

# The Cult of Kataragama

By  
Maureen Seneviratne

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FROM the mystic mountain of the gods: Kailasa in southern Tibet, to the southern tip of the last landfall this side of Oceania, there are many sacred places dedicated to deities of the Hindu pantheon. None however have acquired such a reputation for holiness or are as devoutly venerated by so many; none are so steeped in powerful tradition as the forest-shrine of the god of Kataragama in the extreme south-east of Ceylon.

The origin of this jungle sanctuary is enveloped in the mists of primordial time. The dim beginnings of the cult itself are given many varied interpretations by its priest-guardians as well as other zealous devotees. The fact remains that in all South-east Asia there is no holier spot than this primitive shrine in the jungle fastnesses of the island's scattered south eastern hills. So sacred is the fane and its environs that from time immemorial this part of Ceylon is known as *Deviange-Rata*: "the god's country".

Here the strange and the wondrous and the miraculous fuse incredibly with the cheap and corporeal and material. Here is to be witnessed a fervor of faith, an ardor of worship and a passion of penance as is to be seen in few places in the world. Here men, women and little children abject themselves into nothingness, wallow in the very dust in their zeal to honor and supplicate a deity they believe to be all-good, all-powerful.

The cult of Kataragama is that of the war-god of the Hindu pantheon. At first he dwelt with the other gods and his terrible father, Siva the Destroyer, third and awesome lord of the great Hindu Triumvirate, on the mount Kailasa. To his devotees the god of Kataragama is known by many names and many powers are attributed to him. *Kandasamy* they call him, or *Kanda Kumara*, *Skanda* or *Subramanyo*, the second son of the high, majestic Siva; *Muruga*: the god of youth and tenderness and beauty, especially in Ceylon, because all these things, and love of a maiden, brought him to the island—so legend has it, thousands of years ago. But *Muruga* is a name only spoken in fulsome awe; it is never written for it is too holy a word for that. *Kartikeya* is another of his names denoting his origin: "the one coming from the *Pleiades*"; *Gangeya*: "born from the *Ganges*", sacred river of the Hindus in India; *Sanmugam*: "the one with six faces".

Yet it is by his manifestation as the god of war that *Skanda*—the name generally used—is chiefly worshipped and some there are who claim him as the deification of *Iskander* or *Alexander the Great*, warlike Macedonian conqueror who first attempted (and almost succeeded) to fuse East and West together. But the legends of Kataragama go back further into time than the third century B.C.

The symbol of the god of Kataragama is a lance: *vel*; the victorious lance by which Siva's son destroyed the evil forces of the *Asuras* (demons), who had defeated the *devas* (gods) and held them in thrall. With only his lance to wield in the fierce battle he waged at the head of thousands of warriors, the brave and comely god of war challenged the evil *Taraka* (prince of demons) and

defeated him, thus destroying forever his malign power.

The "war" itself and the "victory" are symbolical, although the simple pilgrim implicitly believes in the literal meaning of the ancient tale. The lance triumphant is the symbol of strength and power inherent in its bearer, the god of Kataragama; it is the sign of his victory over evil and hate and viciousness; cruelty and death, typified in the character of the demon Taraka, and signifies his redemption of those beings who suffer from the effects of these inner conflicts, as well as from the woes of the world.

It is in this deeper, mysterious, significant sense that his cult is observed by the initiated, though the majority who devoutly pay obeisance at his shrine come primarily to beg or give thanks for help rendered and support in their trials and tribulations.

The mystic lance is believed to have been placed by the god himself on one of the seven hills of Kataragama. An iron lance, of unknown antiquity is to be seen there to this day: a symbol held in pious veneration by pilgrims. Votive offerings of iron or silver lances are made to the deity and men and women pierce their cheeks, tongues and bodies with lances of various sizes in their eagerness to do homage to Skanda, god of the lance.

Hindu deities each have their particular mount. Siva, for instance, has the bull; Vishnu the cobra; Skanda has the peacock. In most representations of this god, including the painted cloth which divides the "Holy of Holies" from the front portion of his *Maha Devale* (great temple) at Kataragama, he is to be seen with his two wives and the peacock, his bearer. The legend has it that the peacock sprang from the defeated demon who was mercifully spared by the god, and who promised thereafter in gratitude to serve him as his mount.

The god of Kataragama is also represented at times with six faces, symbolically showing his six divine powers or attributes. According to the German writer, Von Paul Wirz, who made a deep and profound study of this cult: "One face, so it is said, radiates light that like lightning dispels the darkness; the second expresses compassion and pity for 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 Veddha-girl". In all paintings, attempts are made according to each individual artist's skill and ability to convey the facial expressions arising from these divine emotions.

The Veddha-girl, his well-beloved and second wife, was the cause of god Skanda's emigration from the sacred mountain of Kailasa in the Himalayas, fair abode of the gods, to Kataragama among the scattered hills in the dense forests of south-east Ceylon. Her name is Valli-Amma or Valli ("child of the wild yam creepers") because it was in the creeper-enclosed woods that an aboriginal huntsman found her one day. The Veddha chieftain discovered that she was a strange, lost child of mystic parentage: her mother a doe, her father a holy hermit who had withdrawn to a remote jungle cave to live his life of meditation and penance. The Veddha chief took the child and brought her, in all her grace and beauty, to his wife, and as they were childless they decided to adopt her as their own.

Valli grew in gentle loveliness till one day Narada, messenger of the gods, son of the great Brahma, wandering through the three worlds, entered the forests of Kataragama. There he found the girl and was enchanted by her great beauty and virtue. On his return to Kailasa he described her to Skanda, who was fired with passion for the unknown maiden, and decided to go in search

of her, and make her his wife.

After many adventures he sought her out and winning her love and trust, married her. The pair settled down in perfect bliss on the top of one of the hills in the vicinity of Kataragama. But the idyll could not last for long, because a green fire of anger and jealousy was kindled, and smoldered on the white heights of Kailasa. The wife of Skanda, Thevani-Amma, daughter of Indra, god of thunder, was enraged at the faithlessness of her spouse. She would win him back, she told her father, and he, powerful one, must help her do so. A wise man was summoned; one skilled in the creation of *yantras* (charms) and by the power of its spell, Skanda was to be brought back. But the god was already aware of these designs upon him and when the seer arrived bearing the magic *yantra*, Skanda seized it from him, and incapacitated its creator, turning the wise man into a *lingam* of mother-of-pearl.

The *yantra* has since been preserved in the Maha Devale. It is the only tangible symbol of the god that is found in his temple, for strangely, unlike other Hindu temples and cults, no sculptural representations of the deity exist within the *devale's* portals. The *Yantra* and the Lance: the latter is put up in the grounds of the temple at the entrance, and representations are reverently offered by pilgrims in numerous ways. The *yantra* of incredible sanctity in its container, is kept in the inner room and no human eyes except those of the chief-priest and his assistant, are ever able to gaze upon it. Some say it is the diagram of the god: a hexagon of one triangle upon another, made of gold, but it can never be taken out and displayed to the public gaze even for devotional purposes.

Thevani-Amma was not to be defeated, however. When she realized that her husband would never return to her, having taken up his permanent abode with Valli in Kataragama, she decided that she would forsake her divine home and settle down close to him in the jungles of this alien isle. So she came, accompanied by her priests and servitors, this daughter of the gods, to the forest plains of Ceylon, and in due course she persuaded her husband and Valli to descend from their hill-top home and live with her in the now sacred city. Domestic peace was restored and legend confirms that all three lived happily together. The *devales* dedicated to the two wives of Skanda are built immediately outside the temple area.

Those who come to Kataragama, seeking the splendor and magnificence of Hindu temple decor; the lavish and elaborate wood and stone carvings, imposing architecture and exquisite sculpture of South Indian craftsmen, visible in every shrine on the sub-continent; or who expect to find a resplendent sacred city such as the superb Buddhist cities of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa in North-western Ceylon, filled with their gems of religious art; are bound to be disappointed. For this holiest of shrines, sacred to Buddhists and Muslims as well as Hindus, which for more than two millenniums has captured the imagination and brought healing and spiritual comfort to millions of human beings, merely consists of a few simple and unpretentious stone buildings of no architectural grandeur whatsoever.

It is its association with incredible sanctity, the depth and wonder and mystery of its cult that has made Kataragama famous and well loved; has caused it to be regarded with undisputed awe and veneration through countless centuries.

To the Buddhists it has been further hallowed and sanctified by a visit of Lord Buddha during his lifetime. In consequence it is exalted as one of the sixteen sacred places in the island sanctified by the Buddha's presence on each particular spot when he visited the country. A shoot from the sacred Bodhi-tree (the tree of Enlightenment)—one of the eight saplings that sprang

forth miraculously from the tender branch when it was first brought from India and planted in the then royal city, in the 3rd century B.C.—was planted in Kataragama.

God Skanda himself is one of those deities who have been incorporated into Buddhism and his *devale* usually stands in the precincts of most Buddhist temples, or at least his image can be found in their ante-rooms. Ancient kings made reverent vows at Kataragama, endowed temples and made devout pilgrimages to the holy spot. It is a curious fact that this god of the Hindu pantheon is attended upon by *kapuralas* (priests) who are Buddhist in their beliefs, and the temple itself and all its revenues and affairs are watched over by a *Basnayake*: a Sinhalese Buddhist lay-official. This has been the practice for centuries.

An ancient *dagoba* (stupa) the Kiri vehera was built in 300 B.C. by a Sinhalese king, Mahanaga, on the spot where Lord Buddha is believed to have preached a sermon to the *devas* (gods) when he visited Kataragama.

To the Muslims Kataragama has come to be held in high veneration, because holy men of the Islamic faith resorted thither and lived in the vicinity of the present mosque, dying there in great sanctity. The tombs of these saints have become places of pilgrimage and annually a Muslim festival is held there.

The *Maha Devale* itself dedicated to the cult of god Skanda, the principal shrine in the sacred area, is a small, unadorned building, divided inside by three curtains. Devotees can only enter the outer-most room, which is smoke-blackened by the countless millions of oil lamps that have burned within from ancient times. That the temple itself is of remotest antiquity cannot be doubted. Originally a rude primitive hut had stood on the spot, and this was later converted into a temple. All the other *devales* are equally unprepossessing in appearance; plain and bare and unattractive to behold. They have never been otherwise, for at Kataragama, unlike at most other shrines, the cult of god Skanda does not desire or demand outward embellishment or the exoteric signs of grandeur and wealth.

It is the place itself, its atmosphere, the spirit that pervades the very air hereabouts of an indefinable, indescribable holiness, that penetrates deep into the souls of pilgrims and inspires them to perform acts of incredible self-mortification; to reach heights of spiritual ecstasy never before experienced and immeasurably enriching; and find a tremendous force of spiritual fulfillment from pilgrimages to the sacred shrine.

The great annual festival takes place in the months of *Esala* (July-August). The festival lasts from the time of the new Moon to its full, and consists of a nightly *Perahera* (procession) from the *Maha Devale* to the *Valli-Amma kovil* (temple); led by the high priest of the former, seated atop the temple elephant, bearing in his hands the sacred *yantra* (relic). For a quarter of an hour the relic is placed in the sacred chamber of the goddess and then brought back to the *Maha Devale* of her spouse. Only on the last day of the festival is the relic placed in the *Valli-Amma* temple for the whole night.

The days itself are taken up with a number of *poojas* (sacrificial services) and these are conducted by the priests for all those donors who bring their offerings to the shrine. Cooked food—especially milk-rice, an almost mystic repast, ripe plantains, grain, fruit, and so on, are offered to the deity. There are usually regular hours for the *poojas*, though at Kataragama, one thing that is not adhered to strictly or even mentioned is *time* for the only ‘time’ here is "god's time", and it is unlucky to speak of, leave alone think and plan, according to one's own.

Fantastic penances are performed by devotees, in their honoring of vows made to the deity while some extremity of sickness or misfortune assailed them and no human aid proved effective; or to earnestly supplicate the god for some favor ardently desired, be it spiritual or material. Some, and theirs is the purest worship, mortify and torture their bodies in expressions of exultant adoration.

Before vows can be fulfilled, favors craved or acts of worship performed however; even before the sacred temple precincts can be entered, there is one important ritual all must perform. Physical cleanliness being essential if sacrifice is to bring merit, all pilgrims must bathe in the river flowing hard by the shrine; the *Menik Ganga* (River of Gems) which is so considerably associated with the cult of Kataragama.

Rolling from the river bank to the gateway of the temple is the commonest penance undertaken but this can only be performed by men. Women usually walk the distance on their knees, or on all fours, touching their heads to the ground every so often in worship in the direction of the temple.

Others carry *Kavadi* on their shoulders: an arch-shaped wooden contraption, of varying size and weight according to the age and strength of the bearer, richly adorned with colored streamers and bunches of peacock's feathers. The carrying of *Kavadi* or *Kaveri* is also a form of worship and penance. Many pilgrims are pierced through their cheeks, tongues and bodies with silver lances, tridents and spears; iron arrows and hooks are driven through the flesh of the back; iron nail-shoes are worn on the feet. Holy men set up their booths along the pilgrim route and it is these who attend to the pilgrims, fix the instruments of torture into the bodies of penitents; apply holy ash on their foreheads and bless them; solemnly recite verses from the Vedas and succeed in bringing the great majority into a state of ecstasy; a ritual trance in which the "sinner" is prepared to go to any lengths to express sorrow or piety, or fervent adoration of the deity.

Many of the pilgrims are unquestionably in a state of trance as they perform these astonishing penances. The condition deepens as they chant and pray and it is evident they feel no pain of body or mind, but a curious, surging upliftment of the soul, a merging of the individual with the divine *Atman* (Soul). Some slash themselves with knives, working themselves into a frenzy of religious abandon; others prick their flesh with daggers and spears; or suspend themselves in space by means of metal hooks. In no instance is a single drop of blood to be seen; neither do these cuts and slashes leave visible traces on the skin. The physical energy expended seldom results in bodily collapse.

There have been exceptional occasions however when a devotee at the height of mystic ecstasy has slit his throat or dismembered himself fatally, but it is merely accepted by all present that the "victim" has become one with the deity by this supreme act of self-immolation; his reward is "paradise" forever.

The climax of the festival of Kataragama is the fire-walking ceremony which takes place on the last night of the *Perahera*. It is held in the early hours and is a literal walking on fire or rather on glowing, red-hot coals with the naked feet. Firewalking takes place within the temple yard and for some hours before the ceremony the area is prepared. It has to be cleaned thoroughly and piled with logs and branches. The chief *kapurala* (high priest) lights the fire at midnight with pieces of burning camphor and more camphor is placed in-between the wood. A prayer to Agni, Hindu god of fire, is intoned by the priest. It takes from two to four hours for the wood to burn into embers, and when every piece has been consumed, the shimmering coals are evenly spread

to cover an area or pit about fourteen feet long and eight feet broad.

A great many spectators gather round, for this culmination of the fortnight's ceremonies is of deep interest even to those who are not stirred by religious motives. The heat is intense and few can stand nearby for long. Those who are due to walk the fire are by now ready for their tremendous ordeal. They have observed all the necessary preliminaries, as for instance prayer and rigorous fast over a certain period, the abstention from all flesh meat, fowl or fish, partaking only of a bare vegetable diet; the avoidance of sexual intercourse for some days and all evil thought and practices. They have bathed in the *Menik Ganga* to purify themselves and have visited the *Maha Devale* to obtain the god's blessing on their endeavor.

They have reached a condition of singular detachment from self. They exist in their bodies but their spirits are infinitely attuned with the deity, seemingly floating up and above them in mystic regions, which state of being alone makes this act of worship and penance possible. Those who have achieved this ideal walk steadily and slowly, unhurt, over the fire. Over and over again they tread the red-hot embers and the soles of their feet are not burned or blistered with the fire's heat. Others who have failed to establish that sublime, spiritual rapport may attempt to walk the fire, but the "miracle" eludes them: their feet show visible and unmistakable marks of their apparent unworthiness.

Scientists and scholars have tried to explain away this unique phenomenon as simply trance and auto-suggestion, in which state most things are possible. To the initiated it is part of the stupendous cult of Kataragama; a miracle achieved by the infallible power of the god Skanda, protecting those who have surrendered themselves to his will.

In a land where distinctions of caste, class and creed, though no longer binding, yet have some hold upon the way of life of its people, not a vestige of these superficial differences are to be observed at Kataragama. In the sacred city all are one, united, equal; stripped of all worldly disparities; naked and vulnerable before the deity.

In a country of many different religious beliefs; among an ancient people to whom the gods are very close and very real, even though the majority are firm followers of the purest form of Buddhism: that great philosophy of detachment and compassion which behooves its adherents to make or unmake their own *karma* (fate), the cult of Kataragama is yet a living, breathing, age-old symbol of the power of the spirit over the weak, corrupted flesh and signifies the eternal yearning, the ceaseless striving of man seeking to be one with the god-head.

Strange marvels and wonders take place year after year at Kataragama and are retold with awe and excitement, but the greatest miracle, though poets rarely sing of it and story tellers do not find drama enough in it, is the personal sense of communion between god and human; the mystical, all-pervading ecstasy that gushes forth within the consciousness of the ordinary simple man at this confrontation with the divine. It is this which has kept the cult of Kataragama vitally alive through countless centuries.

(Original editorial inclusions that followed the essay:)

*Shibli was supposed to be insane and was confined in a madhouse. Some persons came to visit him. "Who are you?" he asked. They answered: "Thy friends", whereupon he pelted them with stones and put them to flight. Then he said: "Had you been my friends, you would not have fled from my affliction".*