

RAIN RITES OF THE SINHALA PEOPLE

by

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Water is the primary need of all that lives, and rain is its ultimate source. From the earliest times man was being awakened to the truth that water sustained not only his own self but everything around him that made his existence possible. In primitive societies, therefore, the absence of rainfall and the scarcity of water that it resulted in, in most cases, has been and is the cause of the greatest anxiety (no less than it is today in civilised and 'modern' societies). It led to states of intense emotional excitement of which various magico-religious ceremonies professedly aimed at bringing in fair winds that transported moisture-laden clouds, were the outcome.

These ceremonies which were once universal as those associated with the Sun—'the great progenitor,' having evolved with time have come up to the present day, and may be broadly categorised as follows :

those imitating a gathering storm, specially by sound effects

—Do— birds that portend rain

—Do— a rainbow

—Do—in which water is sprinkled (as by a bunch of leaves, a twig, a flower, etc.)

—Do— —Do— spilled or poured (on the ground or on an object)

—Do— —Do— blown into the sky

—Do— —Do— splashed by person to person

—Do— bathing is the outstanding item

—Do— a water-surface is hit with hands

—Do— animals resembling clouds (therefore, generally rotund and black) are paraded

—Do— general dancing is performed (sometimes with rainbow motifs drawn on the body)

—Do— prayers and sacrifices of fruits and animals are held¹

—Do— images of deities are dipped in water or are washed.¹

Such practices are certainly to be expected relatively more among the Sinhala people of Sri Lanka who during the course of a history of over two

1. ERE. X. 561. 'Rain' & The Golden Bough (Abr.) : J. G. Frazer. London 1960. 82-102.

millenia built what is now termed a 'hydraulic civilisation'—a way of life intimately associated with water. Being practices of the people for the major part they find only a passing mention in the classical literary works (if a king participates, for instance), though archaeological evidence is far more striking and substantial.

The earliest rain rite performed in Sri Lanka that finds literary mention appears to have been held during the short reign of Upatissa II (522–24) when the island was 'vexed by the ills of a famine and a plague' (*dubbhikkha-roga dukkhehi pīlto*). Consequent to the counsel that he received from the monks, he caused to be made an image of the Buddha in gold and laid His alms bowl filled with water in the hollow of His hands, and placed the image in a chariot. The king next descended to the principal street surrounded by *bhikkhus* who recited the Ratana Sutta, pouring out the sanctified water from the bowl during the whole of the night. In the morning 'a great cloud poured rain on the earth' (*vassi mahāmegho mahītale*). The king also decreed that on such future occasions, if ever, the same ritual be performed (Mhv. 37. 190–98).

The antecedent was, no doubt, the chanting of the Ratana Sutta (Khuddakapāṭha. No. 6) by the Ven. Ananda at Vēsāli on an occasion 25 centuries ago when the great city was visited by four-fold evils. The *parittas* (Sin. *pirit*), meaning 'protection,' are Pali compositions in metre, and ceremonies in which they are recited are meant to ward off evil and bring in welfare, and are, as Geiger says, 'derived from popular magic' (Mhv. 46. 5fn.).

Four centuries later similar conditions recurred in the island when harvests were poor and a plague was spreading (Mhv. 52. 80). A drought is not referred to, but may well be the cause of this state of affairs. The king, Kāsyapa V (914–23), held a *paritta* ceremony to ward off the ills.

Particular mention has to be made of the fact that it is not only the Ratana Sutta (referred to here as the Gangārohaṇa Sutta) that stands in ritual significance here : the Buddha's bowl relic (*pātra dhātu*) too which appears to have been in Sri Lanka during this period has been, evidently, regarded with magical import. It may have been so owing to one or more of the following associations : (i) it was from the Buddha's own bowl that the Ven. Ananda sprinkled water at Vēsāli (Sutta Nipāta Aṭṭhakathā. 204–05; Catubhānavāraṭṭhakathā. 97), as referred to earlier; (ii) the Buddha's bowl was 'always full' and fed the great personage throughout His life (iii) the colour of the bowl was not dis-similar to that of a rain cloud, and (iv) its curvi-linear shape is reminiscent of the general outline of a cumulus cloud—the bearer of heavy rain in the tropics. Further points of significance here

are that, firstly, the bowl was full of water—water itself, and secondly, that monks poured out or sprinkled (*sinca*) the water on the streets as at Vēsāli. Thus, in this single night's ritual one may discern elements of both imitative magic and sympathetic magic.

An increase in the number of ritual objects may be observed seven centuries later when King Parākrama Bāhu II (1236–70) held a nation-wide festival aimed at counter-acting the effects of a 'great heat' (*mahāgimha*) that visited the island making a famine almost inevitable. The festival was held in honour of the 'three sacred objects' (i.e., the Buddhist Triple Gem), the *cētiyas* (relic domes) and the *bōdhi* trees, and of the protector divinities—Nātha¹ and Metteyya; various offerings were also made to miracle-working deities. Further, the *parittas* were recited and the Tooth Relic was borne round the city in fitting manner with the resolve that 'the heavens shall rain' (*dēvō vassatu*). The rains did come as an aftermath 'destroying the glowing heat, making joyful the people, drowning away famine, beautifying the country and reviving the corn.' And the people agreed: 'By the powers of the Buddha do these rain-clouds pour forth such rain' (Mhv. 87. 1–10).

No direct associations are evident between rain (or water) on the one hand, and the 'three sacred objects,' the *cētiyas* and the *bōdhi* trees on the other. The first are also called the 'three refuges' (*tun saraṇa*) that may be sought in case of calamity in general. The *cētiyas* and the *bōdhi* trees are also holy objects to the Buddhists, the former being those that enshrine generally, the bodily relics (*sārīrika dhātu*) of the Buddha, and the latter being of the *pāribhogika dhātu* type, i.e., those that were made use of by the Buddha. But more of the *bodhi* in the sequel (See *infra* pgs. 165, 166). The two divinities (who are Buddhist, and non-Hindu, deities) may also be thus supplicated to ward off general evil, but the other miracle-working highest deities (*devānam mahid-dhinam*) may be folk deities and of other orders some of whom may be noted in the sequel (see *infra* pgs. 164, 167, 168).

The emergence during this reign of the Tooth Relic as an object to be propitiated in rain magic is of particular significance.

According to the Siṅhala Daḷadā Vaṅsaya (4–7) King Parākrama Bāhu IV (1302–26) also performed the rite of the Tooth Relic in his capital—Kurunagala; among other rites, the monks (seated in the same chariot as he) recited the *parittas* and sprinkled the charmed water from a silver vessel. And the king also decreed that this rite should be performed in the future too in the event of a drought *vāsi novasnā kala da mema lesin daladā pūjā karavanu isā* (Daḷadā Sirita. 53).

1. Nātha does not occur in Geiger's translation.

An association between water, rain or rain-clouds on the one hand and a tooth on the other too is difficult to identify, for there is no relationship either in shape, function or content. But rain is recorded to have occurred on two occasions connected with the Tooth Relic. The first was the arrival of the Relic at Anuradhapura when, among other miracles, a 'rain of flowers (*mal varsā*) fell from the vault of the sky (Sinhala Daḷadā Vaṁsaya: 34-5). This is better regarded as a figurative usage meaning a pleasant drizzle in the sun, and need not be interpreted as a miraculous descent of flowers from the sky.

The Dāṭhā Vaṁsa by Vimalakitti, a thirteenth century literary work, refers to a torrential down-pour that occurred on the occasion of the ceremony at the Mēgha Giri Vihāra—the official resting place of the Tooth Relic at the capital city during the early fourth century A.D. Says the chronicle :

*sansibbitam rajatarajjusatānukārī — dhārāsātēhi vasadambaramambudēna
sabbādisā jaladakūṭa mahagghiyēsu—dittācirajjutipadīpasatāvabhāsā: 371*

(‘It appeared as though both the sky and the earth were enveloped in a hundred-fold flow resembling hundreds of silver threads. The directions were lit by hundreds of lamps of lightning that shone from the gem-set eaves of the rain-clouds’)

These two occurrences would have been inspiring precedents for later generations to honour the Tooth Relic as a magical object to be propitiated in rain ritual.

In addition, it is possible that the faithful people of old saw an affinity between the benefits brought about by rain and those brought about by the Buddha’ and considered that whatever belonged to the Buddha was invested with the magical powers of bringing prosperity to the world in common. (This factor, is, therefore, applicable even to the bowl relic referred to : See *supra* pgs. 159-60). But in this particular case it is possible that the more educated of the folk took advantage of a linguistic affinity—a figure of speech—in the absence of any other.

Terms referring to rain (as relevant) in Sanskrit are *varṣā* and *vṛṣṭi*; in Pali the term is *vassa*; in Sinhala the terms are *vāssa* (pl. *vāsi* or *vāhi*) and *vaharē* of which the latter is found in the written usage mainly of the classics. The Skt. term *varṣā* too has always been common in Sinhala usage.

The Doctrine or Norm of the Buddha is referred to as *dharma* (Skt.), *dhamma* (Pl.) and *dham* (Sin. Prk.), *dam* and *daham* (Sin.). The Skt. form (*dharma*) is also used in Sinhala, both in the written and the spoken usages.

In figurative usage the Doctrine is, at times, referred to as the 'Rain of the Norm' through usages such as *dharmā varṣā*, *dharmā vṛṣṭi* and *dharmā vāssa* (in Skt. and Pl.).

In the Sinhala classics usages such as *dham vahare*¹, *dharmā varṣā*², *daham vāsi*³ and *saddharmāmrta varṣā*⁴ (all meaning 'the rain of the Norm') are evident. The forms *dharmā varṣā* and *daham vāssa* (or—*vāhi* or—*vāsi*) are even known to current usage, in writing and sermon.

Also of interest is the reference to the Buddha as a 'great cloud,' *mahā mēghaya*, in the Butsarana (115).

It becomes thus evident that there lies an affinity (on whatever plane) between rain and the Doctrine of the Buddha. Are not both of them of untold benefit to the world of mortals irrespective of time and place ?

The vital link between these two *varṣās*—the physical and the figurative, is the Tooth. For, has it not felt, as the Sinhala classical writers would affirm, the touch, *sparsa* or *pahasa*, of the 84,000-fold mass of the Doctrine, *asūhāradahas dharmaskandha* ? And did not the Ven. Toṭagamuvē Sī Rāhula describe the *daladā himi* ('the venerable Tooth Relic') as *lada muniṅḍā dam kaṅḍa pahasa mana bāṅḍi* ('that received the touch of the mass of the Doctrine of the Lord')⁵ ? And so the *dharmā varṣā* finds a lasting physical representative in the Tooth, and the Sri Lankan Buddhists had no hesitation in associating it with the physical *varṣā* (rain), and in adopting it as a sacred and magical object invested with the powers of bringing rain.

There is, unfortunately, no record of the era when the Tooth Relic (*danta dhātu* or *daladā*) came to be thus honoured initially; but once the magical association began it did not cease. The *Daladā Sīrita* composed during the reign of King Parākrama Bāhu IV (1303–33) of Kurunāgala stands evidence to the performance of this ritual subsequent to the Dambadeniya times to which the earlier reference pertains.

The *daladā* having also come to be honoured as the palladium of the Sinhala kings was one of the cherished possessions of the royalty and the nation at large. For several subsequent centuries it was so honoured although its particular magical associations do not find literary mention, which factor

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1. Amāvatura. 7
 2. Dharmapradīpikāva. 196, Butsarana. 115.
 3. Daladā Sīrita.
 4. *Ibid.*, Dambadeṇi Katikāvata in Katikāvata Sangarā. 6
 5. Sālahini Sandesa, 16.

need not be implied to mean that they were forgotten or ignored. In fact, quite opposite was the case, and the local folk perpetuated this association from generation to generation.

A memorable occasion when the efficacy of the *daladā* as a magical object that was supposed to bring rain was tested took place, as is recorded, in 1828. After the British occupation of the Kandyan kingdom and the spread of their suzerainty over the whole island (1815), the annual *perahāra* (the procession carrying the Relic round the city of Kandy) was given up. Rain, it is said, gradually ceased to fall on the Hills, and from 1821 it ceased altogether. The local chieftains, understanding well the cause as they understood it, represented matters to John D'Oyly, the British Resident, who made the Governor, Sir Edward Barnes, aware of the situation. Permission was granted to hold an exhibition of the Relic and the *perahara* for 7 days with the *diya kāpimē mangalyaya* ('the water-cutting ceremony') to follow on the eighth. All activities took place as arranged culminating on the 28th May 1828, and the torrential rain that fell subsequently was so heavy that the bridges over the Mahavāli river at Pērādeniya and Katugastoṭa were washed away. The inundation came to be known as the *daladā vatura* ('the flood of the Tooth Relic') or *guruganvatura*. Barnes decreed that the festival should be held for 14 days annually, and not for 7 days, in the future.¹

It is also interesting to note that the first resting place of the Tooth Relic in Sri Lanka, according to the *Dāṭhā Vaṃsa* (346, 352), was called the *Mēgha Giri Vihāra*—'the *vihāra* of the Rāin Mountain or Cloud Mountain' (see *supra* pg. 161) which Paranavitana identifies with the *Isurumuṇi Vihāra* at Anuradhapura². It is not known whether this was the original name of the institution, or whether it came to be so called after a phenomenal occurrence, which in this case may be conjectured to have been a considerable down-pour of rain soon after the enshrining of the Relic. Or, if the institution was the *Isurumuṇi Vihāra* itself, this appellation would have been attached to it (to last, of course, for a short period) consequent to such a memorable occurrence. However, the association gives greater weight to the professed magical properties of the *daladā*.

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1. Three literary works give descriptions of this ceremony of Thursday 28th May 1828 : i. *Daladā Varṇanāva* (103-27) ii. *Daladā Perahara Lakara* and iii. *Dāṭhādhātu Vansaya*. The first gives a description of the flood terminating with these lines : *ema dā gālu maha vaturaṭa samaharu daladā vaturayi pavasannā, pahadā e lesin tava samahara aya gurugaṇi vaturayi nada dennā* ('Some refer to the flood of that day as *daladā vatura*, while others equally happy acclaim it as *gurugaṇ vatura*-). The second supplies a complete description of the *perahāra* without mentioning the inundation.
 2. *Artibus Asiae*. XVI. 167-90. Devendra contests this identification in *JCBRAS*. NS·VIII.

Interesting is also the apparently incidental factor that the king of Sri Lanka at the arrival of the Tooth Relic was Siri Megha Vaṇṇa (Mhv. 37. 92-8; Sri Megha Varna, Skt. and Siri Mevan, Sin.)—the 'Illustrious One of the Colour of the Cloud.'

Of further significance is the fact that several South Indian invasions were aimed at the removal of the *pātra dhātu* (the Bowl Relic) and the *danta dhātu* or *daladā* to either of the kingdoms, Cōla or Pāndya. First it was Agga Bōdhi IV (667-83) that invaded Cōla to bring back these relics that, by the beginning of his reign, were no longer in his island kingdom. Next it was Gaja Bāhu II (1132-53) who brought them back from South India. A little over a century later Ārya Cakravarti, a Pāndyan chieftain, took away the *daladā* from Yāpahuva to be brought back by Parākrama Bāhu III (1257-93) of Kurunāgala (*Daladā Pūjāvaliya*. 50, 61). It is well known that none of these kingdoms was Buddhist and hence had no desire to own the Relics purely as articles of worship. There probably was another reason why these South Indians crossed the Palk Strait to carry them to their kingdoms. It was likely their professed power to bring rain, and nothing else.

Another aspect of rain rites of the Sinhala is associated with the Isurumuṇi Vihāra itself. In a niche on the rock here is carved the sculpture of a man and the head of a horse. The man is seated on his haunches with his right hand resting on his folded and raised knee, and the left leg, also folded, on the ground with the left arm on the side; he also has a head-gear and earrings, all very conspicuous. His visage is thoughtful and his glance seems to spread over the broad expanse of paddy that lies contiguous with the *vihāra*. The horse's head by the man's right shoulder is roughly carved with a band running across the forehead. Paranavitana identifies this human figure with Parjanya—the God of Rain, implying the prevalence of the associated cult during the 7th century (when this sculpture is generally supposed to have been executed) at least in the Raja Rata region of Sri Lanka. And if the expression *podonavulu* of the Pillar Inscription of Kāsyapa V (914-23) actually implies the propitiation of Parjanya, according to Paranavitana (*Epigraphia Zeylanica* I. 43), the cult may be regarded as having been practised even three centuries later. Parjanya also may be one of the *dēvānam mahiddhinam* propitiated during the reign of Parākrama Bāhu II of a further three centuries later, as earlier referred to (see *supra* pg. 160).

Hard by on the rock is the carving in bas-relief of a group of elephants sporting in the water, and touching these representations of majestic beasts is the actual water of the Isurumuniya pond. The whole sculpture is a masterpiece that combines well with the foreground—the group composed of three

tuskers and a baby appearing to be revelling among the lotuses of the actual pool and the beast to the right, with its trunk raised in a rhythmic curve as though in the act of splashing water into the air.

This creation has so far been taken on its face-value¹ and appreciated solely on its aesthetics, but at this juncture it is important to understand its symbolism as well.

The elephant with its dark complexion, its thick bodily features, the apparent curvaciousness of the outlines of many parts of its body—the rump, the back, the head, the trunk, the lower jaw, the stomach—and the inset curve of its ears conjures the vision of a moisture-laden cumulus cloud in an imaginative mind. How symbolic, therefore, is an elephant in rain charms? A more appropriate animal, in fact, cannot be conceived; and a permanent open-air display of the representation of beasts with such propriety—and one of them in the very act of splashing water (see *infra* para. 2)—has all the qualifications known in cultural anthropology to be accepted as a perpetual rain charm.

The beautiful sculpture, it remains to be said, emphasises the importance of Isurumuniya as a true Meghagiri Vihāra.

The relation between the elephant and the rain cloud is well known to classical literature. The Kavṣiḷumiṇa of the 13th century, among a few references to the 'elephant cloud'—*gaja mē* and *gaja vela* : (61, 28, 440, 502, 671) spells out the corresponding features (440) : the ropes (*yot*) : lightning (*vidu*), armour (*paṭa*) : rainbow (*dēdunu*), the trumpet (*gājum*) : thunder (*gigum*), the tusks (*dala*) : the cranes (*kok pela*), the must-drops (*mada*) : the rain drops (*ṣoda*). Another verse compares elephant, adorned with golden chains to clouds streaked with lightning (406).

In addition to this identity is the reference to Paṇḍara, the white elephant with the 'wondrous powers of bringing rain' (*vāsi vasvana mahānubhāva āti*) in the most popular Jātaka tale, Vessantara (Cowell VI. 246 & Pemananda. 539) known widely among Buddhist folk and found invariably represented in temple murals of Sri Lanka.

Among the relics honoured in Sri Lanka as rain-bringing agents is also the *bōdhi* tree—a *pāribhōgika* relic. The affinity between a rain cloud and the curvi-linear crest of a *bōdhi* tree has been recognised in Sinhala literature, ex. Girā (216), Hansa (184) and Mayura (44) Sandesas. Further, the occurrence of thunder, clouds and rain has been noted in the Sinhala Bōdhi Vaṇṣaya

1. 'The purpose of these scenes is not clearly understood as yet' : Early Sinhalese Sculpture—N. D. Wijesekera. 238.

among the other miracles that took place when the sapling meant for Sri Lanka took root in a bowl. On its way to Sri Lanka the Nāgas, it is said, created speedy winds and rain, and at the planting ceremony at Anurādhapura there occurred a rain of divine flowers in addition to a *puskara varṣā* or *pokuru vāsi* (a miraculous rain that is said to fall only on those that are desirous of getting wet), and a thick, cold, snowy cloud enveloped it for a week. The author also wishes that there be beneficial rain (*samyag varṣā*) in the country at regular intervals¹.

It is likely that these incidental associations contributed to the acceptance of the *bodhi* tree as a rain-bringing agent. The Mihintalē Inscription of Mahinda IV (956–72) makes reference to a *somnas mahabō maṅgula*—‘the happy festival of the great *bōdhi*’ or the happy, great festival of the *bōdhi*—and a *ruvan asun mahabō maṅgula*—‘the festival of the jewelled seat of the great *bōdhi*’ (Epigraphia Zeylanica, I. 88). In the absence of any other information it is not possible to understand the exact nature of what these festivals would have been, and one may only conjecture that these were nothing other than rain rituals, or those performed with the main aim, or with a secondary aim, of bringing rain to the country. They may also have been held in association with the Sacred Bōdhi Tree at Anurādhapura, or the *mahabō* mentioned here may be a particular outstanding tree at Mihintale itself.

Paranavitana also refers to a *sināna pūja*—another festival held regularly in honour of the *bōdhi* tree at Anurādhapura². It is suggestive of the action of bathing (*Sināna*), and it is likely that the tree was bathed as the main item of the ceremony which is, in turn, suggestive of a ceremony of imitative magic performed in anticipation of rain (see *supra* para.2).

Sena II (853–87) is also reported to have held a festival for the Sacred Bōdhi Tree—‘the Lord of Trees’ (*duminda*). Among other activities the *parittas* were recited, and the protection of the people against illness (*rōga-bhaya*) was sought by sprinkling the charmed water (*parittōdaka*); and the king decreed that the ceremony should be performed every year (Mhv 51. 78–82). Although the sprinkling of water—an act of imitative magic (see *supra* para. 2)—is suggestive of rain, no specific mention is however made of it in the text. But these rites, elaborate as they are, are not usually limited in purpose, and such disaster as famine and drought (which generally are the causes of other pestilences) complete the list. And hence it is not difficult to imagine that the festival held by Sena II was intended as a rain rite, too.

1. Vilgammula Pabanda. 482, 487, 491, 503.

2. University History of Ceylon. I. 384.

An unusual feature of this festival was the conveyance of an effigy of the Ven. Ānanda to the city of Anurādhapura and the honour bestowed on it. The Ven. Ānanda, it may be noted, was the *dharmabhāṇḍāgārika*—‘the Treasurer of the Norm’—during the times of the Buddha; and the magical *dharmavarṣā*, as noted above, was therefore at his command. It was also to this venerable monk that the Buddha taught the Ratana Sutta at Vesali, and it was he who recited it and sprinkled the charmed water there (see *supra* para 2). How appropriate was the Ānanda effigy, therefore, in a rite performed in anticipation of rain? Or, on the other hand, how suggestive of rain was a rite in which the effigy of the Ven. Ānanda obtained a place of prominence?

A similar festival associated with the Ven. Ānanda was held a little over two centuries previously, too. As evidenced in the Pārakumbā Sirita (21) of the 15th century King Detupatis or Dāṭhōpatissa (639–50) had a golden effigy of this monk conveyed through the streets on a chariot to the accompaniment of the recitation of the Ratana Sutta by monks from all quarters of the island and the sprinkling of the charmed water. The rite was aimed at dispelling pestilence and famine. By this act the king, it is said, caused a heavy down-pour of rain (*maha mē vasvamin*) which resulted in wide-spread joy and peaceful content. It is not unlikely that it was the same effigy that was paraded during the reign of Sena II.

A festival called the *буду бисо маңгула*—‘festival of the lustration of the (image of the) Buddha’ (*bisō* < *abhiṣēka*, skt., ‘to lustrate’), has been mentioned in a 10th century inscription, according to Paranavitana.¹ Nothing more is noted about the ceremony. But lustration—the ceremonial washing—is, in the present context, the key word. This function is a rain rite (see *supra* para. 2) and it may only be conjectured that this 10th century ceremony was also performed in anticipation of rain.

Terms such as *gēhamabhisekajina*, *abhisēkan yācitvā* and *abhisēkajina* also occur in the Mahavamsa (39. 6, 7, 40), but unfortunately, the absence of details regarding them does not facilitate the interpretation of their meaning.

Divinities in charge of the wind and clouds too have been conceived by the Sinhala people at least 1700 years ago, as evidenced by a few contemporary and later literary works. This, however, need not preclude one from thinking that the conception is of a yet earlier date for the deification of natural phenomena goes back to very early stages of human culture. The pious monarch Sri Sangha Bōdhi (mid 3rd c. A.D.) on being confronted by the very severe drought that assailed his kingdom, seated himself in the courtyard of the Mahā Thūpa at Anurādhapura resolving that he would rise

1. University History of Ceylon. I. 385.

only if he would be raised up by the water that the god shall rain down (Mhv. 86. 76). Seven centuries later the Dhampiyā Aṭuvā Gaṭapadaya (204) refers to the *sulaṅga valā āti devi*, 'the deity in whose possession are the winds and the clouds'. Reference is also available to *vāta valāhaka divyaputra*¹, 'the deity of the wind and the clouds,' and to *vāyu dēvatā*, 'the deity of the wind'². Clouds were brought in by the *abhravalāhaka dēvatā*,³ the *valāhaka dēvatā*,⁴ or the *valāhaka divyaputra*,⁵ and rain was caused by the *vāsi valā devi*⁶ or the *vāssa valāhaka dēvatā*,⁷ the deity of the rain cloud' who bestowed rain to the earth at his discretion.⁸

None of these literary works refer to a ritual performed in honour of any of these deities, however. Only the 15th century prose work, the Elu Attanagalu Vaṁsaya, elaborating on the short Mahāvamsa narrative referred to above, mentions how the king Sri Sangha Bōdhi, who was conscious of the fact that one of the most important functions of a monarch was to rid his people of evil and ensure the productivity of the land by causing rain, performed personal austerities when his kingdom experienced a total 'disappearance of rain' (*vr̥ṣṭi vighāta*) consequent to the non-attention of the deities that cause rain, '*var̥ṣādhikṛtavū dēvatā*. These austerities were performed as a pious Buddhist devotee would, and not as a zealot of a particular folk deity. It is said that the monarch having performed a ritual observance of the (Buddhist) Precepts (*sil samādan va*) willed that there should be rain; and then with the blessing of the deities, and the Nāga and the Yakkha hosts, clouds gathered⁹.

This account also takes for granted that the deities themselves were those that paid homage to the Triple Gem (the Buddha, Dhamma and the Sangha), and were Buddhists themselves who, therefore, would have thought it their duty to have come to the aid of the royal devotee.

It also remains to be said that the concept of the *vassa valāhaka dēvatā* is yet persistent among the Sinhala people. The expression is current in the folk idiom, and is often heard during periods of drought when folk rituals are being planned and held. And on occasions when deities, major and minor, are being invoked and merit transferred on them, these deities are not forgotten. There is, however, no sculptural or mural representation of these nameless weather gods anywhere in Sri Lanka.

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1. Butsarana 101.
 2. Jātaka Aṭuvā Gaṭapadaya. II. 11.
 3. Pūjāvaliya, 199, 419.
 4. Milinda Prasnaya, 125.
 5. Dharmapradipikāva 260.
 6. Butsarana 166, Dahamsarana, 209.
 7. Butsarana, 101, Pūjāvaliya. 199, Pansiya Panas Jātaka Pota. 350, Saddharmālankāraya. 742.
 8. Dhampiyā Aṭuvā Gaṭapadaya. 203.
 9. Elu Attanagalu Vansaya. 29-30.

Rain rites as prevalent among the Sinhala people during the present day may be categorised as follows :

Religious	Buddhist	<i>Daladā Perahāra</i>
		<i>Gam Pirit</i>
		Lustrating <i>bōdhi</i> trees
	Buddhist and Deitic—	Ceremonies at Buddhist temples together with those at shrines of local deities
	Non-Buddhist—	<i>Pol gāhīma</i> and <i>Ankeliya</i> in honour of the Goddess Pattini
Non-religious		Bathing at the Sinhala New Year
		Draining of the Sandaravala (Baddegama)

The Daladā Perahāra

The traditional *perahāra* (procession) at Kandy since its revival in 1828 (see *supra* pg. 163) has been held uninterrupted during the July-August season every year. The traditional rites are strictly adhered to, and the casket (*Karañduva*) containing the Tooth Relic is conveyed round the streets of Kandy on a richly-caparisoned and majestic elephant, in the grand procession held on the seventh day. Nevertheless, the magical significance of the long-drawn ceremony is now largely forgotten, one reason being that it is performed strictly periodically irrespective of whether a rainy or rain-less weather condition prevails over the region or over the island as a whole. It is regarded more as a cultural pageant by which certain aspects of the artistic heritage of the Sinhala people are exhibited to the world at large. However, its ritual aspect remains intrinsic and undiminished as its grandeur keeps increasing almost from year to year.

Gam pirit

The well-known Buddhist ceremony performed on occasions of drought is *gam pirit*—the recitation of the *parittās* at 'village level' (*gam* < *grāma*. Skt. 'village'). Whereas a domestic *pirit* ceremony is limited to several hours of just one night, the *gam pirit* continues without break day and night for a week or even a fortnight. It may be performed within the sermon hall (*dharma-sālā*) of the temple itself or a temporary decorated pavilion of cadjan may be erected at a convenient site in the village. In the latter case monks from the temple along with the casket of sacred relics are conducted in a procession of drummers, flag-bearers, dancers, devotees, etc. The Ratana Sutta is no doubt recited among many others (as it was done at Vēsāli and Anurādhapura of old); and at the end pieces of the charmed thread (*pirit nūl*) are tied on the right wrists of the devotees and the charmed water (*pirit pān*) is applied on the face and the head of the devotees who also drink a handful of it. These little performances are common to any *pirit* ceremony, but the

most significant part of this particular ceremony and the item which brings it to a close is the *pirit pān perahāra*, 'the procession of charmed water,' a special feature of which is a chariot in which are seated monks who keep on chanting the Ratana Sutta as one of them keeps on sprinkling the charmed water on either side of the road (as of old) with a sprig of arecanut flower. And so a magical ceremony which saw its inception 25 centuries ago in a North Indian city continues in Sri Lanka today with, perhaps, the sprig of arecanut flower for a change.

Lustrating bodhi trees

The ceremonial bathing of *bōdhi* trees is also a practice among the local folk during periods of drought. It does not appear as a distinct ceremony today except in association with the Sri Mahā Bōdhi (the Sacred Bōdhi Tree) at Anurādhapura, the trunk of which is laved with the water of the Abhaya Tank (reservoir) located in the neighbourhood. during periods of drought. One may conjecture that this is the present day manifestation of the *somnas maha bō maṅgula* or the *sināna pūja* of old (see *supra* pgs. 265-166). The lustration of *bōdhi* trees as a rain charm is known to the rest of the island as the final act of a *gam pirit* ceremony for the *pirit pān perahāra* terminates at the village temple and the devotees bathe the *bōdhi* tree within the precincts with the charmed water that yet remains. Any other *bōdhi* trees in the village are also similarly bathed.

Buddhist and Deitic

A ceremony associated with Buddhism and the local mountain cult may be occasionally witnessed at Badulla during certain periods of drought. In the Mutiyangana Vihara of that city is a painted cloth (*petikada*) which is taken out only for this ritual occasion. It starts with the usual temple ceremonies—the offering to the Buddha (*buddha pūjā*) in the shrine room (*vihāragē*), the offerings and incantations to the deities (*dēva pūjā*) at their shrines (*dēvālaya*) and the recitation of the parittas. Then a procession to the summit of the Namunukula Peak (6,679 ft.) starts to wind its way conveying the *petikada*. Once the summit is reached it is soaked in water and the devotees keep on chanting 'Sādhu! Sādhu!' as loud as they can to bring the ceremony to a close. On the return, it is reported, a very heavy down-pour drenches them all and fills the river-beds for miles around, thus bringing the drought to an end.¹

Pol gahima

Pol gāhima (lit. 'coconut hitting') is an important folk ritual performed in anticipation of rain, as well as of other fertility benefits. Two teams, usually

1. The ceremony is referred to by the Ven. Nāulle Dhammānanda in his *Uva Itihāsaya*, Colombo 1966, 104, 142.

from two villages, gather at a suitable venue—a field or a beach—with their collections of husked coconuts, with specially the strong, thick-shelled variety *pora pol*, ‘fighting coconuts.’ A member of one team throws a nut at full volley to reach an opponent, standing about 40 feet away, at or slightly above shoulder height, and the latter, poised with a *pora pol* in his hand gives the on-coming nut as strong a jab as he can in order to crack it to pieces. When the throwers nuts are all thrown and cracked, or, on the other hand, if the *pora pol* itself cracks, another pair enter the fray with the functions altered. There is much cheering by the team-mates as by the spectators. The broken bits are scraped and oil extracted therefrom to keep the several lamps lit in honour of the Goddess Pattini. The sport continues for 7 or 14 days for a few hours each day, usually in the after-noon. On the final day a *pol perahara*, ‘coconut procession,’ winds its way round the village or villages. A conch is blown, drums beaten and the participants keep on shouting ‘*Apē gamē pol gahalā—api dinuvā—hōyiyā—hōyiyā purē hōyiyā*’ (‘In our village—coconuts were hit—we won—hurrah—full hurrah—hurrah.’)

On the following day alms of *halkiri* (a pudding made of rice-flour, jaggery and spices) are offered to Pattini and collectively partaken, by the villagers.

Rain symbols are evident in this ritual-sport. The sap in the cracked nuts¹ splashing outwards along with the sharp explosive sound emanating for an instant, and the sound of the drum, the conch and the hurrahs are suggestive of rain, its portents and accompaniments.

An keliya²

Añ Keliya (‘horn sport’), another fertility performance in honour of Pattini, is a speciality in times of sickness, and is not a rain rite in particular. As sickness generally accompanies drought the effects of this performance, as professed, has to be regarded as indirect. No step in the process of this ritual appears to possess a symbolic relationship with rain and its attendant phenomena. Its significance as a rain ritual has, therefore, to be regarded as secondary.

Bathing at the Sinhala New Year

One of the chief items of the celebrations connected with the Sinhala New Year is the communal bath which is either the penultimate or the final event (dependent on when the new moon is to be sighted) which, as in the case of

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1. The coconut with its three ‘eyes’ is so much suggestive of a human face that one is almost compelled to surmise that its ‘cracking’ (in this ritual and in the courtyard of *devālayas* in Sri Lanka) is a substitute for the primitive sacrifice of human beings to appease certain deities.
 2. For a description of the ceremony see Sinhala Visvakōsaya (Sinhala Encyclopaedia). I. s.v., Spolia Zeylanica. 26. II. 1951 and Ethnological Survey of Ceylon No. 3.

all others, starts at an auspicious moment indicated by the astrologer. At that moment a mixture made of a few medicinal herbs and other ingredients such as musk (*gōrōcana*) is applied on one's head as he or she stands on a cluster of leaves (of the kind prescribed) with another cluster (as prescribed) held over the head. (one may even stand under the prescribed tree or plant, if one is close at hand). This function is usually performed by an old person, uttering simultaneously a wish that the subject lives not merely a 120 years (the human life-span as traditionally conceived) but 220 years. The next is the bath itself, and the rural environs see a concentration of bathers at a tank, river or canal, and there is much prolonged revelry.

The significance of this ceremonial bath taken communally is now largely lost to the participants as to the Sinhala people in general. Bathing is a rain rite (see *supra* para. 2) practised by many peoples of the world; and this activity which finds continuity as an important item in a national festival in which the folk participate without exception has certainly to be pregnant with meaning. A further point is that this annual fertility festival—the Sinhala New Year—each item of which is found to be symbolically significant,¹ is performed with the anticipation of communal and individual welfare for the ensuing 12-month period. The bath, important as it is, cannot be an exception. And all evidence leads to the conclusion that it is the remnant of an act of imitative magic once performed in anticipation of rain.

Of further interest is the fact that the splashing of water (*vatura gaha gānima*) is an item never missed at this bathing ceremony, and the splashing of water, in itself, is a ritual act (see *supra* para. 2). It is performed by two individuals facing each other, the one splashing water at the face of the other, striking the water-surface with the lower half of his palm which is bent upwards at the wrist at an angle of about 60°. There may, sometimes, be four participants making way for cross or diagonal splashing, too. When one hand is tired the splash may change on to the other, and the sport which may rise to the level of a competition enjoyed by all around, may go on for a considerable time depending on the stamina of the participants. In this instance, water-splashing as an item taking place within the main item—the ceremonial bath, takes the form of a rite within a rite.

Draining of the Sandaravaḷa

The rite performed at the Sandaravaḷa (Baddegama 10 mile N.W. of Galle) is another example of a rain rite practised during modern times, devoid of a religious association. The Sandaravaḷa is a natural reservoir, the

1. See 'The Sun and the Moon in Sinhala Culture'—V. Vitharana 1976 (mimeographed). Ch. IV Proceedings of the National Symposium on Traditional Rural Culture of Sri Lanka : 1977. pgs. 75-100.

surface of which spreads over about one acre at the highest water level. It has no permanent surface supply of water—periodical over-flows from paddy fields, floods and rain being, if ever, the only such visible sources. (It is likely that subterranean supplies keep the reservoir full even during the worst droughts). It also does not overflow. It stretches in the form of a gentle arc and is said to be extremely deep in the middle. These features, no doubt, invest it with a magical import in the minds of the folk.¹

The rite performed here is very simple. The villagers—hundreds of them—gather round its edge and keep on draining its water in all sorts of receptacles among which the *kulla*, the winnowing fan (used to winnow paddy and sift husked rice) stands out in its novel function, and the motor pump is seen as a recent addition. At the end of 2½ days' draining, as has been observed in all recent cases, a heavy downpour brings the collective exercise to a close.

It is not known when or how the rite saw its inception (as in most cases of such rites), but the story of its recent phase starts with a certain Mr. Winter—a pioneer tea planter in the Baddegama area. A prolonged drought occurred and his plants were withering when the villagers approached him and made him aware of the rite as was traditionally known to them. The planter consented to supply them the food and the material needed, including of course the *kulla* made of reeds, and experienced the very welcome down-pour subsequently.

In 1916 the rite was performed with the usual success to be witnessed by a few that are yet among the living in the Baddegama area.

The last performance so far was in 1968 when the rite was given a religious 'colouring' so far unknown to it through the patronage of the *vihāra* located in the immediate vicinity. Villagers circumambulated the Sandaravaḷa in a *pān perahāra* ('water procession') and offered the water to the shrines of the Buddha and of the deities Vishnu and Kataragama at the temple. The draining started on the 25th February, and just past 1.00 p.m. on the 27th clouds gathered, lightning flashed and thunder struck, and the heaviest down-pour in living memory drenched the environs. The villagers were inspired to further action : they erected a pavilion over the water in which monks

1. Sandaravaḷa, 'the pit of Sandara,' is believed to have been so called after Sandara, a local chieftain of the 13th century, who at the decline of his power threw his wealth in gold and gems to this water-hole, and the exact point is now marked by the *nidangala*, 'treasure stone'. Tradition also refers to an eel with gold ear-rings living here, but seldom seen. These add to the mystic aura surrounding the site.

chanted the *parittas* for seven days starting on the 19th of April to be followed by a 'fire walking,' on the termination of which a similar down-pour occurred to drench the glistening embers.¹

It is now opportune to revert to the *daladā perahāra* at Kandy and examine a few of its features which appear to be significant at this juncture. The procession starts from the Temple of the Tooth (the *daladā māligāva*) at an auspicious moment which is marked by the firing of a cannon which resounds like a thunder-clap over the ring of ridges that surround the city. Leading the van is a team of whip-crackers rending the air like volleys of small arms fire. Among the torch-bearers, flag-bearers and the *nilamēs* (chieftains) with their entourage composed of a team of dancers and their few drummers are scores of richly-caparisoned elephants with their riders and keepers; and then there are the teams and teams of drummers, sometimes numbering over 80 in each. In the midst of the general visual splendour for which this pageant is universally known, there also is evident a 'pageant of sound' created not only by the whips and the drums but also by the singing, the ringing of the (tambourine-like) *pantēru*, the cymbals and bells of the dancers and the clang of their metallic costumes. The deep throb of the drums (*gāta bera* and *davul*) is, of course, all pervading. And the spectators are carried away by the sound of a 'gathering storm.'

The experience of a combination of reverberating sound produced by the musical instruments used in this procession naturally inspires literary embellishments on the 'storm' theme. It has been so from the times of the Sinhala classical writers. The author of the *Sasadāvata* of the 12th century refers to the 'sound of instruments of music' (*туру gosa*) that precedes the King of the Cloud (*gana raja* : 69), evidently with the sound of thunder and lightning, and even of the wind, in mind; and the *Kavsilūmiṇa* refers to 'the thunder of orchestral music (*vada gana gājum*) and the 'stormy sound of morning drums' (*aluyam bera mē gos* : 16, 324). The *Elu Attanagalu Vaṅsaya* says that orchestral sounds (*tūrya nāda*) are in truth a series of sounds emanating from rain, clouds or storms (*mēgha dvani* : 31). The *Sāvul Sandēsaya* implies the relationship between the sound of a storm and of orchestral music (composed of drums, in the main, here) when it says that domestic peacocks of *Sapara-pura* (mod. *Ratnapura*) were overjoyed on hearing the sound of the latter (145).

1. I am indebted to the Ven. Ganegama Saranankara, Chief Incumbent of the *Ratanasāra Vihāra*, Ganegama, Baddegama and several residents of the area for the above information. Ven. Saranankara also has published a short description of the rite as performed in 1968. The date of the down-pour (27.02.68) is inscribed on a rock on the water margin. Some villagers aver that the performance of 1916 preceded the one sponsored by Mr. Winter.

The mimicry of the sounds of a gathering storm is, indeed, a rain rite (see *supra* para. 2) which falls under the category of imitative magic; and that mimicry performed to the accompaniment of around a 100 elephants—the pre-eminent animal symbol of rain as indicated above—parading makes the *daladā perahāra* of Kandy the world's best known, the most picturesque and the most elaborate rain rite witnessed together by the largest number of people.

The significance of orchestral music in general and of the drum in special in rain rites brings into focus a *mini bera*, i.e., a gem-set drum, that had been removed from Anurādhapura to the Cōla country along with the *pātra dhātu* and the *daladā* (see *supra* p. 164) and brought back by King Agga Bōdhi (667–83), as referred to in the *Daḷadā Pūjāvaliya* (50). It is likely that this drum, too, was a magical article which was beaten ritually as an item in contemporary ceremonies performed in anticipation of rain, in which the two relics referred to also were paid homage. It is possible that the Cōlians too recognised its professed efficacy.

An interesting question now faces the cultural anthropologist : What is the origin of the drum ? This percussion instrument in its many forms has been and is being used as one or more of the following : as a rain charm, as a means of summoning devotees to prayer, the wise for a conference, soldiers to battle, etc., as a carrier of messages, as an offering to the holy (*sabda pūja*, 'sound offering' of the Buddhists, for example), as a producer of (social) music, etc. But how did it originate ? What inspired its birth ?

One may imagine an old primitive genius—a leader of a savage community—roaming over some seemingly endless, parched terrain during a period of drought and pestilence when around him was nothing but stark ruin, desolation and despair, sighing at the void of the sky and forcing his blunt intellect to work out a means of extracting a drop of golden rain—the ultimate source of his existence from its empty and silent vastness. One may imagine him striking palm upon palm, stick against stick, club against log producing sounds the like of which he so much desired to hear emanating from above as a prelude to a priceless life-giving shower—his innocent and ignorant face turned up open eyed and open mouthed in abject supplication.

The origin of the drum—which, among other things plays a significant role in rain magic even as yet—perhaps lay in that desperate exercise of an unnamed forebear trying to coax a harsh and dessicated sky to grant him a few drops of water.

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