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The Contribution of Religious Rituals to Link Conflicting Sinhals and Tamils in Sri Lanka

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This paper will elaborate on how conflicting ethnoreligious groups in Sri Lanka actually unite in everyday interactions in a background where stigmatised ethno religious identities continue and connections among groups are still anxious after more than three decades of war. In this paper, based on my ethnographic research, I will explain how the religious rituals construct a space for conflicting groups to develop relationships with special reference to Victor Turner's idea of communitas as recently applied to the lived religion of pilgrimages. During the discussion, I will refer to two main religious performances; namely, the yearly worshiping of the Hindu goddess Pattini and god Kōvalan and the annual pilgrimage to the shrine of the Hindu god Murugan (or Kataragama).

[Key Words: *Ethnicity, Ethnic Conflict, Ethnic Border, Pilgrimage, Pattini Cult]*

Introduction

In everyday life we “take-for-granted” many a situation while we are always very much concerned of some categories, divisions constructed by various interest groups, i.e., politicians and elites of the society. Ethnicity and religion are two such categories which have created a gulf among three main ethnic groups in the country. This situation has given rise to a nearly three-decades old ethnic war in Sri Lanka. There have been many hartals, riots and inter-ethnic clashes. Especially in the 1983 ethnic riot some Sinhala goons came to the street attacking Tamils. This situation has contributed to establish a worldwide belief that Sinhals and Tamils cannot live in harmony if not for all main ethno-religious groups.

However, our everyday realities in the country suggest that there are bases of integrations and disintegrations. Like many others in the country, I come from an ethnically mixed background and we have been cooperating for so many years which pushed me to explore the shape of this process in various socio-economic contexts. Against this background an ethnographic research was conducted with the objective of explaining the contribution of religious rituals in building relationships among the conflicting ethnoreligious groups.

The research conducted in Pānama, a village located on the east coast, elucidates that members of rivalry ethnic groups are inclined to disregard their variances in the context of rituals that mix Hindu and popular Buddhist religious traditions.

I will argue how the religious rituals work as a context for conflicting groups to develop relationships with reference to Victor Turner's idea of communities (1969) as recently applied to the lived religion of pilgrimages (Hermkens and Notermans 2009). In the local context, communities are formed via their rituals derived in relation to their anxieties regarding security, safety and wellbeing in order to facilitate people's unity. Victor Turner's writings on liminality have proven very useful to explain the process of relationship building between the Sinhala and Tamils. Turner borrowed the concepts from Arnold van Gennep's usage of "liminal phase" of *rites de passage*. Van Gennep defined *rites de passage* as "rites, which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age" (Turner 1969:94). Turner uses the term *state*, which well represents changing position of the actor. According to Van Gennep, rites of passage have three stages; separation, marginal and aggression. In the first stage, the actors detach from their previous fixed social points in the social structure or cultural condition (*state*), or both. In the second, the liminal phase, the actor is in a state of ambiguousness; "he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state" (Turner 1969:94). In the last stage; the actor is in a more stable relationship.

Methodology

I adopt an ethnographic approach in this research. From February 2011 to end January 2012, I and my assistant Aravinda stayed in a rented house in one corner of the Pānama, which were considered as border zones during the internal war between the LTTE and the government military forces. Despite the risks posed on us during the "greased devil"¹ phenomena that prevailed in most parts of the island in general and this multi-ethnic area in particular, we took part in rituals of the AmpitiyeDevālaya where rituals for Goddess Pattini and her consort God Kōvalan or AluthBandāra were held. Most of the lively ethnographic data was collected while participating in 6 days PādaYātra and 14 day rituals in AmpitiyeDevālaya in Pānama. During this period formal and informal interviews, discussions, key person interviews were also conducted. Two principle analytical tools used were; 1. *Exchange* and 2. *Social classification*. The *exchange* gave me a chance to analytically comprehend social relations that create values in daily life produce, while *social classification* helped me to examine cultural meanings that form and are formed by *exchange*.

Invention and Maintenance of Ethno-national Divisions

During my fieldwork I always heard that people were referring to ethnic others as "incompatible partners". I treat this as a creation of ethno-political history. The necessary ethnic rivalry created among the people according to hardened ethno-raciality; Muslims, Tamils, Sinhala is a colonial invention and

post-colonial maintenance and that was further reinforced/ confirmed by socio-economic-political reasons of both colonial and post -colonial periods. The people of the country had been exposed to various socio-economic-political changes for about 450 years, over five generations of Colonial administration by Portuguese, Dutch and finally the British.

During the pre-colonial era of the island ethno-national clashes did not occur as the migrants who came from India from time to time were systematically absorbed into the local community quietly as castes. This process had created communities that featured a unique way of unity and disunity through ideological connection by the time the colonials came to Sri Lanka. However, this situation gradually changed during Portuguese and Dutch era in general, and the British in particular. Moreover, both the pre-British colonisers of the island have continuously categorised people according to caste groups.

Nevertheless, this situation drastically changed when the British invented ethno-racial categories through their scientific census taking process that is reflected in the racial theory which was very dominant in Britain during that time through superior Anglo-Saxon identifications (Jeganathan 2010; Peeble 2006:8). The British also highly believed the need for civilisation of Ceylonese people that was operationalized through education, codifying new laws specific to ethno-racial groups linking broader cultural identities to ethno-raciality, religion and missionary education system.

Unlike the Portuguese and Dutch who governed only the coastal areas, the British got total control of the country in 1881, via a treaty signed with the elites who was angry with their king as a result of his misbehaviours of the independent Kandyan kingdom. Replacing the existing regional rule, they introduced a central administration system to the whole country thereafter. In this system, they have considered the ethno-racial category that made communal representation for the governing process. This initiation is a “historiography naturalisation” of “communal representation” (Jeganathan 2010:429). This led to niching ethno-racial categories into politics, state, power and economic processes, which repeatedly created and recreated ethno-racial consciousness to keep the momentum of the people. This context led to competition among the elite groups with different ethnic backgrounds to get a better share in social, economic and political spheres. They played a major role in creating and increasing ethnic consciousness among their own ethnic group, the masses became voters after the Donoughmore commission changed the constitution giving voting rights to men and women above 21 years in 1931. With this process the electorates became increasingly politicised. During this period the populist slogans based on language, religion appeared (Wilson 1998:115). The mass mobilisation finally converted into majority vote was the only language which colonialist understood. The same political campaigns and strategies continues until today. This was how the British intervention in Ceylon constructed rivalries and competition among ethno-racial groups in politics, business, and cultural spheres to get a better share for each other’s group under

the Westminster parliamentary template which was introduced to the country as a method of ruling mechanism in the unitary sovereign centralised state.

The post-colonial country further reinforced and continued already invented divisions by the colonialist. All political elite groups were competing with each other uniting and disuniting ways at different points. Moreover, the post-colonial politics inherited capacity to trigger competition among the political elites in the same party or same ethno-racial group to get into power. This situation resulted in creating Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) by S.W.R.D Bandaranaike who broke away from the United National Party (UNP). From this point onwards the two parties competing to get more votes by mobilising the ethnic majority Sinhala by generating more and more ethno-racial sentiments. In this propaganda mechanism the political elites combined religion, caste, language, class and all other possible means.

The postcolonial Sri Lankan politics seems to be a game with ethno-racial “emotions” or sentiments. The political elites found a miraculous power in ethno-racial myths, patriotism, which brings them state power by mobilising the “masses”.

The postcolonial governments dealt with official language, education, agriculture development and colonisation schemes, recognition for the Buddhism as state religion, citizenship rights amidst growing competition in the party politics, economic benefits to the citizens, have been explained by Wilson (1998). The completion for the better share of the state of different ethnic elites had contributed for the 30-year-long ethnic war which ended militarily in May 2009. However, the discussions, debates and struggles for creating better socio-economic and democratic rights for the minorities have been continuing in locally and internationally. The internationally exerted pressure had the power to mobilise leaders of other developed countries and brought a resolution against the Sri Lankan state and also change of the regime led by then President Mahinda Rajapaksa. This study which was conducted in the post-war period, witnessed the attempts of people to construct a comfortable zone in which members from all the ethno-racial backgrounds could live in harmony.

Ankeliya (Horn Pulling) and KataragamaPādaYātra (Foot Pilgrimage)

Our participation in both the *KataragamaPādaYātra* and Horn Pulling or *Ankeliya* in Sinhala (hereafter S.) and *Kombu Vilayattu* in Tamil (hereafter T.) emphasized the fact that a miraculous power of both the rituals were required to unite members of all three ethnic groups in general and Sinhala and Tamils in particular. We are very much fascinated by this miraculous power and suffered from a thirst of comprehending it. These rituals are conducted expecting the prosperity and safety of the village or the community, as well as the development of individuals and the respective families. I will explain two rituals in the next two paragraphs.

The series of rituals of Pānāma starts with pilgrimage to worship God Kataragama, Skanda (S.) or God Murugan (T.) situated in Kataragama. This pilgrimage on foot is commonly identified as KataragamaPādaYātra. In the

month of July, the main religious festival for God Kataragama is held annually and devotees from all the main ethno-religious groups, as well as the local indigenous community or Vāddas, attend the shrine and perform various rituals for their safety, prosperity and wellbeing in general. Among the various ritual a devout Sinhala and Tamil devotees of both northern and eastern provinces make a special ritual, and a foot pilgrimage is performed. This journey starts from the Hindu temples in the north, especially from Nallur temple and walk through the eastern coast and Yāla national park. This route falls through Pānama from where I and Aravinda (my research assistant) joined along with the Sinhala and Tamil Pānamavillagers. From Pānama we walked around 105 kilometres for about five days through the Yāla forest. By taking part in this pilgrimage for about eight days I was able to get an “insiders” experience of ethnoreligious border negotiations. Those who attend this pilgrimage are identified as *Sāmi* (*pl. Samis*) irrespective of various divisions, i.e., ethnicity, caste, class, gender and age. The pilgrims take a pack of most essential items such as cookerries, biscuits, rice, dhal and similar items a few clothes and other items needed to perform rituals. They do not have a plan when and where to have food, sleep and wash their bodies. They basically spend a life of a homeless person or a beggar which helps them to understand the deep lessons connected with human life. The pilgrims, irrespective of various conflicting identities, undergo the same pain and sufferings. The pilgrims deeply believe that they are in “Gods Territory” where all are treated in a fair manner and they are very cautious of not exposing to *killi*, a manner which is not God’s wish. Therefore, they mind their language, carefully select food, and are always ready to help others and in general engage in meritorious activities.

My explanation of Horn Pulling of Pānama people has been much focussed on ethnoreligious boundary negotiating which was not emphasised by Obeyesekere (1984). Goddess Pattini worship is one of the key rituals of Pānama people. Goddess Pattini is considered as the guardian goddess of the community and the villagers would come up with many instances, including miraculous escape from Asian Tsunami and various LTTE attacks. Pānama people annually conduct the horn pulling rituals at AmpitiyaDēvalaya for fourteen days after the villagers take part in KataragamaPādaYātra. The entire village join in this ritual irrespective of the caste, class, gender or any other divisions following customary traditions. During this period Sinhalas and Tamil people of the village perform rituals according to *Udupila* (upper side) or *Yatipila* (lower side), a traditional division to look after both the god and goddess. However, they also can perform rituals other than horn pulling disregarding the above separation. Ankeliya is the main religious festival in the village: they buy new clothes, those who work outside come back home, stop fishing which is the main livelihood of the village, engage in more meritorious activities. On the whole, the entire villagers behave very carefully to avoid exposing to *killa* (a manner which make God and Goddess angry) which would bring bad outcome to the village in general and individuals in particular. Since

the horn pulling is connected with the prosperity of the village, all behave in a very responsible manner that connects villagers through common rituals, norms, and a customary bond.

The process of the ritual happens as indicated below. The *udupila* tie their horn to a tamarind tree (identified as *an gaha*- horn tree) located slightly behind with equidistant to both devalayās. The *Yatipila* tie their horn to a tree trunk (around 15-20 ft high) identified as *henakanda*(thunderbolt tree). The *henakanda* is placed in a channel hinge around 6-8 feet long conduit and held in position by logs identified as *Happini Kandan* (female cobra trunks). This channel helps the trunk to move back and forth easily during horn pulling. Two ropes are tied to *henakanda* to tug. Once both the hooks are entangled for the best satisfaction of the both side they start *an edeema*. While six persons from both sides holding their hooks, other men of both sides tug two ropes tied to *henakanda* to give the pressure until one of the interlocked horns are snapped. The breaking of a hook is considered as a defeat. Immediately when one hook is broken, the winning party whose hook remained unbroken take their hook to inside the devalaya.² In the same time, the winning party start dancing jubilantly, and yelling salacious (Scandalous) songs at the vanquished team in front of their (Defeated Group's) devalaya. The defeated team remain calm and silent during these provocations. Both sides have arranged position called *Vattami*, who is at the target of these sarcastic acts on behalf of their side.

The rituals as a social space which warrant Sinhala, Tamil unity

Both rituals conducted in Pānama have been in existence for many generations. Similar religious practices are being observed in the other Tamil villages of the eastern coast as well. There are archival evidences on KataragamaPādaYātra in 1870s and were able to grab a considerable consideration in the early nineteenth century (Gilitz& Davidson 2002:309; Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988:182) as well. Both rituals are operating within a broader Hindu-religious culture which plays a major role in shaping everyday social lives of the multi-ethnic people in this area.

These two rituals have been constructing a social space where people with multi-ethno-religious background can collaborate and cooperate. The concepts of "liminality" and "communitas" introduced by Victor Turner are very useful in explaining the relationship building process. Turner adopted Arnold van Gennep's usage of "liminal phase" of *rites de passage*. Van Gennep defined *rites de passage* as "rites, which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age" (Turner 1969:94). Turner uses the term *state*, which represents changing position of the actor. According to Van Gennep, *rites of passage* have three stages; separation, marginal and aggression. In the first stage, the actors detach from their previous fixed social points in the social structure or cultural condition (state), or both. In the second, the liminal phase, the actor is in a state of ambiguousness; "he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state" (Turner 1969:94). In the last stage; the actor is in a more stable relationship.

Both the rituals have liminal stages. In this liminal stage the existing social hierarchies are temporarily melted or has no role at all, the existence of the traditions become more unclear, there will be much doubts, uncertainties and risks about the future. Therefore, the only option is to observe the rituals completely. The devotees exercise much attention to their behaviour as they may provoke gods and goddesses which bring negative outcomes for individuals and the respective communities. They used the term *killa* (plural *killi*) to denote “pollution” and they are the actions those would make gods and goddesses angry. The “fear” of gods’ punishment or negative return from the god creates a situation in which all behave responsibly and with sense and commitment for the community.

During the liminal stage of both rituals people engage in most of the activities which please gods and goddesses. During the ritual period they control their body, i.e., eating, talking, drinking, listening, thinking, sexual activities, etc., People in this village primarily engage in agricultural and fishing activities. Those who engage in fishing (*muhuduyāmaor muhudurassāwa*(S.) *kadaltholil*(T.)) give up their work or else do it in the far away locations in the Yāla national forest and they do not come home during the festival period. The villagers give up eating meat, and fish or even eggs and they basically adhere to a vegetarian meal. During Ankeliya members with menstruation and new born kids are sent to the far away corner of the village and these specific members or any of their family members do not take part in the pilgrimage. In one night when a member of a Pānāma pilgrimage team was bitten by a snake people started to talk that he belongs to a family which has a girl who experienced menarche very recently and this particular member had joined the pilgrimage without knowing this situation. This is an outcome of the perception of menstrual blood as dirty and harmful for others. On another occasion, when a wild bear attacked a Tamil lady during this pilgrimage, there were rumours connecting her exposure to *Killa*(*killataahuwela*(s.)). Villagers stop consuming alcohol, fights, harming others etc., also during this period. The villagers are requested to mince their words (*kata waraddagannawā*(s.)) and always talk about good things. We were told that a committee composed of key people of the village oversee the behaviour of the people, especially during Ankeliya ritual. Furthermore, if they found someone violating the accepted behaviour, they were punished. Contributing financially, materially and labour for common work of the village were the main punishment methods as it was explained by a low-caste young man who exercised much restraint during this period.

People who take part in these rituals are vulnerable of enormous risks and challenges while they take part in these rituals. The pilgrims have to walk through harsh environmental conditions and also through the wild animals including wild elephants living areas. If something happens there is no one to help them. Only hope is the faith in god Murugan. I well remember how we called for the help of god Murugan yelling “*haro...hara...*” when jumbos

reached “Katagamuwa” resting area, a bare land in the forest, where around 1000 men, women, children, old and young people slept in the night. In the Ankeliya too people are very much concerned about the way the horns are broken and who will win the game. They remember how once the shrine room of Goddess Pattini caught fire after the “water cutting” (*diyakepēma*) which was an indication of the negative outcome of the ritual. That year the villagers’ crops were damaged, exposed to various spreading disease endangering their lives. This risky and unpredictable nature of the rituals and their outcomes facilitate people to move away from their everyday life worlds and engage in more

One of the other dimension of this liminality is that all these rituals happen within the physical and mental space that belong to the gods and goddesses. During Ankeliya, I did not see even the police officials as special law and order prevail in the Ampitiya temple during this people. To highlight the power of this law and order, people shared with me narratives that centred around people chasing police officers out of the temple premises and also instances where both father and son engaged in heated arguments as members of two different sides. However, those heated arguments are confined only to the religious rituals and the temple premises. Outside the temple premises they forget those tense situations which were part of the ritual and engage in everyday social activities.

Both these rituals are performed expecting support from goddess Pattini, God Kōvalan and God Murugan; therefore, the devotees are really committed to perform their rituals. Specially the Ankeliya ritual is performed expecting prosperity of the community, i.e., better harvest, preventing diseases, etc., People who engage in PādaYātra do so in view of making vows, as well as performing various vows. Most of their requests are connected to individual or to the family members. A member of my team, 40-year-old-mother of two, have been taking part in this walk many times to fulfil a vow she made to the God Murugan, expecting cure of a chronic illness of her elder son. She believed now the illnesses of her son is fully cured and started to work in one of the private firms in Colombo. Therefore, people do not want to mess up their demands by engaging in “bad” activities which may provoke the gods and goddesses.

Since rituals involve a lot of risks and unpredictability, people try to be very good and polite to each other. They also try to follow “gods path”. In order to make this process more feasible they use special names to refer to each other. During the pilgrimage, all are called as Sāmi irrespective of gender, age, ethnicity, religion, regional identities etc., During Ankeliya ritual people only represent two groups “udu pila” and “yati pila” only. So people of all the groups will be brought under one or two simple categories. This process makes the interaction easier among the people. While walking in the Yāla national park I noticed that women and young girls walk alone in the forest and no one

even thinks of molesting them as many incidents are reported by daily news reports.

People with diverse ethno-religious backgrounds basically follow the path of one or two gods in these rituals. This would reduce the competition for religious space, follow almost similar rituals and respect common values, norms and systems. They also have been engaging in these rituals for some time, i.e., Ankeliya for 15 days and pilgrimage around 4-8 days. And also there is a sense of similarity among all the devotees. There is no discrimination among the devotees as they respect broader human values. I observed that people share foods, water and other drinks with the unknown pilgrims and also did not hesitate to share even a few words with each other groups. If one found an elderly person walks with great difficulty other devotees tend to help the person by taking his or her extra baggage or carrying them on strong men's back. People do not hesitate to ask for help from others, as well as to accept various offers from other pilgrims. The pilgrims from the ethnic majority or minority and also high-caste or low-caste have to undergo much pain when they perform rituals during ankeliya or else during the pilgrimage on foot. This makes the interactions and cooperation's across the ethno-religious boundaries easier.

Liminality, the uncertainties and fear of making gods and goddesses angry had pressurised the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, hereafter, LTTE) to support pilgrims of all ethno-religious backgrounds and also support or at least not to disturb Ankeliya. There were different time periods in which one section of the Yāla national park was controlled by LTTE, while the second half was under the government soldiers. I was able to collect many narratives of how both groups supported both Sinhala and Tamil pilgrims even during the peak of the 30-year-long war which existed between the two parties.

According to Turner; in the first step the actor disconnects from their earlier secure social points of the social structure or cultural conditions (state), or both. During the second stage which is the liminal stage, the actor is in a more ambiguous situation. In this stage he or she goes through a cultural realm that has a limited or none of the characteristics of the past or approaching state. At the last stage the actor will be in a more stable relationship. I have explained all three stages while giving much attention to the liminal stage which contribute towards relationship building. In the second liminal stage the actor is in a state of ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state (Turner 1969:894). The last stage; the actor is in more stable relationship. Taking part in these rituals have contributed towards developing a positive relationship between Sinhala and Tamils in the Pānama village. There are many examples of Sinhala-Tamil marriages among the young people who take part in the foot pilgrimage. Moreover, the foot pilgrimage has contributed towards developing numerous stories, folk tales and poems in the local literature. Tamils and Sinhala who took part Ankeliya of Ampitiya temple from other neighbouring villages invite

the Pānāma people also to attend similar rituals in their temples. The Pānāma villagers also offer food for those who take part in foot pilgrimage which is falling through their village. These rituals emphasise the need of contribution and unity of each and every member of the village to ensure the prosperity and safety of Pānamagama (s.) or Ūr (T.). The solidarity among the villagers increase due to the rituals and is given higher recognition after taking part in both rituals.

Conclusion

Both KataragamaPādaYātra and Ankeliya rituals explained above have created a liminal stage, giving rise to many uncertainties or unsettled situations which have developed a situation where inter-ethnic collaboration is essential. This collaboration and unity is a condition to invoke blessings of God Kataragama and Goddess Pattini for the wellbeing and safety of individuals, their families and communities. The research findings suggest that these rituals create a space which contribute to link the members of ethnoreligious groups who are sandwiched between a Sinhala and Tamil ethno-national crisis.

Notes:

¹They are night-time prowlers clad only in underwear and also they cover their bodies with grease or oil to avoid capture or arrest. It was rumoured that they were targeting women for attacks, especially when they stay at home alone. This is connected to mythology of various devils and other bad evils which come in the night times.

²Local Sinhala term for Shrine specially dedicated for various gods and goddesses.

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