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To Sangsakta from Richard.

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The Consecration of a Buddhist Image

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SINHALESE Buddhists state that their religion was founded by the Buddha, who was a human being and is now dead. Cognitively this position is held by every Buddhist from the most learned monk to the most ignorant layman. Yet they usually behave as if the Buddha appears to them as a powerful and omnibenevolent god, a supreme being who is still in some way present and aware. (Perhaps we might say that cognitively the Buddha is dead, but affectively he is alive.) For instance, if assailed by dangerous demons a pious Buddhist will recite the qualities of the Buddha and thus keep any malevolent forces at bay. If asked to explain the apparent inconsistency, Buddhists say that the gods and demons are restrained by respect for the Buddha—but it is respect for his memory or for his doctrine, not for his active power.[1] Moreover, Buddhists have dealings with the Buddha in which they behave as if he were at least numinously present; in particular, offerings are made before statues of the Buddha.

Every Buddhist monastery[2] has a temple with at least one statue of the Buddha, and most laymen have in their houses a small shrine or at least a picture of the Buddha with a tiny altar before it; in front of these representations of the Buddha people conduct themselves as if in the presence of an important person. The usual offerings to a Buddha image, which may be made at any time, are flowers, lights and incense. People explain that these actions, too, are signs of respect for the Buddha's memory (in our terms, symbols of their active adherence to the Buddhist faith). While making these offerings they recite Pali verses which bear their explanation out, and express sentiments consonant with Buddhist doctrine. The verse recited while offering flowers says that as these flowers wither so will my body pass away. Meanwhile, however, the demeanor of the average worshipper is reminiscent of theistic devotion rather than of philosophic contemplation.

It is one thing to behave as if the Buddha is aware of one's actions; another to behave as if the very statue before which one stands is in any sense alive. Offerings to a Buddha statue must be made with a certain punctilio: for a flower offering the flowers

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[1] On this one point I have greatly oversimplified the belief system, as an accurate discussion would lead me far from my main topic. Strictly speaking, the security which Sinhalese Buddhists feel from the abuse of supernatural power they often ascribe to the vigilance and potency of the higher deities who have been appointed guardians of the Buddha's moral law. For an authoritative outline and analysis of the Sinhalese religious belief system see G. Obeyesekere, "The Great Tradition and the Little in the Perspective of Sinhalese Buddhism," *Journal of Asian Studies* XXII No. 2, 139–153. For the derivation and use of the power of supernatural beings see especially pp. 145–146.

[2] Western terminology is a little confusing. A monastery is not merely where monks live (*pansala*) but the complex of buildings associated with such living quarters. This complex includes a temple (*vihāraya* or *vihāragedara*) containing Buddha images and other religious art.

must have only their heads, not their stalks (feet are disrespectful); and each bloom must be laid on the altar separately, in such a way as to face or incline towards the statue. All such acts of devotion can still be rationalized as showing respect for the Buddha, who is here represented, not for the particular statue; but at least one ceremony is so obviously motivated by fear that it cannot be rationalized in terms of respect and affection for the memory of an omnibenevolent Buddha, whether dead or alive. This is the ceremony of consecrating a statue. Only when a statue has been consecrated can it be an object of worship, and this fact is sufficient to show that a Buddha statue is more than a mere reminder of the Buddha.

Before consecration a statue is treated with no more respect than one would give the materials of which it is composed; afterwards it may not be moved, and must be treated with all decorum. Robert Knox, the seventeenth-century Englishman who was twenty years a prisoner in Ceylon, made the same observation:

> Before the Eyes are made, it is not accounted a God, but a lump of ordinary Metal, and thrown about the Shop with no more regard than anything else. . . . The Eyes being formed, it is thenceforward a God.[3]

Elsewhere Knox says,

> As for these Images they say they do not own them to be Gods themselves but only Figures, representing their Gods to their memories; and as such they give to them honour and worship.[4]

The very act of consecration indicates that the statue is being brought to life, for it consists simply in painting in the eyes. If (a rare case) the statue is not to be painted at all, the ceremony consists in carving the pupils. Even paintings of the Buddha or of gods, an inquirer was told fifty years ago, should be completed by adding the eyes at an auspicious moment with some simple ceremony.[5] However, modernization inevitably erodes these customs, and no ceremony is performed for manufactured images, such as the small plastic Buddhas sold everywhere in stalls, or the large cardboard Buddha mentioned later in my account. Such images are correspondingly less sacred and more purely decorative. The ceremony is popularly called *nētra pinkama*. A *pinkama* (literally "merit action") is any Buddhist ceremony; *nētra* means "eye"; the whole therefore means "eye ceremony." A more formal title is *nētra pratiṣṭhāpanaya utsavaya,* "festival of setting the eyes."

The ceremony is regarded by its performers as very dangerous and is surrounded with tabus. It is performed by the craftsman who made the statue, after several hours of ceremonies to ensure that no evil will come to him. This evil, which is the object of all Sinhalese healing rituals, is imprecisely conceptualized, but results from making mistakes in ritual, violating tabus, or otherwise arousing the malevolent attention of a supernatural being, who usually conveys the evil by a gaze (*bälma*). The craftsman paints in the eyes at an auspicious moment and is left alone in the closed temple with only his colleagues, while everyone else stands clear even of the outer door. Moreover, the craftsman does not dare to look the statue in the face, but

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[3] Robert Knox, *An Historical Relation of Ceylon,* originally published in London, 1681, now available as *Ceylon Historical Journal* Vol. VI (Ceylon, 1958), 130 (original folio p. 82).

[4] *Ibid.,* 116 (folio p. 73). When I first wrote my analysis, I was not acquainted with these passages.

[5] A. Coomaraswamy, *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art* (Broad Campden, 1908), p. 70. On p. 73 he also quotes a sixteenth-century edict which mentions that the ceremony was performed for a painting of the Buddha on cloth (see note 10, fin.).

keeps his back to it and paints sideways or over his shoulder while looking into a mirror, which catches the gaze of the image he is bringing to life. As soon as the painting is done the craftsman himself has a dangerous gaze. He is led out blindfolded and the covering is only removed from his eyes when they will first fall upon something which he then symbolically destroys with a sword stroke. The spirit of this ceremony cannot be reconciled with Buddhist doctrine, so no one tries to do so. Monks say that really the whole thing is nonsense, but a picturesque tradition worth preserving. Many laymen hold the same view, and though they obey orders to keep clear, they do so with some indifference. Only the craftsman, on whom the evil influence may fall, seems really frightened, and insists on the importance of every detail of the ceremony.

Doctrine only attempts to account generally for the veneration in which a statue is held. There are three kinds of Buddha relics: pieces of the Buddha's body, objects he used, and objects which remind one of him. All images are in the last class, and statues usually have their relic status enhanced by burying inside them a minute relic of the first class, a piece of the Buddha's body. This practice is ancient; indeed Buddhaghosa, the great commentator on the Pali canon (the sacred books of Southern Buddhists), writing in the fifth century A.D., gives this presence of a relic as the rationale for worshipping a Buddha image at all. The relic is normally placed inside the statue by a monk just before the eye-painting, but there is no ritual for this act, nor does it have a place in the ritual connected with the eye ceremony, so that by introducing these holy relics it appears that the monk is trying to legitimize the whole proceedings. He cannot, however, disguise the fact that the climax comes when the eyes are painted in by the craftsman.

These craftsmen (*sittaru*) are members of a subsection of a certain caste, generally known as smiths (*navandannō*). This caste of skilled craftsmen, a comparatively small one, includes workers in metal, stone, wood, ivory and lacquer. *Sittaru* are primarily painters, but they must combine the skills of painter, sculptor and architect.[6] It can happen nowadays that a statue for a temple is made by an artist, a person not of this caste, but even in such cases the traditional craftsman is called in to paint in the eyes, for only he knows the correct ritual. An artist of my acquaintance put in the eyes of a statue he had made, but will not repeat the experiment. He was ill for six months afterwards. He told me, "I do not believe, but always in my dreams I thought this was the reason." For the craftsman it is a lucrative business, because after the ceremony he is given all the food and utensils used, which amount, at a guess, to as much wealth as an ordinary peasant might acquire in a year. His gains include the bull, traditionally white, into whom is directed, at the end of the ceremony, the evil influence which has been banished.

If a Sinhalese wishes to avert trouble or danger there are two major types of cere-

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[6] For a general account of the traditions and functions of these craftsmen see Coomaraswamy, *op. cit.* For a reference to their subgroupings, probably comparable rather to craft guilds than to subcastes, see R. Pieris, *Sinhalese Social Organization* (Colombo, 1956), p. 182. In the Low Country and the towns carpentry is no longer—if it ever was—a caste-bound profession. For a discussion of this break-down of caste traditions, as well as of the status of *navandannō*, see B. Ryan, *Caste in Modern Ceylon* (New Brunswick, N. J., 1953), pp. 111–113. This information is not known to the villagers in the area of the ceremony described, where *navandannō* are not indigenous; they thought that *sittaru* were members of the drummer caste.

mony which he can sponsor: either Buddhist monks may chant certain sacred texts (*pirit*) which are believed to have apotropaic power; or Buddhist lay specialists may perform ceremonies to placate minor deities. Although in the latter case there are some specific spells and rituals to produce specific results, on the whole both kinds of ritual are highly generalized and can be used on all kinds of occasions. (*Pirit* is more doctrinal, more respectable, more likely to be used on public occasions, up to the Opening of Parliament; the other ceremonies have very little to do with Buddhist doctrine and are more used for private ends, including black magic.)

The key figure in a *nētra pinḳama* is a low-caste lay specialist, whose rituals primarily concern low-class deities; but as this happens in a Buddhist monastery, and the inauguration of a temple is the occasion for public festivity, it is not surprising to find going on at the same time ceremonies in which monks play the leading part and assert the supremacy of Buddhism. Not only is a relic placed in the statue by a monk, but while the craftsman is performing his rituals, *pirit* is going on in the background, and throughout the night the monks chant in their loud, unceasing monotone, which drowns the craftsman's muttered invocations.

Probably the first reference to a *nētra pinḳama* is by Buddhaghosa in the fifth century A.D.[7] He ascribes the celebration of such a festival to the emperor Asoka in the third century B.C., though in a mythical context: he says that when a superlatively beautiful image of the Buddha had been miraculously created for the king, he celebrated the *aḳḳhipūjā* for seven days. (*Aḳḳhipūjā,* a Pali term, corresponds in meaning to *nētra pinḳama.*) The reference is reproduced in the great sixth-century Ceylonese chronicle the Mahāvaṃsa.[8] We can, therefore, assume that a ceremony with the same purpose as ours was known in fifth-century Ceylon and believed to be far older. There are further references to the ceremony in the continuation of the Mahāvaṃsa, the Cūlavaṃsa,[9] and in copper plate edicts mainly of the eighteenth century. Maybe it was performed by the king himself. It is explicitly stated[10] that the famous king Parākrama Bāhu I (1153–86) who ruled at Poḷonnaruwa used to put in the eyes of Buddha images himself—probably he put in sapphires, which we know from other passages to have been used for this purpose. A Tamil inscription at Poḷonnaruwa of similar date states that the eye of a colossal Buddha image there was annually removed and repainted with collyrium, and though this annual festival has

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[7] Samantapāsādikā introd., *Vinayapiṭaḳaṃ,* ed. H. Oldenburg, III (London, 1881), 300.

[8] *Mahāvaṃsa* ed. W. Geiger (London, 1908), V 94.

[9] *Cūlavaṃsa* ed. W. Geiger (Vol. I, London, 1925; Vol. II, London, 1927). This carries the story of Ceylon through to the late eighteenth century. The only clear references to a *nētra pinḳama* (called in the Pali *nettapūjā* and *nettamaha*), which unambiguously refer to the modern form of the festival, occur in the last chapter (Chapter C), which deals with King Kīrti Śrī Rājasiṃha (1747–82) the great reviver and patron of Buddhism.

[10] *Cūlavaṃsa* LXXIII 78. This is the only indisputable passage to state that a king put in the eyes himself. Coomaraswamy (see note 12) translates the passage "paints," but the Pali word *ṭhapetuṃ* merely means "to place." His other two references to painting by the king are also dubious. The one, *Cūlavaṃsa* C. 191, merely says the king "caused the eyes to be placed" (*nette paṭiṭṭhāpetvāna*). The other is an edict in the name of Vikrama Bāhu, a king of Kandy in the early sixteenth century, which refers explicitly to a *nētra pinḳama* with the placing of pots (i.e. *ḳumbhasthāpanē,* see below), and says that after the ceremony the king washed his hands and bestowed lands on the painters. The question is whether we are entitled to infer from the king's washing his hands that he himself painted the eyes. However that may be, if the edict is authentic—and in 1890 it satisfied a court of law—it is the earliest certain reference to the modern form of the ceremony.

no modern equivalent, a *nētra pinkama* may be performed when a temple is renovated (*jarā-vāsa arinavā*), so presumably the ceremony was at least similar. Robert Knox wrote in 1681 that an image "is dedicated by Solemnities and Sacrifices, and carried with great state into its shrine or little house, which is before built and prepared for it"[11]—unfortunately he does not further specify what the "Solemnities" were.

The *nētra pinkama* is discussed by Coomaraswamy in an appendix to his monumental work *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art*.[12] He regards it as "Hindu rather than Buddhist in origin," a line of analysis which I do not find useful; the rite is the exclusive property of Sinhalese Buddhists. He does not seem to have witnessed the ceremony himself, and his brief account differs in many details from my experience. In the course of my description I shall note the principal divergences. The larger and more elaborate ceremony which he describes was perhaps carried out in rich and important temples; the comparative modesty of the ceremony which I saw can be ascribed to the erosion of ancient traditions or to the modest means of a remote rural community, or both. In the absence of any other recent literature on the subject, let alone by an eye-witness, it is hard to tell.

I append an account of a *nētra pinkama* which I saw in central Ceylon, the Kandyan hill country. I do not give details of the texts used, because, as I have said, they are of general application, not peculiar to the *nētra pinkama,* and so not interesting in this context; a couple of texts are quoted by Coomaraswamy, but I do not think they were among those used on this occasion.

In the hills are large tea estates, in the valleys villagers grow paddy. The monastery stands in between by the road. It was founded thirty years ago by a priest of the Amarapura sect, which admits low-caste clergy, and is therefore popular mainly among low-caste laymen. To this temple come people from several villages around, most of them jaggery-makers by caste, rice-growing peasants and agricultural laborers by profession. The incumbent priest is in his thirties and was educated in a monastic college in Colombo. He is worried by the poverty of his parishioners and not entirely proud of the temple which has cost them fifty thousand rupees to build.[13] His predecessor started it on this scale fifteen years before, so when he took over there was no going back. But the next building project he plans for the monastery is a library, which is to be far cheaper to build and available for public use.

The form of the newly completed temple is roughly a square within a square. I call the square in the middle the shrine, the part between the shrine and the entrance, the vestibule; the other three sides outside the central shrine I call the ambulatory. The ambulatory is separated from the vestibule by doors which are normally kept closed. The sculptures are of brick and cement covered with stucco and garishly painted. All the way around the longer (outer) wall of the vestibule are twenty-four identical images of the twenty-four previous Buddhas, standing erect, with a trestle running in front of them to serve as an altar; on the shorter (inner) wall are tableaux in high relief, scenes from the life of Gotama (our) Buddha, with the Buddha always in the center. The walls of the vestibule are painted with scenes from

[11] Knox, p. 131 (folio p. 82).

[12] Coomaraswamy, pp. 70–75 (Appx. II to Chapter III).

[13] Nearly four thousand pounds. An unskilled laborer earns three rupees (nearly five shillings) a day.

Gotama Buddha's previous lives. The huge Buddha in the central shrine is, as usual, a seated image. He has his right hand on his knee, palm upwards, and his left hand in his lap, palm downwards—the Ceylon version of the gesture known in the West as "Calling the earth to witness" (*bhūmi sparśa mudrā*). He is flanked by statues of his principal disciples. None of the images have their eyes painted in yet. Figures other than the Buddha do not require a ceremony to be completed, but presumably they could hardly precede the Buddha in any way.

The whole temple is the work of two craftsmen, father and son, who have supervised and taken part in the construction of the building and made all the sculptures and paintings, and even the colors. Like most of their professional subcaste nowadays, they come from the low country, from the Southern Province. The master craftsman is an elderly man, with his thin white hair tied in a little bun at the back of his head, after the traditional manner. His status as a craftsman entitles him to the respectful title of *bās unnähe*.[14] He is a kindly, venerable figure.

It has been determined by local astrologers that 6:04 a.m. on a certain day is an auspicious moment. According to Coomaraswamy, the eyes must be painted at about 5 a.m., the hour at which the Buddha attained enlightenment. As usual, there has been some accommodation of the doctrinally ideal to the empirically convenient. Posters are printed, distributed, displayed in monasteries (of the same sect), in shops, on trees. The translation[15] of what they say goes:

> GREAT FESTIVAL OF SETTING EYES
> AND
> PIRIT FOR THREE HALF-DAYS.
>
> Meritorious laymen!
>
> With the advice of the venerable head monk D.D., preacher of the manifold true doctrine of the Blessed One's teaching, which is the Lord of India, chief incumbent of A. monastery, who dwelt at the blessed S. monastery in G. village in the region M., and of his chief disciple, our virtuous head monk, the venerable C.; at the initiative of the committee for building S. monastery and the Mother of Gāmiṇi[16] Ladies' Committee, and with the aid of the meritorious inhabitants of the surrounding villages,
>
> AT THE COST OF ABOUT 50,000 RUPEES IN THE GREAT
> SHRINE WHICH HAS BEEN BUILT,
>
> the great festival of setting the eyes of the venerable twelve-foot Buddha image in the central shrine, and the venerable Buddha images of the twenty-four manifestations in the ambulatory
> ON 30TH JUNE 1965
> will take place at the auspicious moment which falls at 6.04 at dawn.
>
> For this occasion from June 29th to July 1st there will also be an exposition of the

[14] *Bās* is in origin the Dutch word *baas* ("boss"), and is now widely applied to craftsmen and builders; *unnähe* is a polite Sinhalese pronominal form for "he," used as a common courtesy title in the low country, but not idiomatic in central Ceylon.

[15] The translation is necessarily not literal, but attempts to give the effect of the original despite the unnaturalness of such a word order in English.

[16] Duṭugämuṇu (Pali: Duṭṭhagāmaṇi), Sinhalese national hero. This is the local women's organization.

doctrine in a Great Pirit. Therefore in the name of the Teaching we inform the Buddhist public that they should participate in these noble eight great meritorious actions and thereby gain Heaven and Release.

Signed

The Nētra Pinkama Committee.

Monks and laymen will accordingly assemble on the evening before the eyes are to be painted in, and *pirit* will continue till dawn on the day after the central ceremony; the monks will then be given their mid-day meal, and most of them will leave after spending about forty-five hours in the monastery.

In the remoter country districts no buses run after dark, so the only ways of getting to the ceremony are on foot or by hiring a car. It is a moonless night, and the only light comes from the occasional kerosene or Petromax lamp in a house by the roadside. The final bend of the road as it winds around the hillside reveals the monastic area brightly lit (a dynamo is supplying electricity), an enormous cardboard Buddha dominating the scene with his five-colored rays flashing on and off. The loudspeaker, as on all Sinhalese occasions, is audible for miles and blares unceasingly with the voices of young laymen exhorting the faithful to make donations. When I arrive at 8:30 the crowd has assembled, though many stand around outside the temple grounds drinking tea at the small local shops. Most of them wear the white clothes suitable to religious occasions, especially the men, who are more likely to wear white anyway. Some men are in the "national costume" of white long-sleeved shirt and plain white sarong; no one present is wearing trousers. Both sexes and all age groups are fully represented. Everyone is cheerful and mildly expectant; a Sinhalese crowd rarely, a gathering of Kandyan villagers never, gives an impression of intense excitement.

The monastic premises are reached by a short, steep path up from the road, and are on two levels. First one reaches the monastery proper, a fair-sized bungalow inside which the monks have assembled. Every monk of this sect for several miles around has come, and so have a few of their pupils and "brothers" (i.e. pupils of the same teacher) from as far as Colombo. The senior monk present is one of the five equal heads of the Amarapura sect in central Ceylon, whose monastery is some twenty miles away. He is a bent man of over seventy with an amazingly deep voice and considerable education including some English, which is far less frequently found among the rural clergy than among educated laymen. Altogether sixteen monks are there, their heads shaven but not (in this sect) their eyebrows, their robes tending to a somewhat paler yellow than that worn by local members of the other sects. Some monks have brought their novice pupils, their ages ranging from about eight to twenty. These novices are dressed in the same way as their seniors but often they have not yet mastered the requisite decorum. Only the larger ones take part in the proceedings; the little ones dart about talking to each other, peering and giggling.

From the monastery courtyard some cement steps lead up to the area where most of the laymen are gathered. The steps are surmounted by a huge triumphal arch built up in vertical square bamboo frames with bunches of coconuts hanging in each square. The only permanent structures on the higher level are the temple and the preaching-hall, both recently completed. The top of the temple is now lined with colored electric lights, and above it flies the Buddhist flag—bars of red, yellow, white,

orange and blue, the colors of the rays of the Buddha's halo. A large rectangular structure, with colored paper streamers from the roof, has been built for the *pirit;* the larger part of it has coconut matting on the ground on which, as well as on a couple of low benches, the lay spectators can sit, while at one end is the octagonal platform which is traditionally built as a *pirit* "pavilion" (*pirit maḍuva*), in which the chanting monks will sit. The walls of these pavilions are always made of paper cut in intricate designs and glued onto thin uprights at the eight corners. This pavilion is the usual size, ten to fifteen feet in diameter, but is more elaborate than the average. The paper walls have windows cut into them. At each corner stands, painted in outline on paper, a *kapruka,* a mythical wishing-tree which grows in heaven. The octagonal platform stands on a square, the corners of which are covered with imitation carpet; the foundations of the platform are painted to represent white bricks with red cement. The whole pavilion is outlined in tiny lights. On a table in the center stands a microphone, its flex mingling with the areca flowers, light green tufts, which hang from the ceiling. Under it are bottles of water and coconut oil which will give immunity to the people they touch when the water is sprinkled at the end of the ceremony and the oil is used by its owners as hair oil at some later date. At intervals outside stand eight altars to demons[17]—small boxes of plaited coconut leaves, open on one long side, supported on bamboo sticks at about head height. In a corner near the steps is the organizers' stand with the loudspeaker equipment in constant use. Finally, to the far side, a special attraction has been squeezed in; it styles itself a science exhibition hall, and its doors are guarded by drawings of the young men holding up pots of flowers who guard entrances to religious buildings all over Ceylon, for they are copies of an ancient motif. Such guardians are never fierce; in fact the pair at the doors of the inner shrine of the temple here are so effeminate that a Westerner would take them for women.

Soon after my arrival, at a quarter to nine, a small and noisy procession comes up from the road. People, mainly children, carry small white pennants and paper Buddhist flags, and shout "Sādhu sādhu sā," which is like a Christian Amen in being religious, but has rather the feeling of "Hip hip hooray." As in all Sinhalese processions, professional drummers drum and dance as they go, and one of them blows a piercing, tuneless wind instrument. The purpose of the procession is to bring material for the ritual. A train of laymen bring coconuts and bowls of rice, mostly borne on their heads. The procession ends at the temple door, and everyone pours his rice into a big bag, which is then spilt in front of the main Buddha image. This rice will after the ceremony belong to the master craftsman, along with all the other provisions and utensils stacked in the temple vestibule for use in the ritual.

The drummers now stand outside in two groups and perform. These are not merely drummers by caste but are also in fact a rather well-known professional troupe who are engaged to perform over quite a wide area. Their home is in an adjoining village, where the temple is Siyam sect. Although that is technically "their" temple, which they would normally attend and for which they have a feudal obligation to drum, this is the newest temple of the only sect to which one of their caste

[17] In Coomaraswamy's version these altars are dedicated to the deities guarding the four quarters and the four intermediate directions, i.e. E, SE, etc. This sounds like an original detail. No doubt the altars were symmetrically erected at appropriate points around the temple. He adds eight further altars for the attendants of these deities.

would be admitted as a monk. I have heard these drummers before, but it seems to me, though they are being paid in the normal way, that they are giving a special display of their skill to honor the occasion. At the same time as they are playing, which just now is for no particular reason, some fireworks are let off, and all the time the loudspeaker blares. The noise is overwhelming.

When the drumming and fireworks stop there is a lull. I take the opportunity to queue up for the science exhibition, pay ten cents, look down a kaleidoscope, see some biological specimens and watch a phial of liquid change color in the hands of the local schoolmaster.

At ten o'clock the monks file out of the monastery into the preaching hall, where they are served refreshments. They may, of course, take no solid food after mid-day, but they can always be given tea, which is now served with jaggery, the brown sugar made from the sap of kitul or coconut palm flowers. They also get green boiled sweets. I have seen raisins, butter and even ice cream served on these occasions. The rule in practice seems to be to take only things which one does not bite. The refreshments are accepted by the recitation of a long formula distributing the merit of the action. As the monks are not supposed to talk during a meal they finish in a quarter of an hour, and file back to the monastery, where almost every one of them slips into a back room for a surreptitious cigarette away from lay eyes. There is, of course, no rule specifically to forbid smoking, but it is vaguely felt to come under the prohibition on intoxicants, and not to be quite becoming in a monk, or even quite moral. I, however, am an outsider before whom these more trivial appearances need not be kept up, and I am invited into a back room filled with the sandals and umbrellas of visitors, and now with the cigarette smoke of the monks who are sitting on the spare beds. I am plied with tea and oil-cakes while monks ask me questions and explain what will happen tonight. Their explanations of the main ritual are vague and unilluminating, as few if any of them have ever taken notice of what the craftsman does on such occasions. It is tabu for monks to participate in rituals addressed to deities, and some consider it indecorous even to watch them, though there is emphatically nothing wrong with them for laymen. They tell me that the *pirit* will get rid of any mistakes (*väradi*) made, while the craftsman's appeasement of the planetary and other minor deities (*bali bili*) will get rid of the evil influence (*dos*)—but these are two ways of saying the same thing. They all agree that the *pirit* is efficacious, but my informant says that in the *bali bili* only the craftsmen and drummers believe.

A full-scale *pirit* chanting is supposed to begin at about nine p.m., but the Sinhalese are not an obsessive people and the more important an occasion the further it falls behind an ideal schedule. As I am chatting at about eleven the incumbent priest, who is obviously getting a bit nervous and thinking it is time some ritual began, rushes in, takes me by the hand, pulls me through the crowd and leaves me on a low bench facing the *pirit* pavilion. The drummers are now well warmed up and making an invigorating din. Soon they lead up the *pirit* procession, to great shouts from the faithful. A canopy is held over two laymen—the first carries on his head the relic casket, the second a spool of thick string and palm-leaf manuscripts of the texts to be recited. All these necessities for a *pirit* are placed on the table in the octagonal pavilion. There follow the monks in order of seniority (years since ordination), in single file, both shoulders covered with their robes after the fashion of this sect. At

the entrance to the rectangle each has his feet washed and dried by senior laymen and then walks along a strip of white cloth laid by washermen to the octagon, which he enters and then sits down on a cushion. Fourteen monks and five novices enter in this way; the incumbent monk and a friend of his from a neighboring monastery do not join in the procession but move around supervising the laity. When the monks are all seated, the drummers stand before the octagon and give a real performance. They are in full ceremonial kit, naked to the waist except for shining ornaments, with red sashes, white cloths folded rather like baggy trousers, anklets; two have plain white cloths round their heads, the others more ornamental headgear. One blows the piercing wind-instrument (*horaṇāva*), one plays metal castanets (*tālam*), two play on sets of two small drums each (*tammäṭṭam*), and three play on big round drums (*hēvisi*), and only one, as it happens, on a tom-tom (*magul bera*)—a long drum tapering at both ends—though in this area these are the commonest on such occasions. Led by a drummer holding a white pennant, they move three times clockwise around the octagon, moving sideways so as to face it always, and folding the hands in respectful salutation at regular intervals. Each time they reach the front, they pause, the tom-tom beater standing front center, and give especially lively performances. When a climax has been reached there will suddenly break a comparative lull, with only tom-tom and castanets playing in a more tranquil tempo, then gradually the others join in, and all get faster and faster, louder and louder. At first the style seems haphazard, but when one has got used to it the rhythms are discernible and the climaxes become electrifying. The drumming continues for about a quarter of an hour, which shows what pride the drummers take in their skill. The final flourish must have shaken the earth; no one looks especially interested.

The incumbent priest now gives a speech, but as he stands at the entrance to the octagon with his back to the laity, and without a microphone, it is scarcely audible. He is certainly saying that this is a historic occasion, that we are honored by the presence of such illustrious monks and various distinguished lay visitors (I, too, am mentioned), and that everyone present can gain much merit by taking a sympathetic interest in the proceedings. The senior monk present now leads all the laymen in taking the three refuges and the five precepts, the invariable introduction to a religious occasion. He adds certain unimportant embellishments not customary with the Siyam Nikāya (the oldest and most traditional sect). Another senior monk then makes a speech, similar in tenor to the first, which he begins by lengthy reference to me, both courteous and didactic. At 12:10 he ends, and there is more drumming as the final preparations are made for *pirit* to begin. A monk scatters fried rice grains from a brass tray. The string is unwound from its spool and handed around to be held by all the monks in the octagon and then around the audience for laymen to touch; through it passes from monk to layman the protection from the chanted text. The incumbent monk lights the lamps of coconut oil which flank the entrance to the *pirit* octagon, burns some incense which he wafts around, puts down a cushion just inside the octagon entrance and sits on it in a reverent attitude. This position is taken by the principal organizer or sponsor of a *pirit* ceremony, and when the *pirit* is held in a monastery it frequently happens that this is the incumbent monk, though normally one would expect to find monks associating themselves with the active side of Buddhist rites, not forming part of the audience.

The first set of texts to be recited is the *maha pirit* ("great *pirit*"), which always

begins and ends a night of *pirit,* and is sometimes chanted alone as an epitome of the whole ceremony. It consists of certain short, well-known texts from the Pali canon, and it is always recited by all the monks present together. The style of chanting is a loud measured monotone—the words are not recited to be intelligible—and it is essential (though this is not always explicit) that there should be no interruption in the sound, even at the end of a text, so though any monk or monks may stop, rest, take his breath, or even take a chew of betel, they must never all stop at the same moment. The *maha pirit* begins at 12:20 and ends at 1:30, about three and a half hours behind the ideal schedule. Most people consider they have gained sufficient merit if they listen to just the *maha pirit,* or even a part of it, and at 1:30 many people drift away, going home to get some sleep, or resorting to a tea shop for refreshment and conversation. For the rest of the night *pirit* is chanted by two monks at a time. They take it in turns and are careful that there is no break in continuity when the shifts change. The others retire to the monastery and rest.

The center of interest now shifts to the temple. There is scaffolding across the lap of the Buddha statue in the shrine, as the monk and then the craftsman will have to climb up to be level with the head. Once the image is consecrated, the exposed palm and the feet will always be covered with an ornamental cloth "out of respect," but now they are bare, and against the crossed legs is propped the small mirror the *bās* will look into while he paints in the eyes. Electric lights have been temporarily fixed up in the vestibule, and in the shrine even a piece of strip lighting over the door, beneath which is a microphone. Over the floor of the shrine, from just inside the door to the Buddha's pedestal, the craftsman has spread out a bed of rice grains, and on its level surface traced a square[18] divided so that twelve equal squares surround a bigger square. On the rice of the central square has been traced a lotus design. On this stands a large brass pot and protruding from it are coconut flowers and a red lotus. The central square has a border of small flower heads. On each of the other squares stands an earthenware pot full of rice grains, covered with a betel leaf on which is a small coin. (A small coin on a betel leaf always has to be offered when approaching a deity.) Under each pot is traced in charcoal on the rice the first syllable of the name of the deity for whom the pot is intended, and the full name is written on the pot in white paint. There is an extra pot squeezed in at the mid-point in the top row of squares. Lighted joss sticks are stuck upright into the bed of rice. At the back of the rice, leaning against the Buddha's pedestal, its base in a pot, is an object about four feet long, made of cloth oddly draped over a stick, roughly umbrella-shaped. This is called an *Indrakīlaya* (Pali: *Indrakhīla*), "Indra's post," the name of a column which in ancient times was set up before a city gate. How it has survived in ritual I cannot explain, but according to Coomaraswamy it is a figure which stands before the image with the same function as the mirror which is used while painting the eyes. It will receive the gaze (*bälma*) of the image. He adds that this pot contains "the nine gems, gold, rice, etc.," i.e. the things which are put in the earthenware pot which is left, either buried or tied to the eaves, in any new building.

The *bās* tells me that the ritual consists of six parts (*sadaṅga pūjāva*): drumming (*magul bera*), worship of the gods (*dēviyanta pūjāva*), setting pots (*kumbhasthā-*

[18] The design in the ceremony described by Coomaraswamy is different, a kind of eight-pointed star, and there were eighty pots, arranged in two groups of forty, one group for Brahmā and one for Viṣṇu.

panē), *Indrakīlaya,* worship of the statue(s) (*mūrta pūjāva*), "making peace" (*śānti karaṇaya*).[19] The texts, he says, he learned from books. He now stands before the microphone and begins the worship of the gods, a lengthy invocation of all the various classes of gods from the top down, beginning with an invocation to the Buddha, by whose license the gods hold their power. The first words ("Reverence to the blessed arhat, the fully enlightened Buddha") are the same as preface the common expressions of Buddhist faith, such as taking the precepts. He tells me that the gods he will address are Śakra, Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Mahēśvara; Gaṇa dēviyō; Kaḍgapāla; nine grahayō; eight Bahiravayō. Śakra is represented in the Pali canon as the chief of the gods; he has long ceased to matter independently, and indeed no longer ever occurs outside a Buddhist context. Brahmā, too, has no shrines and no cult, although he has not disappeared from Hindu mythology and practice; like Śakra, he owes his position here solely to the tradition of canonical Theravada Buddhism. Viṣṇu is also a canonical god, and according to the Mahāvaṃsa was entrusted by the Buddha with the protection of Buddhism in Ceylon. Mahēśvara is another name for Śiva. Both he and Viṣṇu are powerful gods today, though Mahēśvara is of minor importance to Sinhalese Buddhists, in stark contrast to his second son Skanda, alias Kataragama, who is a modern upstart in the Buddhist pantheon and is not even mentioned in this ritual. Gaṇa dēviyō is Śiva's elder son Gaṇēśa, the god who has the form of a pot-bellied, one-tusked elephant, and is invoked, especially by Hindus, at the beginning of an enterprise—he may be found at the entrance to a temple or at the beginning of a book. Kaḍgapāla's identity I cannot discover, though his name means "Sword protector"; nor did I notice any part of the ceremony being addressed to him, but Coomaraswamy says that his altar stands beyond the temple grounds, so I may have missed it. The grahayō are the planetary deities: Ravi (Sun), Candra (Moon), Kuja (Mars), Buda (Mercury), Guru (Jupiter), Śukra (Venus), Śani (Saturn), Rāhu (dragon's head), Kētu (dragon's tail). Bahirava (Sanskrit: Bhairava), usually a single deity, is a subterranean devil who guards buried treasure; here he is multiplied into a class.

The temple doors are shut; a few important laymen and monks are allowed inside, but in fact only two monks bother to watch at all. A couple of others drop by to chat with me. The craftsman performs with great intensity; as he chants, in a high rapid monotone with occasional melodic clausulae to mark the end of a text, sweat beads form on the bald crown of his head under the strip lighting, and he occasionally asks for and drinks glasses of water. The invocation of the gods takes about an hour; now start the offerings to the planetary deities and the four gods first named.

Lighted candles are planted in the rice round the outside, one for each square; and the junior craftsman has a pot of charcoal. The *bās* has each of the thirteen pots

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[19] Coomaraswamy writes: "At about 6 p.m. on the previous evening, a beginning was made with the recitation of Kōsala-bimba-varṇanāva." On this he adds a note: "A sixteenth or seventeenth century work in Sinhalese prose, relating how in Buddha's time, King Kosala used frequently to visit Him with his retinue, to offer gifts and hear the doctrine. On two occasions Buddha was away from His cell, and the retinue began to grumble at their long journey in vain. Upon the next occasion the King asked from the Buddha whether, in order that they might not again be disappointed altogether, he might get made a beautiful image as a representation of Himself. . . . The image was of red sandal wood (rat handum piḷima)." The aetiological myth is interesting. I was not aware that such a recitation had taken place earlier in the evening, but it may have happened and I not been told of it.

handed to him in turn by his assistant and chants over it; he then drops some incense (*ratta kumacca*) on the charcoal, making a great puff of sickly sweet smoke, and holds the pot over it for a moment before putting it back on its square. He takes first the pots to the planetary deities, which are in all the squares except the four corners; the order is Ravi, Śukra, Kuja, Rāhu, Śani, Candra, Buda, Guru, Kētu. From the four corners he now takes in turn Śakra (top right), Brahmā (bottom right), Viṣṇu (bottom left) and Mahēśvara (top left). He now picks up the *Indrakīlaya* and chants while holding it. At this point laymen are admitted to look around the temple. When he has finished chanting, the *bās* takes the red lotus out of the brass pot in the large central square and plants the *Indrakīlaya* in its place.

It is 3:15 a.m., about the hour when most Sinhalese rituals start getting exciting. Now come the offerings to the eight Bahiravas, whose altars stand outside around the temple. In each are coconut flowers, a coconut oil lamp and a candle. The junior craftsman winds a white cloth around his head, and walks in single file with seven other men; each of them holds a plate of food covered by a banana leaf, and a glass of water, food and drink for the demons. As they go, the craftsman chants, and there is loud drumming; men hold a white strip of cloth as a canopy over them. At each altar in turn the craftsman leaves a plate and glass, takes the candle from the altar and burns some incense over it. This incense, *dummala,* is of a kind ritually inferior to that burnt before the Buddha. This group returns to the temple, where the senior *bās* stands transformed. Like his assistant, he has put on a white turban. Over his white clothes he has put a red pullover and a bright red sarong; in his right hand he holds a sword, in his left a tray of flowers. Others hold in readiness coconut oil and strips of cloth to make lamps, a dish containing one hundred and eight small balls of milk-rice, a corresponding number of small coins, a great pile of betel leaves, candles and incense. To a ferocious accolade of drumming the *bās* appears at the temple door, veiled in the smoke of incense. People crowd around, some men holding the canopy over him, others busily preparing his way as he advances, chanting, towards the first and largest altar. For at every step his bare feet take he treads on a betel leaf hastily laid before him; on it is a ball of rice and a lighted candle, which he extinguishes. Next to the leaf on which he treads is laid another leaf with a coin on it. He must take one hundred and eight steps, and as the route is short he goes indirectly, with many small steps, and passes once around the altar before facing it. Then he thrusts his sword into the bamboo horizontal at the mouth of the altar, and puts on the altar flowers from his tray and a lighted white cake of incense on a betel leaf. He draws back his sword and the drumming stops. He now walks, still under the canopy but without stepping on betel leaves, to each altar in turn and does the same thing; behind him the incense flares within the plaited green coconut leaves, making of each altar a lamp in the darkness. He proceeds clockwise, keeping the temple to his right, as is obligatory in all Hindu and Buddhist ceremonies. After the last altar he goes up to a tree at the edge of the temple area and strikes it thrice with the sword; it exudes a milky sap.

Returning to the temple and resuming his mild aspect, the *bās* makes an offering to Gaṇa dēviyō in the vestibule. On top of a huge heap of rice is a toy mouse, the vehicle of Gaṇēśa. At the corners of the rice are coconuts, and on it are also mangoes, jaggery and a tray of bananas. When this is done it is 4:15. The *bās* now has nothing to do for a couple of hours and nothing is going on but the *pirit.*

At five o'clock there is another procession from the monastery living quarters up the steps to the temple, with wind instruments, drums and this time a red canopy. Beneath the canopy walks the incumbent monk, carrying on a tray a tiny silver stūpa, a relic casket containing, we assume, a minute piece of the Buddha's body. He is accompanied by a monk who had the same teacher. Many laymen have reassembled, uttering exclamations of piety. The feet of the main Buddha image are now covered with a cloth, like the head. The monk climbs onto the scaffolding, reaches round the head under the cloth, and puts the relic casket in a hole in the back. He then applies mortar. The other monk makes a speech telling us that the eyes will soon be painted in, that this is extremely dangerous and that everyone should stand well clear. Under the direction of the *bās,* the fifth item he listed, *mūrta pūjāva,* is now begun. Laymen place before each of the twenty-four Buddhas in the ambulatory an offering: flowers, betel leaves and areca nuts on a banana leaf, water in a pink plastic cup with matching saucer. The pots and rice are cleared from the shrine. As the auspicious moment approaches, everyone but the craftsman and his assistant, who are very tense, leaves the temple and not only are the doors shut, but the whole area before them is vacated. It is getting light. In a far corner a brown bull with a white face is being tethered. All the monks except those still chanting are in the monastery; the incumbent now has another duty, for a father arrives with his little boy, who is to be introduced to the alphabet at this auspicious moment. The child faces in the auspicious direction as the young monk, seated, holds a printed primer before him. A firecracker explodes to announce the moment; the child unwillingly repeats after the monk "A ā"; the *bās,* sitting high on the scaffolding with his back to the image, is looking into the mirror which his son holds up for him and painting in the first eye.[20] To paint in all the eyes will take him two or three hours, and the temple will not be reopened until it is done.

I could not stay for the *śānti ķaraṇaya* which I presume followed and concluded the craftsman's part in the proceedings. It is a ceremony to ensure that no harm ensues from any mistakes in the ritual and is not specific to a *nētra pinķama.* The evil influence is collected in an earthenware pot. The ritual practitioner, in this case the *bās,* emerges blindfolded, carrying the pot, and the covering is removed from his eyes so that the first thing his gaze falls upon is the bull. He also smashes the pot on the bull's horns. He then takes a sword or knife and slashes at any tree which will exude milky sap. Plainly he "kills" the tree instead of the bull. Buddhism forbids the slaughter of animals. Besides, today the bull is the best part of the *bās*'s fee.

In Coomaraswamy's version there is no pot and no bull, but a water-cutting ceremony instead. The blindfolded *bās* is led straight to a vessel of water in which he washes his head; he then cuts the water with a sword, and the vessel is shattered. Thus any evil which might come from his gaze passes into the water and is harmlessly dispersed.

[20] According to Coomaraswamy the craftsman who paints in the eyes is dressed up as a prince, which reflects the custom that sometimes the king himself did the painting (but see my note 10); his assistant was also dressed up, but less elaborately; both had cloths over their heads to act as veils as soon as the work was over. I assume that inside the temple before painting the eyes the craftsman resumed the costumes they wore while giving offerings to the eight Bahiravas, which correspond fairly closely to the costumes described at that point by Coomaraswamy.