists, he plays a more or less important part. During the big Kandy-perahera, which takes place annually in August, the Kataragama-deity occupies its rightful place. The tooth relic, which today is the main object of the perahera, had originally no connection whatsoever with it. Only around the middle of the 18th Century was it connected with it. This happened at the request of Kirtti Sri Rajasinha, the king at that time, who had invited many hundreds of monks from Siam to his court. The town of Kalutara on the southern bank of the Kalu Ganga has been closely connected with the Kataragama god since ancient times, and because of it still carries today the name of *Velapura* which means "town of the lance". The part of the town situated on the opposite bank of the river is called *Desestra Kalutara*, which means "Enemies of the deity". Both designations refer without doubt to the Kataragama-deity, who is worshipped today in both parts of the town in a similar manner.

The ritual in the Maha-devale and the other temples in Kataragama is supervised by the twelve kapuralas*. Among them the Maha-kapurala occupies the highest position. He is the head of the Maha-devale and it is his duty to conduct the ritual. Next to him is the devini kapurala. Every evening the latter takes the relic from the most sacred room of the temple and puts it into a small box draped in cloth, which is already attached to the back of

*. The rules for carrying out the rituals is written down in the *Kumara Tantra*, a script, which still today serves as a guide to the kapuralas.

the elephant. Thereupon he sits himself on the elephant and takes part in the procession. Arriving at the temple of Valli-amma he takes the relic into the most sacred chamber, where it is left for a quarter of an hour. Following this the return journey to the Maha-devale begins. It is only during the last night that the relic stays inside the temple of Valli-amma until the following morning.

The remaining ten kapuralas take turns in carrying out the daily functions in the different temples. During the big festivities their duty is a rather strenuous one. It starts in the early hours of the morning. The ringing of the bell at the Maha-devale announces that the temple is being opened. Immediately after this the first visitors begin to appear.

The priest accepts their offerings and places a little "holy ash" onto the forehead of the donor. By this he allows him to be a part of the grace of the deity. A part of the offering is kept back by him while the remaining portion is returned in the form of holy food to the donor. Only a few, however, bring offerings to the temple. Until a few years ago hardly anything could be bought in Kataragama. The pilgrims had to bring all and everything that they needed. But meanwhile the conditions have fundamentally changed. Today Kataragama is a considerable town and there is no shortage of boutiques, restaurants and hostels. Almost everything that is needed by the native can be got there, at least during the festivities. Nobody need worry that he would not be able to buy his essential requirements.

Part of the offerings are sweet dishes, which the pilgrims make in the temple-yard. This is mostly done during the afternoon and evening hours. This is usually a porridge of ripe bananas, cooked rice and melted butter. An unglazed pot or a banana-leaf serves as a dish. One heats the mixture over the fire or lights the melted butter. After this the food is taken to the devale and offered by the priest to the deity. The pilgrim concerned, however, reserves to himself the right to enjoy the food.

A unique offering is a mature coconut, which is broken on entering the temple-yard in front of the Maha-devale. For this a large stone lying on the ground is used. Everybody uses all his strength in their endeavours to break their coconuts on this stone. The pieces are collected at once and taken for the manufacture of oil for the numerous temple lamps and the torches for the perahera. Many hundreds if not thousands of coconuts are offered in this way. To-

day coconuts can be bought in any numbers in Kataragama itself. Earlier, though, the pilgrim himself had to bring at least one coconut.

Another peculiarity that is common in Kataragama is the burning of camphor. Because of its pure white colour and its pleasant smell, this resin is the symbol of purity; and like its appearance the fire is pure while burning and is therefore specially suited to be burnt in honour of the deity. Enormous quantities are used in this manner during the two weeks here in Kataragama. One can buy it by the piece or in packets. Whoever can somehow afford it provides himself with some pieces or a whole packet of this resin before entering the temple area even if he has to give his last cent for it. Wealthy people usually buy a larger quantity and on arriving at the temple, would not hesitate to light at once a considerable quantity. Wherever one looks one sees burning camphor. Even at the main gate leading into the temple yard several pieces of camphor are almost always burning. It is the same, of course, in front of the gate of the Maha-devale. In the afternoon and towards evening camphor is burned in really fantastic quantities. At that time the whole temple yard is filled with black smoke. It settles down everywhere in the form of soot. It penetrates the ears and nose and the air is filled with sweetish perfume.

There are still other ways in which the burning of camphor is done. Round, unglazed clay bowls are filled with a little soil or sand and the pieces of camphor that are to be burned placed on top of it. Then the container with the smoking fire is carried from temple to temple. In order to carry the container that is gradually getting hot safely, one uses the leaves of the kohomba tree, which, it is said, are cooling. This tree is associated with the deity; it is connected with him by a legend.

Generally towards evening the "fire-carrying" becomes more widespread. It is women who mainly take part in it. They are therefore, so to speak, performing the duty of vestals. They gather at certain places, preferably by the river, where they fill the fire bowls with sand and light the camphor that is placed in them. After this they form a long procession, and walk to the Maha-devale, where the bowl is placed on the ground for a while. Then they walk to the temple of Ganesha and around the sanctuary of the Buddhists, the large Bo-tree, and through the northern gate to the temple of Theyvanai-amma and finally to the shrine of the Mutulinga-swami,

situated opposite. At each kovil they place the bowl on the ground and remain for a certain length of time. This same route is followed by all pilgrims, always starting with the Maha-devale. The Maha-devale in any event is the first one to be visited.

There is still a further story to the burning of camphor in honour of the deity. In earlier times camphor is supposed to have been burned in honour of the deity in absolutely fantastic quantities. The Gods themselves are supposed to have taken part in this. On top of the mountain Vedahiti-kanda, where the deity used to stay, ashes of burned camphor, so tradition relates, are supposed to have piled in very large quantities. One finds there, in fact, in certain spots a caolin-like soil, which has the appearance of camphor ashes. But the people, of course, believe only in the tradition.

Before the beginning of the great festivities this caolin-like soil is taken in large quantities to the town. The rough pieces are ground into fine powder and filled into boxes. This is offered for sale to pilgrims as "holy ash". With this a flourishing trade is carried on and there is never a shortage of buyers. On coming to Kataragama, nobody fails to get the forehead or even the entire upper body daubed with "holy-ash" by a priest or "holy-man". This is in a way the sign that one has taken part in the pilgrimage. This is obviously not done free and one expects at least a few cents in return.

Everything, in fact, ends up in some sort of business. Almost everybody tries to make a little money in some way to partly meet the expenses of the pilgrimage.

Therefore, at least during the time of the great festivity, Kataragama shows in fact two different aspects. One centres on the deity, whom people only approach with utmost reverence. They do so in visiting the Maha-devale. Kataragama, so it is said, is the most holy place in Ceylon and India. Only Benares in the north, Kandri-puram in the south, Pandharpur in the west and Jagannath in the east of the big peninsular come nearest to it. Even compared with the Kailas in southern Tibet Kataragama, according to statements of Ceylonese Tamils, is not inferior in its holiness.

The other aspect of Kataragama, though, centres entirely towards the worldly, especially the cold and materialistic world. Everybody coming to Kataragama, be he a priest or layman, is out to make money in some way. It may be only with a fiddle or a shawm—out of which a few shrieking notes can be drawn—or a few tricks, that he has learned from a juggler or a conjurer, or by just whirling

his head to and fro without stopping. But the most peculiar fact is, that these two aspects cannot be clearly separated from each other. Many actually, the majority, coming to Kataragama display, according to circumstances, one aspect at one time and soon the other. Many "holy men" have erected their camps, or one can as well say "boutiques", on the bank of the Menik Ganga. Each of them claims a few square yards of ground for himself and on this spot he exhibits his *kaveri*. Kaveri in all sizes and forms can be seen there: beautiful, heavily carved, adorned with many peacock-feathers, pasted with gold foil and coloured paper, and simple, plain ones without any adornment. There are large, heavy specimens available and small, light ones, meant for children. What the Kaveri really represents and what its original significance was is now hardly known by the present-day Hindu. Except for Kataragama there are only a few other places of pilgrimage where the carrying of such an object is customary when visiting the temple.

One is Palni in the first place, which is situated in southern India and is dedicated to the same deity.

A legend tells about the origin of the Kaveri or Kavadi, as it is called in southern India. This is in short what it states:

Siva once ordered one of the sages called Agasthia, to remove to the south two small hills that belonged to the holy Mount Kailas. The sage, passed the order on to a demon called Idumbasura, who at that time was his pupil. But he didn't know how to carry out the order. He then saw Danda, Brahma's stick placed on top of one of the two hills and on the other, a snake. He took the stick and, tied the two hills onto the tip with the use of the snake. He then started taking the load to the south with the help of the stick. On his way he decided to rest for a while; but when he wanted to lift the load again the two hills and the ground had fused. This was at the place of the present day Palni, where Skanda used to stay. This is how the two hills arose there. Skanda himself had caused the two hills to join the ground and from that time they remained there.

Later on the humans erected a temple in honour of the deity on top of one of the hills. From that time onwards pilgrims on their pilgrimages provided themselves with a Kaveri in remembrance of the occasion. Two small pots of milk and sugar had to be tied to each Kaveri as offering to the deity. It was supposed to be a sign that the deity was satisfied with the offering

and that he was inclined to fulfil the request of the pilgrim if the milk were to spill while entering the temple.

Another offering, though, consisted of fish, and therefore, milk and fish-kaveri are distinguished from one another in Palni (Jagadissa Ayyar, page 274 et seq.)

The Kaveri are rented out to the pilgrims by the "holy men" for a lower or higher amount according to its size and degree of ornament. In addition there are all sorts of objects and implements exhibited. The pilgrims can make use of these on their way to the temple to fulfil the vow they have pledged. There are silver needles in the shape of tridents or small lances, which are pierced through cheeks and tongue, and small silver arrows, which are pierced into breast, arms and back; iron hooks of different sizes that are driven into the flesh of the back, and also occasionally nail-shoes, on which the "penitent" walks to the Maha-devale. In addition there are bells, conch horns, incense bowls, as well as occasionally the image of the deity in bronze or wood (this rather rarely), and many other objects, being a part of the "puja", which means "ritual". The entire right bank of the river above the road is occupied by these "holy men", who carry on their business here from the early hours till late. This business is the lending of Kaveris to the pilgrims, painting "holy ash" onto their forehead and upper body, thereby blessing them, piercing a silver spear through their cheeks and tongues, driving iron hooks through the flesh of the back and any other necessary penances. This is done while reciting sayings from the Vedas, fumigating, sprinkling of "holy water", noisome drumming and playing of one or two shawms. In this way many, indeed the majority, are brought into a state of ecstasy. After this they proceed to the different temples and shrines accompanied by the drummers and shawm players, who, of course, have also to be paid. Everything is commercial, even the self-chastisement and the torture that the pious pilgrim wishes to submit himself to, have to be paid for. After wading across the moderately deep river the pilgrims always follow the road to the Maha-devale, then follow the other temples, always in the prescribed order. Those that carry a Kaveri usually come dancing. This is done in various ways. Some hop from one leg to the other, others twist and turn to and fro, yet others make the most amazing leaps and behave as if they are frenzied.

Arriving at the temple yard one dances for some time in front

of the Maha-devale. Then one goes to the temple of Ganesha, to the temple of the Buddhists and around the Bo-tree to the temple of Theyvanai-amma. From there one goes along the second parallel road and concludes the circular walk with a visit to the temple of the Mutulinga-swami. Usually the pilgrims do the circuit in groups. Whoever comes with his family will of course go with them. Women and children follow the husband and father; and even the very smallest, even babies, are not left behind. They are carried in a white cloth. They quickly make a sedan chair out of a cloth that is fixed onto a stick and is lifted onto the shoulder by two men or boys. The small child is carried in this. In this manner the child joins the procession from temple to temple still in its infancy.

Besides these, there are of course unsociable people; actually most of them arrive, make their pilgrimage from temple to temple and return alone. These are mainly those who are really serious about the pilgrimage. They have come to Kataragama to submit themselves to a number of penances which they had possibly planned much earlier. They could not possibly do this together with friends and relations. It is almost without doubt that many, and in my opinion most, are first put into trance by a "holy man". The "priest" may pierce dozens of needles, spears and hooks into their flesh without their feeling it.

Nor is there a single drop of blood to be seen in any instance. This is only possible, if the person concerned is in a trance. Exactly the same happens as regards walking on nail shoes and particularly walking over glowing coals in the night before the last day of the festivity. There are many grades of tortures and chastisements that the pilgrims submit themselves to. One of the least harmful is "rolling" to the Maha-devale and around it. For this, of course, a "priest" need not be invited. It is also unnecessary to be put or put yourself into trance. The piercing of needles into the flesh, too, is really rather harmless. Even in the absence of a trance the pains are hardly any worse than when injecting a hypodermic needle. Less harmless is the driving in of hooks into the back. Some penitents let six, eight or ten hooks be driven into them. Each is provided with an eye so that a string can be fixed to the hook. These strings are held by a person accompanying him. Often the penitent carries out all sorts of strange leaps, but is kept back by his companion by means of the strings like a horse that is being tamed.

Some, too, pull by means of the imbedded hooks and the strings

a small wagon behind them. In it are placed two rather large dolls which represent the deity and his beloved. In this case, too, the first journey is to the Maha-devale and after that to the other temples in the order mentioned earlier. There are some people, who regard even this form of torture as inadequate and therefore, in addition walk on nail shoes.

The most intensive self-torture that I ever saw consisted, though, of the penitent letting himself be hanged by eight hooks on a tall scaffold. It was made of iron poles, fixed in the shape of two triangles one placed on top of the other so as to form the diagram of Skanda. Four hooks were driven into the thigh, two into the buttocks and two further into the back. The scaffold itself was fixed on to a small wagon, on which the hanging penitent was carted from temple to temple. This, surely, could have been only done while the penitent was in a trance. Nevertheless, the man concerned was able to talk and give the blessings of the deity continuously to the bystanders. For fully two hours he remained hanging by the hooks from the scaffold. However, when the penitent had completed the round journey and was let down from the scaffold, he fainted. This possibly meant that the effectiveness of the trance was over. He was revived again by sprinkling of "holy water" and fanning.

One sees many strange things during the great festivity in Kataragama. The people, of course, believe that everywhere there is the influence of the deity. Without it, so they think, such self-immolations would not be at all possible. They are entranced by the colourful activities, by the movement of the crowds of people, by the terrifying scenes displayed by the penitents, who torture themselves and by those who have worked themselves into a state of ecstasy as well as the many incidents that occur there from morn till night. Everybody who stays in Kataragama during this time is in fact as a man in state of intoxication. In this state things are often done that costs them their lives. Every year it so happens that some one or another carries the tortures to extremes and dies. It also happens every year that a man who had worked himself up into such a pitch of ecstasy suddenly cuts his throat. Even in such cases the crowd merely applauds. They only see in it a great unblameable act, done in honour and favour of the deity. The man who dies this way is in their opinion a great hero, who will go to "paradise" immediately.

All that goes on in Kataragama from early till late during the

"great festival", is so unusual, so strange, that it is the cause of conversation for a long time. Everybody who attends the festivity takes home unforgettable impressions. On arriving home he will tell those who stayed back all sorts of adventurous stories, most of which have little truth. Whatever has been seen and experienced is, as is to be expected, exaggerated and embellished in an imaginative way. In this manner the most peculiar reports arise and are accepted by the credulous natives as wholly true and are repeated from mouth to mouth, so that eventually nobody can find proof or question their authenticity any more.

THE PERAHERA

The *perahera*, which takes place every evening during the "great festivity", is always the most striking event of the day. The *perahera* is the procession in which the relic is carried from temple to temple. The first one takes place ten days prior to the full-moon, the last one in the night and early morning of the full-moon night, or rather, immediately before the astronomically determined start of the full-moon. The *perahera* is followed at the precise hour of the full-moon by the "water cutting" ceremony, which always concludes the entire festivity.

These ten *peraheras* are supposed to express symbolically stories from the legend. The yantra, the holy symbol of the deity, which here in Kataragama is used in the absence of a statue, is taken on the back of the elephant to the temple of Valli-amma, thereby symbolically indicating that the deity visits his beloved and becomes one with her.

In the afternoon of the day before the last day, there is an additional *perahera* to the Kiri-vehera, but in a rather small way. In this one, too, the yantra is the main object of importance. The meaning of this *perahera*, though, is essentially different. One wants, so they say, to give the deity an opportunity of also honouring the Buddhist sanctuary and with it Buddha himself. For this reason not only Hindus, but Buddhists too and especially the Bhikkus present in Kataragama take part in this *perahera*, which does not happen during the night *peraheras*. This *perahera* to the Kiri-vehera rather amounts to a fraternisation of Hindus and Buddhists.

Preparations for the nightly *peraheras* begin as soon as it starts getting dark. The bell at the Maha-devale is rung and soon the temple yard begins to fill up with people. Then the elephant is led in to be dressed for the *perahera*. But before he is led to the *Vasanamedai*, he stops for a while in front of the temple of Ganesha, to offer his greetings to this "brother", the elephant-god. He does this by lifting his trunk in a dignified way. Everybody waits anxiously for this "great moment", which seems to be based on something almost supernatural, or at least mysterious and solemn. As soon as the animal lifts the trunk all people present are extremely pleased. Shouts of approbation are to be heard. There are shouts and joyous cries. Immediately after this the elephant is led to the *Vasanamedai*,

where he is dressed and prepared for the *perahera* by the person commissioned for this job. A red saddle cloth is laid on the back of the animal and a second cloth with openings for the eyes is spread over its head. After this a wooden box is strapped to the back on top of the saddle cloth. It is open in front. To the slightly higher back-panel a wooden pole is fixed. Two silver tubes are now slid over it. Finally on top of this is fixed a silver plate and a silver button. The edge of the plate is decorated by small silver chains, which hang down symmetrically from it. There are in addition garlands of sweet smelling flowers. Three cloths of different colours are tied to the pole right under the plate. Each cloth lies above the other. They correspond to the three curtains in the temple. Every day a differently coloured cloth is selected as the outer one. After this the three cloths are arranged around the box in such a way that they form a small quadrangular tent. This is for the purpose of receiving the relic. These preparations take at least half an hour. Finally the blowing of conch shells announce that the relic is now being brought out of the temple. Prior to this, however, men approach with torches, others with fans and standards giving the impression of times long past. They line up in two rows in front of the *Vasanamedai*, leaving a sufficiently broad passage up to the Maha-devale. More and more people crowd towards the place of activity. Everybody tries to come as close as possible to the elephant so that he would not miss anything. However, nobody is allowed to touch the animal. It is now a holy animal and every touch would be defiling. The two Veddhas, who are required to be present now, have the duty of keeping order and if necessary pushing back the spectators. There is actually a very large crowd. The blowing of the conch-shells becomes increasingly loud. It sounds eerily through the moonlit night. Flames burst like ghosts from iron baskets which are carried on top of long poles containing rags soaked in oil. It is a strange fairy-tale-like scene. And the people, who have gathered here, seem to have worked themselves into a trance again. One sees men and women stretching their arms in rapture towards heaven or the elephant. Others sing songs of praise and continue singing for a long time. They sing about the beauty of the elephant, of each part of his body, sing about the deeds of the deity, the deity himself and his beloved.

Now a long, narrow, red cloth is spread out on the ground as a "carpet". It is so long, that it exactly reaches from the Maha-devale

to the *Vasanamedai*. Immediately following this two young men appear in the old costume that used to be worn at the court of the former Sinhalese kings: closely fitting white trousers, a closely fitting small white coat with sleeves, puffed in the upper part, and with a square, white cap. In a dignified manner they walk over the red carpet, then up the steps to the *vasanamedai* and, arriving there, take a position on either side of the elephant. They are of course Sinhalese, as well as the kapuralas who are always Sinhalese and never Tamils. Immediately after the Basnayake also appears dressed in the same way as mentioned earlier, and takes his position in front of the elephant, facing him.

By now everything is ready. Once again the conch shells are blown. The crowd is stirred by excitement. The moment has come when the devini-kapurala brings the relic from the Maha-devale. Nothing, however, can be seen. He is covered by a long, white cloth, which is held over him. One only knows that he carries the relic in his hands. Always covered by the white cloth he slowly and deliberately walks in a stooped gait to the *Vasanamedai* and then on the right side up the steps. Arriving at the top, the relic is placed in the box fixed to the back of the elephant; nothing even of this can be seen. Everything happens underneath the white cloth. But as soon as the relic is placed in the small tent made out of the coloured pieces of cloth, the white cloth having served its purpose, is removed. The pieces of cloth that form the little tent are tied with a cord, which is wrapped round the wooden box in such a manner, that they fit tightly on all four sides. As soon as this is done the kapurala who may now be seen, sits himself on the elephant. He sits immediately behind the box and keeps his arm tightly round it. He is entirely dressed in white and his mouth, too, is covered with a white cloth so that the relic will not be soiled by his breath. Then the elephant is led out of the *Vasanamedai*. The people appear intoxicated. They throw sweet smelling flowers towards the elephant and sprinkle him with scented water. In front of the elephant two youthful Kandyan dancers dance in the traditional way with arms stretched out and fingers spread out. They wear short white and red pleated skirts, a small coat embroidered with gold and silver thread and a colourful cloth around their heads. The drummers and shawm-players provide the music. Right in front of the elephant stands a priest dressed in white who now starts burning incense around the animal. He continuously turns the incense bowl round and round in front

of the animal's head. After this a lamp with several arms containing burning oil is brought instead of the incense bowl. Finally sandalwood paste is applied on the forehead of the elephant. The elephant stays motionless, allowing all this to be done: he knows exactly the order of events. Everything is laid down exactly and since ancient times it is carried out repeatedly without the slightest alterations. Through these preparations, so they believe, the animal gets into a hypnotic condition. It is supposed to know then exactly how and where it has to go and behaves like a human who has been hypnotized. During all this time the dancers display their capabilities. Some distance from them stand motionless the eight or twelve *alathi-ammās*, lined up in rows, their faces turned towards the elephant. More and more lamps are lit, the lights play on the naked bodies and the colourfully dressed elephant. It is an indescribable, fairy-tale like scene. The crowd rejoices and there are continuous cries of "haro, hara". Everybody seems to be in ecstasy.

Finally the procession starts. Everybody tries to occupy his rightful place. However, as long as one is inside the temple-yard, there is hardly enough room. Therefore, one moves in a more or less disorderly throng of people in the direction of the Ganesha and Perumal-devale and around these and the Maha-devale, until one reaches again the starting point in front of the *Vasanamedai*. After this one goes through the main gate of the yard onto the road. A large, red canopy, carried by four men on long poles, is kept ready here. As soon as the elephant has passed the gate the four men with the canopy join, and the elephant walks on under it. Only at this stage does the procession straighten out. It turns now to the left and after that to the right to proceed along the second main road, the Pitta Vithiya, up to the Valli-amma temple. All the time more people join the procession and of course there is no lack of spectators, who have posted themselves on both sides of the road. Now the procession consists of the following: Right in front are one or two dozen boys and young men. They sing certain songs, called *Bhadjau* or *kirtan*, which are in praise of the deity and his deeds. Generally there is also an elderly swami, who knows the songs in the right order. Behind the boys the Basnayake and on either side of him his two adjutants follow. All three are dressed in the fashion of the old Kandyan nobility, who had certain functions at the royal court.

Then the *alathi-ammās* follow in two rows and after them the two Veddās with bow and arrow in their hands or, if they have not got

those, with a small axe. Then come the two Kandyan dancers who, flanked by two drummers and shawm-players, go on dancing even during the procession. They are followed by a strange person, a man dressed like a woman, who walks backwards, so that he is facing the elephant. This person carries in one of his hands a tinkling foot-ring (*silambu*), on his other a knife, a kind that is used to kill goats for the offering. She represents the Patini-devi (divine mistress), who plays an important part in the mythology of the Sinhalese. Then comes the elephant with the devini-kapurala and by his side the four men with the canopy. The rest of the people form the rear. In this way the procession reaches the Valli-amma temple. Again the elephant is led to the Vasamedai. The bell of the Valli-amma temple is rung. The kapurala descends from the back of the animal with the relic, covered again with a large, white cloth. Under this cloth he walks again in a stooped gait straight to the temple and disappears behind the curtains. Then he steps out again, but this time uncovered as he has left the relic behind in the sanctum sanctorum. After about a quarter of an hour once again he enters the temple and reappears with the relic, but now covered with the white cloth again. Once more he climbs onto the back of the elephant, after keeping the relic in the small box. Following this the procession starts its return journey to the Maha-devale. But this time it follows the main road, the Madena-Vithiya, which connects the Maha-devale and Valli-amma temple in a straight line. Arriving there, the elephant is led to the Vasamedai and the kapurala takes the relic into the most holy place of the Maha-devale. With this the proceedings are over. The elephant is disrobed. The people fight for the flower-garlands that adorned the container of the relic. Everybody tries to get at least a part of it to take home. Highest divine power is associated with it. Then the people disperse and the night is peaceful again.

THE FIRE WALKING

This ceremony is inseparably connected with the Kataragama-festivity. It always takes place on the penultimate night at about 3 a.m. before it starts to become light. This too, of course, is a religious ceremony. This is done to beg for mercy from the deity, some do it in addition as they have pledged a vow.

The preparations begin shortly after midnight. The place determined for the fire walking is always inside the temple-yard. It is between the eastern porch and the Maha-devale which is exactly where the pilgrims, who come to the temple, break the coconuts brought by them. All dirt has to be first removed. After that dry logs and branches are brought and piled up. These activities take up at least two hours. Crowds of people have already arrived early to watch the display. Most people really come to Kataragama only because of the fire walking. To these numbers could be recently added curious white people, who merely want to "take part" in this, while all other activities hardly interest them. When the pile of wood is ready the head kapurala steps forward and lights it. He does so with a burning piece of camphor. This is "pure fire", as it may be said, because the camphor itself is a pure, white, pleasant smelling substance. Also into the pile pieces of camphor are placed here and there. Before the fire is lighted, however, the kapurala says a rather long prayer. In it is called upon Agni, the God of fire.

Slowly the pile of wood burns down, and this takes at least two further hours. Some men with long poles stand by prepared to poke the fire if necessary and to see to it that all pieces are completely burned. Finally the time comes when there is a pile of embers and a few still burning pieces of wood left. Now the men start to spread the embers evenly with their poles, so that they cover a rectangular space from three to four meters in length and about two meters in breadth. The glow is so strong that one can stay close to it for only a short time. In the meantime men and women who want to walk over the embers get ready. These preparations, however, consist only of a bath in the Menik Ganga and a visit afterwards to the Maha-devale, where they ask for the blessing of the deity. Actually, though, it is important that the *self* is completely switched off; only in that manner is it possible to expose the

body to the fire without getting injured. In other words one has to be able to switch off all thoughts. Not everybody succeeds in this. Among the approximately twenty people whom I saw in the previous year walk over the fire on the occasion of the "great festivity", were several who had blisters caused by burns on their feet. When I asked one of these "injured" about it he answered me that what had happened to him was just, as he had not been completely one with the deity. Spittel, too, tells of a man, who burned himself very badly while walking over the fire and soon afterwards died due to the burns he had received. The way these twenty people, among them also a woman dressed in a long loin cloth, walked across the fire was very different. Most of them ran or hopped with maximum speed and therefore touched the fire at the most twice with each foot. Others went quite leisurely, several stamping their feet and some went straight back and then for a third time over the fire. The fire was in fact spread over a very small area. I once watched a similar religious fire walking ceremony in Burma where the pile of wood reached six meters in length. Not a single person was hurt and there were no prior preparations needed.

In reality it is a matter of auto suggestion, in which condition, as is well known, complete insensibility can be induced. To attain this, of course, there are certain preliminary conditions needed: complete mastering of the *self* and the ability to switch it off. It is commonly known today that white people, too, can attain this ability. Almost every year a swami of German origin is present here in Kataragama, who many years ago became a Hindu and who takes part in the "fire walking" safely every year. There is no need to mention specially that this alone is no explanation of the phenomena. Now as before the psychologists, or rather the parapsychologists, are far from able to explain the phenomenon. It almost seems as if the "mystery" will never be solved. We only know this much—that the person who is in trance or in the condition of auto suggestion at the moment he steps onto the fire is surrounded by a mantle, which completely insulates and protects him. The same applies in the case of the dress, which he wears on his body and which does not catch fire. But we are far from having even an idea of the nature of this protective invisible mantle. But we have to accept its presence if we do not want to just attribute it to a miracle, in which case there is nothing further to be said.

THE WATER CUTTING CEREMONY

This forms the conclusion of the "Great Festival". According to rules it is supposed to be held at the exact hour of the full-moon. This custom has, however, been already abandoned as it is not easily possible to determine the exact time the full-moon takes place. Because of this it is now held in the morning immediately following the beginning of the full-moon. The evening before, the last perahera had taken place. But on this occasion the relic had been left for the whole night in the temple of Valli-amma. For one hour the Alathi-ammass had danced in front of the temple to please the deity. Then they withdrew and the crowds that took part in the perahera dispersed. The elephant was taken back to the Maha-devale without the relic, but with the kapurala on his back. Here he was relieved of his finery. The following morning very early he was dressed and was led again to the Valli-amma temple with the devini-kapurala on his back. Only few people take part. But, as before, the kapurala, covered with a white cloth, brings the relic out of the temple and takes it on to the back of the elephant. After this the return trip takes place. Reaching the Maha-devale the relic is taken back into the most holy room of the shrine and the elephant is undressed.

Soon after this a few men, who have been engaged to help during the festivity, start making a quadrangular basket out of palm leaves and mats, which is big enough to hold a full-grown man. Ropes are fixed to it so that the basket can be comfortably carried on a solid pole. This work takes several hours. It is now almost nine o'clock. The temple bell is struck and sign is given for departure. Again the devini-kapurala gets ready. With the customary ceremonies the relic is brought again out of the temple. But this time it is not put on the back of the elephant. The kapurala, on the contrary, climbs with the relic into the basket, which is kept waiting in front of the Maha-devale. During this he is, of course, covered again with the white cloth, so that nothing of him nor the relic can be seen.

He climbs into the basket, the side-walls of which are so constructed that he completely disappears in it. Branches of the kohomba tree cover everything. In addition, he remains covered with the white cloth while he is squatting in the basket. Supported by the pole the basket is lifted and carried on the shoulders of two men

to the Menik-Ganga. Arriving at the river-bed they run for about two hundred meters upstream to a point, which is of historical significance and where in the middle of the river a quadrangular shelter made of kohomba-branches can be found. This has a small opening through which the basket together with the kapurala is carried in. Immediately this is done the opening is closed again, with leafy branches, so that nothing can be seen from outside.

Loud and noisy, the crowds have followed up the river, but stop a little distance away from the shelter. Nobody is permitted to go beyond the shelter and thereby pollute the water. The elephant, too, has been led here. He is without any finery. Only a bell hangs around his neck. Nothing can be seen of the kapurala and what he is doing inside the shelter. One only knows that there was also a large sword inside the basket, in which he was brought here with the relic. With this sword, so one says, he first draws a magic diagram on the river-bed. It is the two triangles placed on top of each other, the symbol of the deity. When putting up the shelter one had chosen a spot where the water was shallow. Soon after this the kapurala strikes the shallow water with his sword and the relic is dipped in. This is the "cleansing bath" that is given to the deity after his wedding night. As soon as this is over, the kapurala climbs again into the basket. He is covered with branches and starts the return journey. The entire procedure lasted only a few minutes. The men have hardly left the shelter with the basket when the crowds set about it, pulls it into pieces and everybody tries to catch a twig. Every twig—every leaf is sacred. One takes home whatever possible and hangs it up inside the house, to transmit some of the "sacredness" to one's house or dwelling place, too. People also jump into the water, drink from it and hurry to fill the containers, bottles and brass-pots that they brought along. It is pure and sacred, because it came in touch with the relic—therefore with the deity. It is the most precious and effective medicine for all illness and ailments; it cleans, purifies and heals; it drives away and neutralizes all evil and all badness; ghosts and demons are banished and conquered with it. Also the bathing in the river, into which the relic had been dipped just before, has a cleansing, purifying effect. With great tumult everybody tries as quick as possible to fill his containers with water and to dip himself into the water. One even sprinkles each other and also sprinkles the elephant, so that he, too, gets a share of the "sacredness". But all this lasts only a little moment, then one starts the return-journey together

Often, however, the ceremony is carried out in a slightly different way. The elephant brings a large pot here, which he carries in his mouth attached to a rope. The pot as well as the big basket, in which the kapurala is sitting with the relic and the big sword, is taken to the shelter and the latter closed. After this the kapurala strikes the water with the sword and at once fills the pot. Now he dips the yantra into the pot filled with the clean water. The elephant carries the full pot back to the Maha-devale, where the container filled with water is kept. The water is of the greatest sanctity and serves to purify and to exorcise the evil powers and for the ritual (puja) in the temple generally. It is also used during illness and epidemics. Some of this water is also immediately taken by carriers to Colombo to the Hindu-temple there. Following this, a temple-festival, the so-called Vel festival, takes place. This is carried out in memory of Skanda's victory, when he conquered the asura with his lance. In the temple in Colombo it is primarily the lance that is paid the greatest honour, while in Kataragama it is the yantra. A little of the water is also given to other temples, in which Skanda is venerated. To these belong, among others, the temple of Palni in southern India, which, as we have seen, is connected with Skanda by legend.

The entire ceremony is called "water-cutting", because the "cutting of the water" with the sword forms the *punctum saliens*. One can interpret this "cutting" differently. One can presume that it is done to part the bad, impure water from the pure; or alternatively that the river, before the yantra is dipped into it, has to be freed from evil demonical powers, so that it can flow again freely and does not stagnate; or that the river itself embodies a demonical creature, a snake, which has to be conquered and killed; or perhaps the Asura Taraka himself, whom the deity defeated with his lance.

One would rather think, that, this last assumption is the right one. It is the last act of the great drama which finds its expression in the whole festivity. The defeat of Taraka, too, is, as we have seen, only to be accepted figuratively, because the asura in reality is the viciousness and evil which is to be attacked and defeated with the help of the deity.

Among the Hindus there are learned swamis, who have various clever interpretations at hand which they are only too ready to give to the easily gullible. As most things, so the Kataragama-deity is also often discussed in detail, and one tries repeatedly

to attribute to the numerous legends and traditions a higher, esoteric meaning. It is easy to understand that there is a lot of nonsense mixed with much ingenious thought. But in Ceylon and India hardly anybody is likely to be offended by this. There was for instance a learned swami who tried among other things to explain the facts to me in this way: He takes a matriarchal period for granted, combining it with promiscuity, snake-cult, tree-cult, moon-cult, and others. The snake, so he believes, belongs to the matriarchal aspect because it is the symbol of fertility, the motherliness, and also of wisdom and the eternal life. Only after the "imigration" of the Aryan tribe and the establishment of a patriarchal system was the snake marked as evil, bad and insignificant. It lives as the "wise man" expressed himself, in the swamp, feeds on rubbish and symbolizes disorder and concubinage. The hero, who made an end to this disorder, was Skanda, the Kataragama-deity, the God of light, who was chosen by the gods to overcome the darkness. The peacock, his mount, assisted him. It too is a creature of the light, a creature of heavenly origin. Where there are peacocks, there are no snakes, because they feed on them. With Skanda, the hero of Aryan origin, so the "wise man" thought, the matriarchal system found its end and patriarchy replaced it. This brought with it order and discipline and concubinage was replaced by monogamy with the father as the head of the family.

There is of course little sense in discussing this explanation. It lacks knowledge and insight of the true facts.

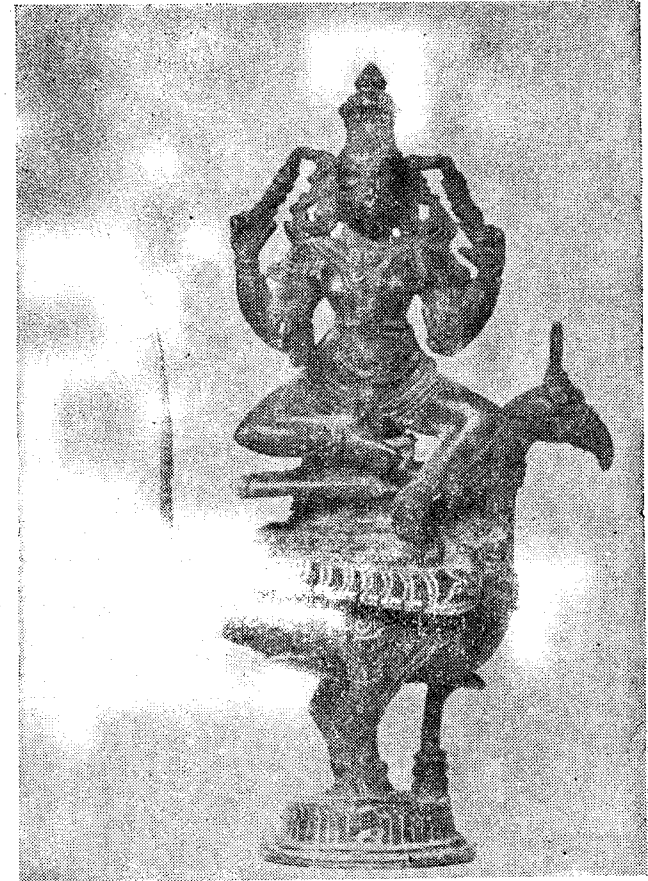
In the meantime as a final act, a *dane* (feeding of the poor), takes place in front of the Valli-amma temple. A large bowl filled with cooked rice is brought and placed on top of a stone socle. The rice is meant for the poor. They come from all directions to get a few spoons full. In a few moments the container is empty, is filled for the second time and then again for the third time. He who comes too late, gets nothing.

Gradually the crowds disperse and everybody is now in a hurry to start the journey home. At the same time there are quite a number of pilgrims who have come too late and who now hurry to make the round of the temples with a kaveri on the shoulder. The priests and swamis continue to be busy the whole day. Only the next day Kataragama will acquire its usual look. The noise, the playing of the conch-horns and shawms, the boom of the drums has ceased. Quietness and peace return again. Except for a few,

shops and tea-boutiques close their doors and the owners hurry to return to Tissa or wherever their homes may be. With this Kataragama has become again the dreamy jungle-hamlet, which is only seldom visited by anybody.

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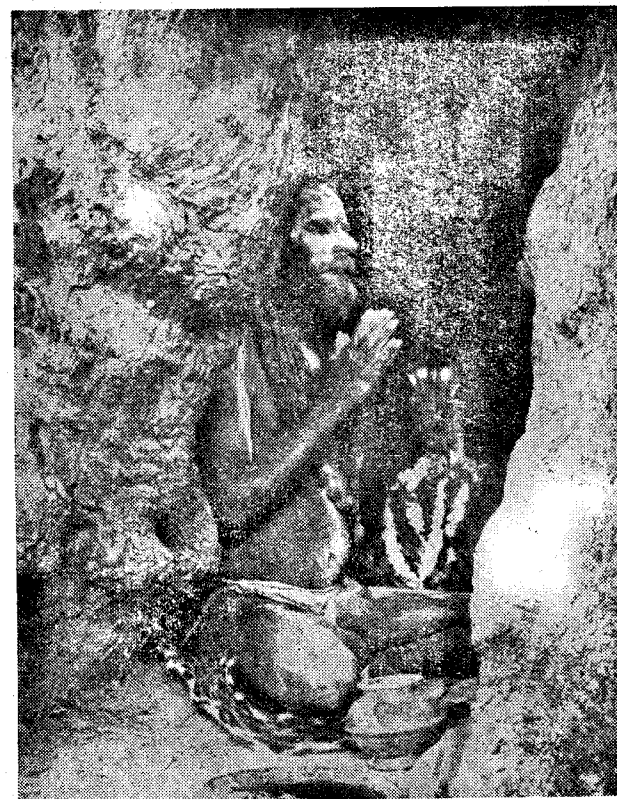
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1. Skanda or Subramanya sitting on his mount the peacock. South Indian Bronze (Height 17.5 cm). From the collection of Paul Wirz



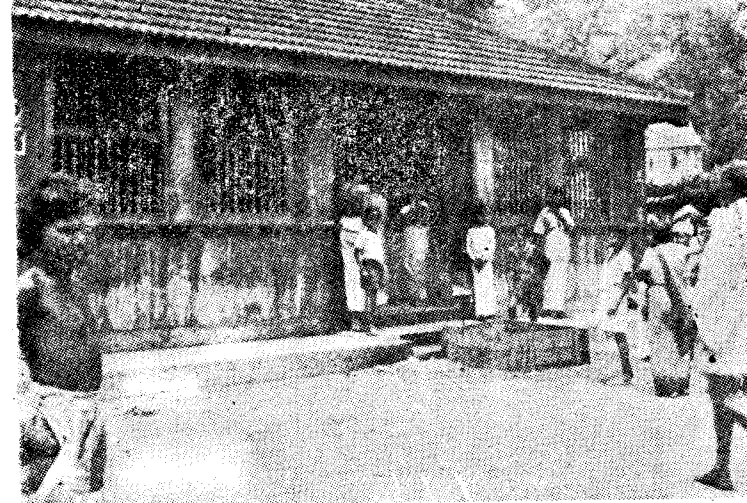
2. The Yantra, cut into black stone with the diagram of the Kataragama deity. Representation of flames along the periphery, the Tamil OM in the centre. (In the Museum für Völkerkunde, Basel, acquired by the author in Trichinopoli.)



3. A swami during his prayers in a large, hollow tree which serves him at the same time as a shelter during his stay in Kataragama.

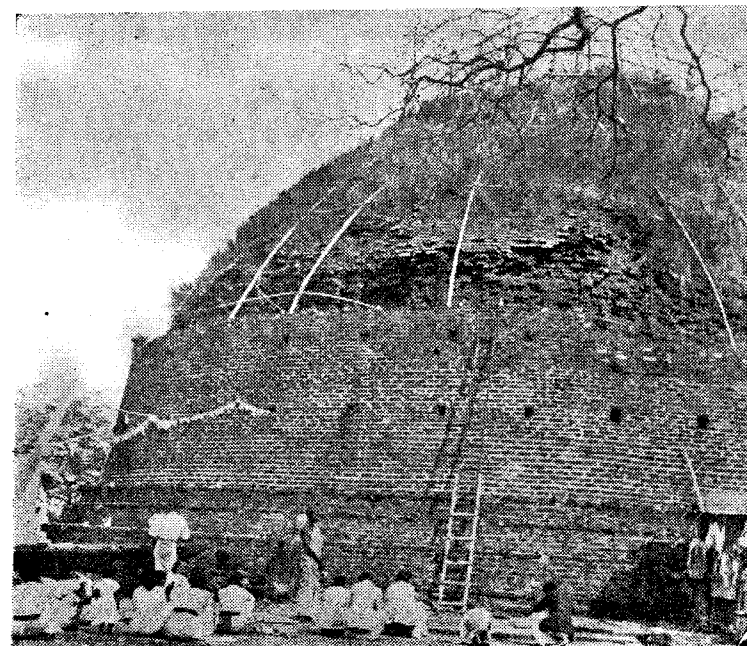


4. During the festivity both banks of the Menik Ganga are crowded with pilgrims.
Here they carry out their religious exercises and ablutions.



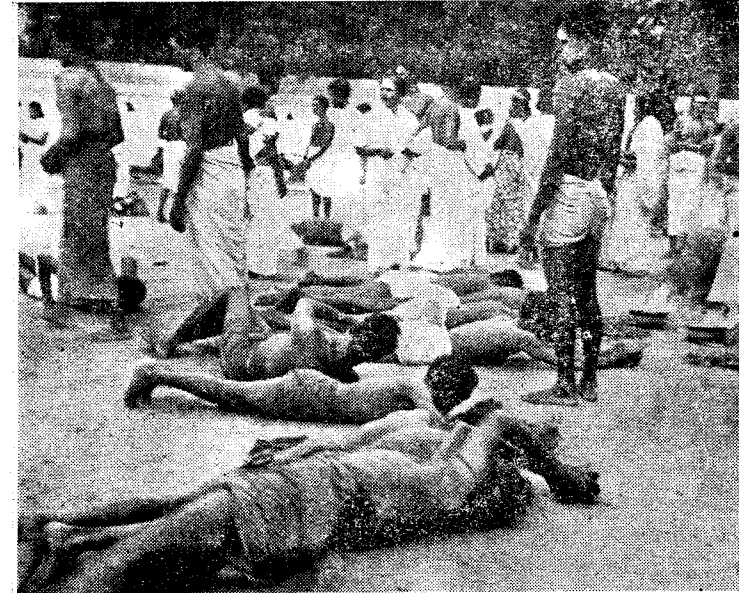
5. The front view of the Valli-amma temple in Kataragama.

6. Pious Buddhists carry out their veneration in front of the Kiri Vehera.



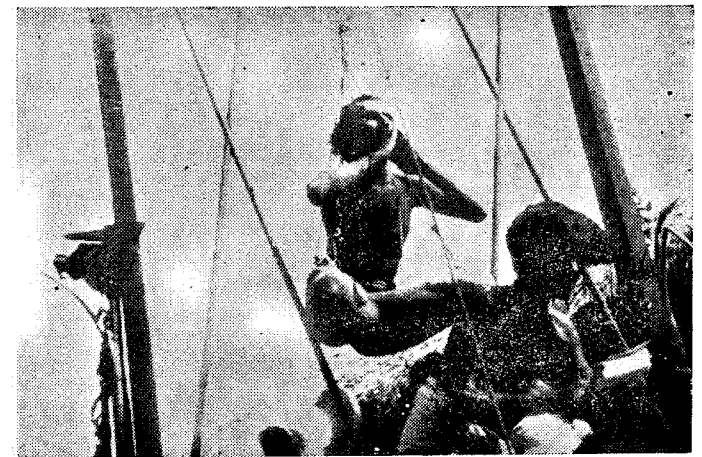


9. Fire bowls with burning camphor in front of the Maha devale.



10. Pious pilgrims roll themselves around the Maha devale and the adjoining temples, which are dedicated to the deities Ganesha and Vishnu.

11. The penitent has got himself lifted by eight hooks on to an iron frame in the shape of a hexagon. The frame is fixed on to a wagon and is pushed from temple to temple





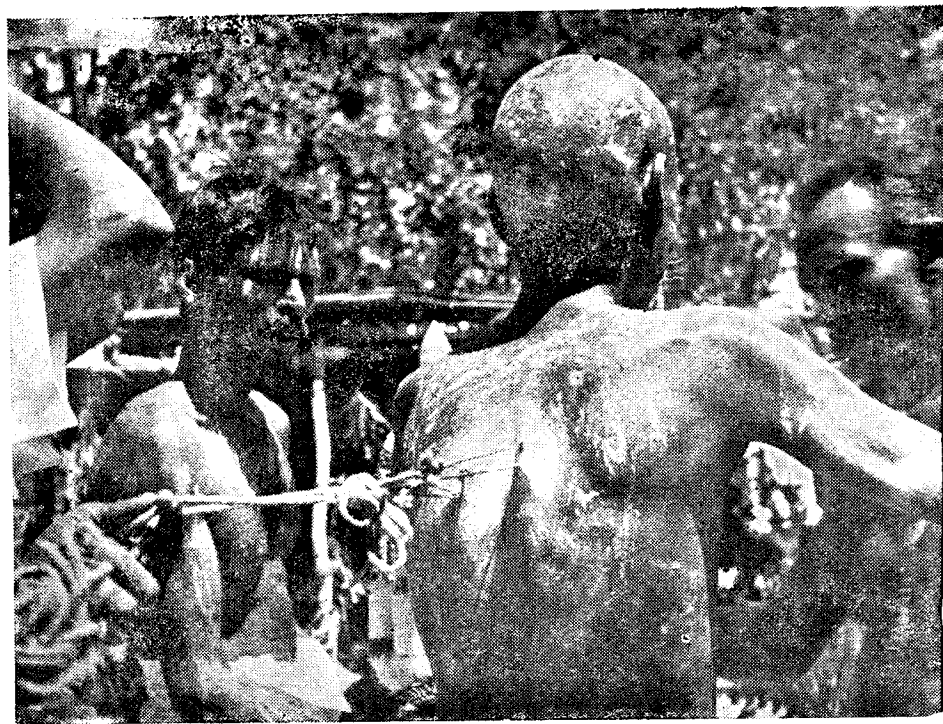
12. Walking on nail-shoes looks worse than it is.



13. A pilgrim on his way to the Kataragama deity. He carries a kaveri, cheeks and tongue are pierced with a silver needle and out of his mouth a cobra made of silver foil is protruding. Into the upper body a number of small silver spears are pierced and in addition numerous small hooks with different amulets



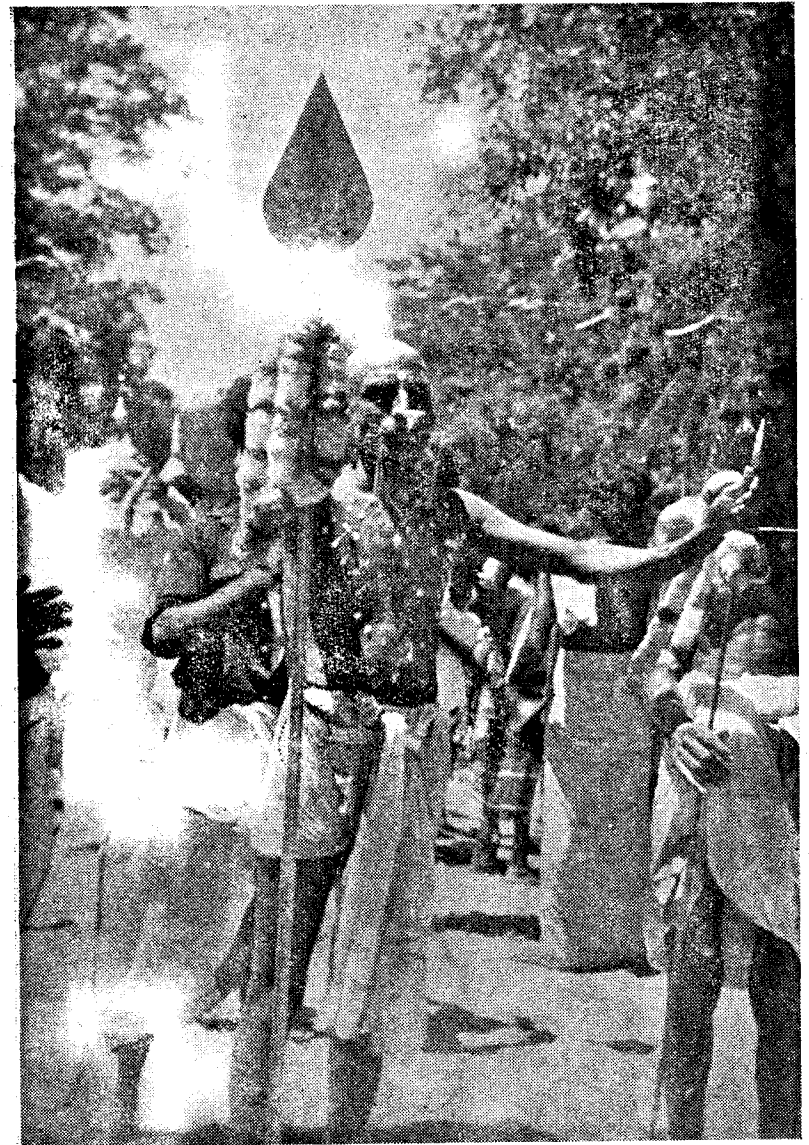
14. Often a pilgrim whose cheeks are pierced with a silver needle falls into a trance. Others behave like fanatics and have to be mitigated by the priest.



15. A penitent with four hooks in the flesh of his back starts the walk to the Maha devale. To the hooks ropes are fixed by which he is led.



16 & 17. A Kataragama-pilgrim with pierced cheeks and tongue. Out of the mouth the silver cobra is protruding. The arms and breast are covered with many silver needles. Into the middle of the back four large hooks with ropes are embedded, which are held by a "companion".



18. A "holy man" on his way to the "Great Temple". Cheeks and tongue pierced by a silver needle, in the breast numerous small arrows are embedded. In the right hand he holds the spear, the sign of the Kataragama God.

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