

Mythologies of Bosat Viṣṇu¹

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SINHALA BUDDHISTS, who comprise two-thirds of the current population of Sri Lanka, are exceedingly proud of the fact that their culture is the oldest continuing Buddhist civilization in the world, dating back some 2,300 years. While Viṣṇu is mentioned just once, and that merely in passing, in all of Pāli canonical Buddhist literature sacred to the Theravāda tradition,² modern translations and interpretations of Sri Lanka's fifth-century CE, Theravāda Buddhist, quasi-historical monastic chronicle, the *Mahāvamsa*, identify Viṣṇu with the sacred role of being the people's and the religion's chief "minister of defense."³ For many, he is regarded as a veritable guardian deity of the island. This identification has been derived in part from a reading of a seminal migration myth recorded in the *Mahāvamsa* that explains that the ancient arrival of the progenitors of the Sinhala people and the subsequent arrival of Buddhism are in part the result of the protective powers of Viṣṇu. But a careful study of the *Mahāvamsa*, together with a study of inscriptions and medieval Sinhala literature, shows that Viṣṇu's Buddhist identity as the island's and the religion's "minister of defense" probably does not antedate the late seventeenth century CE. Nevertheless, it is now difficult to find any general appraisal of Sinhala religion, or of Sinhala deity propitiation more specifically, in either English or in Sinhala, that does not assume that Viṣṇu has been protecting the Buddhist religion since its inception. There are even some popular folkloric accounts in Sinhala *kavi* (poetry) that say that Viṣṇu protected the Buddha from Māra, the personification of death, on the night of his enlightenment experience. Moreover, Viṣṇu *dēvālayas*, or shrines to Viṣṇu, are now ubiquitous throughout all Sinhala Buddhist cultural areas in Sri Lanka, especially in rural, village contexts. His integration into popular conceptions and transactions of the Buddhist

ritual cult has been perhaps as thorough as any other deity in Sinhala Buddhist religious culture. His power is propitiated in invocations at the beginning of virtually every public ritual.

Late medieval Sinhala folk literature is replete with references to Viṣṇu's beneficent presence. Indeed, many Sinhalas living in rural areas of the country would be surprised to learn that Viṣṇu is a deity of Brahmanical, Vedic, and Hindu Purāṇic origins. In the popular mind, Viṣṇu is a very high "god" indeed, one who treads positively on the path leading to nirvana and eventually to buddhahood itself. Because of the vast amount of meritorious work he has performed on behalf of those who seek his help, he is popularly regarded as a bodhisattva, or future buddha.

In this paper, I will examine two mythic cycles among many that contribute to the heart of Viṣṇu's divine profile in Sinhala literature and Buddhist culture. The first has to do with a number of very abbreviated Sinhala remakes of episodes from the Hindu epic *Rāmāyaṇa* that shade the character of Rāma and his significance for the Viṣṇu cult in Sri Lanka.⁴ The second is an important myth that has enjoyed a wide dispensation in Sinhala folklore. It is about Viṣṇu as a conqueror of the archetypal *asura* Bhasma and reflects how moral and righteous power becomes associated with Viṣṇu. Both of these myths, which go beyond the mythic inheritance that the indigenous Sinhala deity Upulvan bequeathed to the "Buddhist Viṣṇu" after the late medieval conflation of these two deities, lend considerable insight into the character of Viṣṇu as it has been refracted within Sinhala Buddhist culture.

The historical importance of the *Rāvaṇa Haṭana*, the *Rāvaṇa Katāwa*, the *Rāvaṇa Puwata*, and the *Palavāla Dānē*⁵ and the significant presence of Rāma and Rāvaṇa in the roughly contemporary chronicle, the *Rājāvaliya*,⁶ lies in the fact that not only do they provide evidence of the relative popularity of the *Rāmāyaṇa* story from at least the seventeenth century, but they also contain episodes that are either entirely unique or are framed very differently in comparison to Sanskrit or other Indian recensions.⁷ It is, of course, likely as well that the Pāli *Dasaratha Jātaka*, which sees Rāma as a previous incarnation of the Buddha, was also a well known story throughout Sinhala and Theravāda history in Sri Lanka from the early Anurādhapura period on, but this *jātaka* version of the story is so completely different from the *Rāmāyaṇa* episodes related in later Sinhala folk ballad literature that there can be no confusing the *jātaka* tradition with the *Rājāvaliya* or later Sinhala *kavis*

named after Rāvaṇa,⁸ or any merit in speculating that the latter were derived from the former. They represent two separate appropriations or transformations of the epic. However, there is considerable and very interesting overlap between the *Dasaratha Jātaka* and the *Rājāvaliya*.

The *Dasaratha Jātaka*⁹ is named for the righteous king of Benares whose chief queen, the eldest of sixteen thousand wives, gave birth to two sons and a daughter, the elder son being Rāma-pañḍita (“Rāma the wise”), the younger brother being Lakkhaṇa (Lakṣmaṇa), and the younger daughter being Sītā.¹⁰ In time, his chief queen, the mother of Rāma, died, and Dasaratha reluctantly finds another consort to replace her, who subsequently gives birth to Bharata, of whom the king becomes exceedingly fond, and on whose account the king promises his mother a boon, which she accepts but defers for seven years. After seven years, she approaches Dasaratha to grant her the boon of making her son king, which he refuses angrily. But she repeatedly and insistently makes the request so that Dasaratha, in turn, begins to fear that she may be plotting to kill Rāma and Lakkhaṇa. Determining from astrologers that he has twelve years left to live, he summons Rāma and Lakkhaṇa and says that, for the sake of their safety, they should repair to a neighboring kingdom where, after twelve years, they should return to inherit the kingdom. With great fanfare, they depart from Benares and Sītā elects to join them, Rāma being regarded like a father by the younger Lakkhaṇa and Sītā.¹¹ After nine years (rather than twelve), Dasaratha dies and the queen attempts to install her son Bharata as king. But the royal courtiers resist her designs and remind her that the “the lords of the umbrella are dwelling in the forest.” Bharata declares that he will go to find Rāma, return with him, “and raise the umbrella over him.” When he finds Rāma alone (Lakkhaṇa and Sītā are out gathering food in the forest, so they do not immediately receive the news of Dasaratha’s death), to Bharata’s surprise, Rāma receives the news without sorrow or emotion. On Lakkhaṇa’s and Sītā’s return, Rāma asks them to stand in a pond and he proceeds to break the sad news, to which they react with great lamentations. Rāma then preaches to them in *gāthās* about the nature of impermanence (*anicca*), which, when understood, allays their grief. Bharata requests them all to return to administer the kingdom, but since Rāma had promised his father he would return in twelve (rather than nine) years, he instructs Bharata to rule in his place. After Bharata continues to object, Rāma tells him to place his (Rāma’s) straw slippers on the throne until he re-

turns. Bharata departs with Lakkhaṇa and Sītā to the capital, and places the slippers on the throne. Whenever a royal adjudication is needed, the slippers indicate approval or disapproval by either remaining quiet or becoming agitated. In three years, Rāma returns with great fanfare, Sītā becomes his queen consort, they are anointed with the ceremonial sprinkling (*abhiṣeka*), and thereupon Rāma, as a *mahāsattva*, circumambulates the city to begin his reign of righteousness that lasts some sixteen thousand years. This is the ending of the abbreviated story of Rāma according to the *Dasaratha Jātaka*. The narrative is thus cut short and does not include the bulk of the remaining story as it has come to be known in Indian recensions. As I have noted, however, there are interesting overlaps with the *Dasaratha Jātaka* in the *Rājāvaliya*'s depiction of Rāma and there are significant Sinhala adaptations to the many further episodes of the *Rāmāyaṇa* within the Sinhala folk ballad tradition. I will turn to the *Rājāvaliya* first.

After giving an account of the traditional cosmography of the universe, and an account of the Okkāka lineage descending from the first primordial king Mahāsammata,¹² the *Rājāvaliya* narrative introduces a story about how Ariṭṭa, the last in the line of the Okkākas, had four sons and five daughters by his chief queen, Hastapālā, who subsequently dies and is replaced by another queen, who bears a prince named Jantu of whom the king is exceedingly fond, and as a result, asks his new queen to ask for whatever she desires. When Jantu attains age, his mother asks the king to abdicate in favor of Jantu. The king at first refuses and points out that his four sons by his previous queen have precedence over Jantu. But the queen persists and accuses him of lying by reminding him of his former promise to provide anything she desires. Shamed, the king summons his sons, telling them to go wherever they wish and to take whatever they desire, save the royal paraphernalia. The five princesses declare that they will also depart with their brothers and so, together with great retinues of ministers, brahmins, noblemen, and merchants, set out “to build a city for our Okkāka race”¹³ peacefully. Traveling for several days to the southeast of Benares, they come across the Bodhisattva who is in his incarnation as the hermit Kapila. Kapila is practicing austerities in the forest. He asks the princes what they seek and offers them to make use of the area he has been using for his *pansala* (temple) because of its auspicious qualities, on the condition that when their city is complete, they name it after him, “Kapilavastu.” The four princes decide that they should

not marry from the families of other kings so as not to “be a scandal to our royal race,”¹⁴ and, since they can find no suitable royal partners for their sisters, they marry their four sisters and decide to treat the eldest sister as their mother. Apparently incest is preferable to violating caste dharma! The *Rājāvalīya* then proclaims:

Upon hearing that the princes had not united themselves to any other caste, their father was greatly pleased; and three times shouted with joy and declaimed as loud as thunder, saying, “These be *Sakya* princes!” And be it noted that since the time the said Okkāka king thus ejaculated, the title ‘Okkāka’ dynasty was changed into the title of ‘Sakya’ dynasty. Thus, 240,770 kings of the Sakya race reigned in the city of Kimbulvatpura.¹⁵

This would seem to be the end of the mythic account of how the Buddha’s city of Kapilavastu and his Sakya family originated, the borrowings or similarities with the *Dasaratha Jātaka* and Vālmīki’s *Rāmāyaṇa* being quite obvious, the main themes having been enlisted into a different mythic service. But the narrative in the *Rājāvalīya* does not end here. Subsequently, the connections with Rāma and allusions to Sītā only intensify.

The eldest sister, who had “become as a mother” to the four other princesses and princes, contracts leprosy, and as a result, is taken by her brothers a great distance from the new city where she is placed into a pit, along with all the necessary requisites she would need to live. Meanwhile, King Rāma of Benares also contracts leprosy, abdicates in favor of his son, and retires to the forest, “being resolved to die.”¹⁶ He begins to eat the bark and flowers of a certain tree and builds a loft in the hollow of a *kolom* tree (it is unclear if this is a separate tree) where he survives the difficulties of living in the wild. One night, Rāma hears the screams of the elder princess as a tiger attempts to enter her pit. The next morning, he descends from the *kolom* tree, encounters the princess, inquires who she is, and learns of her similar condition of leprosy. While she bashfully explains that she would rather lose her life than disgrace her family, caste, and race, Rāma explains that he is the King of Benares, has suffered from the same disease as she, but has cured himself and will cure her too. She is so cured, he “lived with her in love. In the course of time she bore the king twins at sixteen births, altogether thirty-two princes.”¹⁷

Subsequently, one day Rāma encounters an archer who inquires about the identity of the thirty-two princes. When Rāma explains his

story, the archer returns to Benares and tells Rāma's son, the current king, that his father is alive and living in the forest. Rāma's son then proceeds to the forest, finds Rāma, and constructs a magnificent city on the site of the *kolom* tree, naming the city "Koliya."

Meanwhile, the four younger brothers and four younger sisters of the princess (Sītā) who Rāma has married had given birth to eight daughters each, thirty-two princesses in all. While at first rejecting a marriage proposal collectively from Rāma's (and Sītā's) thirty-two sons "because they were born in the hole of a *kolom* tree," they later accepted invitations "to attend aquatic sports" and "and during the sports on the river the princes took each princess by the hand and led her into the Koliya city." The story ends with the following denouement:

The royal fathers of the said princesses laughed, saying, "Our nephews are clever: they have carried off their own cousins." Since that time there were intermarriages between the royalty of Kimbulvat and Koliya cities. It should be noted that the royal families . . . were united into one clan.¹⁸

In such a manner does the late seventeenth-century Sinhala Buddhist *Rājāvaliya* coopt and transform the story of Rāma and turn him into an ancestor of Sinhala kingship. It is from the marriage alliance between Rāma and the eldest sister (apparently Sītā), that the Sakyans, and hence the Buddha, descend. This also becomes Vijaya's lineage. The narrative then proceeds to tell Vijaya's story in terms very close to those in the *Mahāvamsa*.

In the Sinhala folk ballad versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* story, brief as they are, Rāvaṇa is clearly not regarded in such an unequivocal manner as the embodiment of *adharmic* or evil forces. He is regarded much more ambivalently. Indeed, this is how Seneviratne depicts Rāvaṇa as he is known from popular Sinhala folklore:¹⁹

People speak of [Rāvaṇa's] valour and intelligence; ten heads for his learning and wisdom. He was also a master of music. The musical instrument known as the Ravanahasta or Ravana vina is his invention. His knowledge of medicine is highly regarded and respected. The medical texts such as *Nadīprakāsa*, *Kumāraṅtra*, and *Arkaprakāsa* are attributed to him. He was so powerful and courageous that Rāma could kill him only by divine intervention.

Seneviratne's final point is all the more interesting, owing to the fact that in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, Rāvaṇa had been given a boon so that he would be invincible in relation to deities and vulnerable only to hu-

mans. Here, the situation apparently has been reversed. Be that as it may, there are more hints of this “other side” of Rāvaṇa in the *Sinhala Kavi* renditions of the story.

The late medieval Sinhala poetic versions of the story, as I noted, are titled after Rāvaṇa, not Rāma. In itself, this is a signal of the fact that Rāvaṇa’s character is treated with much more empathy. In the *Rāvaṇa Katāwa*,²⁰ Rāvaṇa’s sister becomes enchanted with Rāma and boldly asks Rāma, in a manner seemingly unbecoming of a princess (but in line with her true nature as a *rākṣasi*), to marry her. Rāma demurs and suggests that she approach, instead, his brother, Saman *dēviyō*.²¹ Saman also declines. She then returns to Rāma and begs him to divorce Sītā. In response to this suggestion, Rāma slices off her nose. When his sister reports what has happened to her to Rāvaṇa, out of revenge for this act of cruelty, Rāvaṇa abducts Sītā and the stage is set for monkey-king Hanumān’s famous visit to Rāvaṇa’s garden in Laṅkā where Sītā is held captive. Discovered by Rāvaṇa’s men, Hanumān’s tail is set afire by having cloths dipped in oil set ablaze and attached. The strategy backfires as Hanumān springs onto the thatched roofs of the city’s houses, and the entire city is set ablaze. Hanumān escapes amidst the chaos and returns to Rāma, an invasion of Laṅkā is launched, Rāma slays Rāvaṇa in a personal duel, and Sītā is finally recovered.

This Sinhala version of the story is not quite as melodramatic nor as defined as Vālmiki’s Sanskrit version. In the latter, while Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, and Sītā are still in the forest following the visit from Bharata, the *rākṣasi* Śūrpaṇakhā (Rāvaṇa’s sister) falls in love with Rāma and boldly offers herself, largely in the same manner as in the *Rāvaṇa Katāwa*, in marriage to Rāma. When Rāma refuses, Śūrpaṇakhā determines that Sītā is the impediment to her desire and makes plans to devour her. In Sītā’s defense, Lakṣmaṇa mutilates Śūrpaṇakhā, who then flees to her brother Rāvaṇa to report the cruelty of the two brothers. In addition, she speaks of Sītā’s extraordinary beauty in such a way that her description excites Rāvaṇa’s passion. Rāvaṇa devises a plan to trick Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa away from their hermitage in pursuit of a deer. While they are gone, he arrives at the scene posing as a wandering mendicant, gains entrance, and manages to carry Sītā off to Laṅkā. Hanumān sneaks to Laṅkā on a spy mission and witnesses Rāvaṇa’s attempted seductions and intimidation of Sītā, who staunchly resists his advances and threats.

There is, of course, much more to Vālmīki's narrative, but enough has been said to compare the two versions in terms of how the characters are depicted. In the *Rāvaṇa Katāwa*, while Rāvaṇa's sister acts in manner that is not appropriate for a princess, her behavior does not appear to warrant the response that Rāma (not Lakṣmaṇa as in the Vālmīki narrative) gives to her. There is some justification, then, in Rāvaṇa's abduction of Sītā, since it is seen as an act of revenge for the cruelty that Rāma has visited upon his sister. Further, in the *Rāvaṇa Katāwa*, there is no mention made of Rāvaṇa's attempted seductions of Sītā, nor of his sister's descriptions of her beauty that incite his passions. The portraits of both Rāma and Rāvaṇa, therefore, are a good deal more ambivalent than the neat constructions in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*.

That ambivalence is further evident in another Sinhala episode of the story that has no provenance in the Sanskrit or Tamil versions. The *Palavāla Dānē* (#1),²² which seems to be of later origin than the *Rāvaṇa Katāwa*, contains a remarkable series of episodes that cast Rāma's character in a considerably different light, though in the end, he is clearly identified with Upulvan. The 216-verse poem actually begins with the coronation of Kuvēni by Vijaya, his perjured repudiation of Kuvēni for the Pāṇḍyan princess, the *divi dos* that he and Paṇḍuvas suffer as a result, and then how Sakra, with thirty-six *vāli yakṣas* and Veddhha chiefs in the service of Mala Rāja (the "flower king"), with the assistance of Rāhu disguised as a boar, effects Paṇḍuvas's cure. This is followed by a long description of the Himalayan wilderness where Upulvan and Sītā are said to dwell in the Vaikuṅṭha palace. Then, as a retrospective, the story of Rāma's conquest of Rāvaṇa is told containing the episodes I wish to highlight.

One day Sītā *dēvi* painted a picture of Rāvaṇa and was detected gazing upon it by Rāma. In anger, Rāma took her to the forest and instructed Saman *dēva* to cut her body in two. Saman, however, took pity on Sītā, since she was pregnant with a child, and left her alone in the forest. Soon thereafter, she encountered a *ṛṣi* who gave her shelter in a hut near his own. She fed herself on herbs until the time came for her to deliver her child, which she did successfully. Her son's name was Sandalindu. One day while Sītā was out collecting herbs, the child slipped off her bed, fell to the floor, and crawled under the bed. The *ṛṣi*, whom Sītā had asked to watch over the child in her absence, became anxious when he could not locate Sandalindu. Assuming the child had somehow become lost, and not wanting Sītā to suffer grief, he created a

second child from a flower and laid it asleep on the bed. Sītā returned, began suckling the child, while Sandalindu began to cry. Sītā assumed that a divine miracle had occurred and doubted the ṛṣi's explanation. To convince her, he took some arrow grass and created yet a third child. The third child was named Kistiri Rāja, while the second was Mala Rāja. Hence, the mythic account of the “flower king” who, under Sakra's direction, cured King Paṇḍuvas of his *divi dos*. But the story continues to play out. One day Rāma happened to see Sītā's three young princes playing and became annoyed when they paid him no respect. So, he shot three arrows at them, but to no avail. They simply glanced away. Bewildered, Rāma asked the children about their parents. When he learned of their identity, he was overjoyed that Sītā was still alive, and he restored her as his queen.

What I have just outlined above is one of the root myths celebrated in a ritual known as the *valiyak nāṭum* (“dance”) performed annually at the Mahā Dēvālaya in Kandy following the conclusion of the *āśala perahāra*. In the *Rāvaṇa Puwata* and in the *Palavāla Dānē*, it is fair to say that Rāma's profile is much more ambiguous or ambivalent than the image of Rāma as the embodiment of dharma usually associated with the figure in Vālmiki's or other Indian versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Not only is there a moral question raised by Rāma's treatment of Rāvaṇa's sister in the *Rāvaṇa Puwata*,²³ but it hardly seems incumbent for an embodiment of dharma to be shooting arrows at three young children simply because they did not pay a formal obeisance, as is the case in the *Palavāla Dānē*. My sense is that these portrayals are not accidents and that what they reflect is something of the ambivalent Sinhala Buddhist disposition. That is, these instances would seem indicative of attempts to “cut Viṣṇu down to size” or to “make an immortal god mortal.” From these episodes, and here I would also include the depiction of Rāma that is offered in the *Rājāvaliya* as well, Rāma is much more of a human figure than a divine one. Not only does he suffer from moral failures, but he also suffers from physically debilitating diseases too. No doubt he remains a royal warrior in the Sinhala mindset. I also would submit that his royal warrior profile is precisely why he was regarded so congenially in relation to Upulvan, the great protector of royal interests in medieval Sri Lanka. This would seem to be substantiated in *Palavāla Dānē*. Here, as I have mentioned, Upulvan and Sītā are first mentioned as dwelling together in the Vaikuṅṭha palace in the Himalayas and the *Rāmāyaṇa* episodes are inserted as a kind of retrospect. They explain

the background of how Upulvan and Sītā achieved their heavenly conditions as Rāma and Sītā. The implication is that Rāma is understood to be the human king who later becomes a deity whose power continues to be associated with the well being of kingship and righteous rule.

There is one more variant to the *Rāmāyaṇa* as it is articulated within Sinhala literature that I will briefly explore before attending to other mythic orientations of Viṣṇu. This is found in the *Rāvaṇa Puwata*,²⁴ a poem that is brief, but forty verses in length. Though the poem clearly takes the *Rāmāyaṇa* as its subject, it is unique in two ways: the first is that Viṣṇu (rather than Rāma) is explicitly identified as the protagonist throughout; the second is it contains a unique episode, one somewhat mindful of Kṛṣṇa in his association with the *gopīs* of Vraja. This episode is inserted at the beginning of the poem before referring to the familiar episodes of the story. Viṣṇu goes to bathe in the pond in his park and finds that all the purple lotuses (*upul*) have been picked and that the water has become muddied. Angry at this spoilage, he determines to get to the bottom of this outrage. He conceals himself in the bushes besides the pond and begins to hold watch. Shortly, seven goddesses arrive to bathe, leaving their clothes on the pond's bank. Viṣṇu stealthily steals one set of clothes, but is then discovered by the goddesses, who immediately take flight. But one goddess, whose clothes are in Viṣṇu's possession, remains behind, unable to leave without her garments. This is Sītā. Viṣṇu approaches her, takes her away, and makes her his wife. Then the poem proceeds to recount other *Rāmāyaṇa* episodes, including the encounter with Rāvaṇa's sister. In this rendition of the encounter, rather than Rāma or Lakṣmaṇa cutting off her nose and/or ears, Viṣṇu, in an angry rage, breaks her leg instead! Though the *Rāvaṇa Puwata* is written skillfully in fine literary Sinhala, it articulates a much coarser conception of episodes in comparison to other Sinhala renditions. Sītā is won not by the chivalry or cultivated martial skills of Rāma, but by the cunning character of Viṣṇu, a profile evident in other myths I shall now proceed to explore. That Viṣṇu, rather than Rāma, is identified explicitly throughout the poem as the protagonist represents, I think, the eventual manner in which the various personalities constitutive of his general cult in Sri Lanka have been eventually submerged or coalesced within the profile of the "Buddhist Viṣṇu."

By the middle of the eighteenth century, Viṣṇu's identity as one of the four "guardian deities" of Laṅkā had been formally established, as evident from his inclusion, along with Nātha, Pattini, and Kataragama,

in the ritual proceedings of the annual *āśāla perahāra* during the reign of Kīrti Śrī Rājasimha (1751–1782 CE). That identification may have been solidified much earlier, in the very late seventeenth-century reign of Vimaladharmasūriya II (1687–1707). In any case, the identification of these four guardian deities sustains the original concept of the four guardian deities introduced during the fourteenth-century Gampola period, and the specific identities have been changed. A number of folk ballads, which must post-date these times, were written to celebrate the provenance of these four deities. One of these ballads, the *Satara Dēwāla Dēvi Puvata*, contains a very important myth rooted in Purāṇic origins—one well-known, as well, in Tamil culture. The entire *kavi* is but forty-four verses in length, so verses relevant to each deity are compact and to the point. The section on Viṣṇu begins with a reference to his arrival in Laṅkā and his binding of the *Demala yakas* (“Tamil *yakṣas*”), an indication of the definite Sinhala provenance of this version of the myth. It then refers to Viṣṇu’s Purāṇic boar incarnation, where he dove into the primordial waters to spear the earth with his tusk to establish the inhabitable land of this *kalpa*. This cosmogonic act is followed by a description of his tortoise *avatāra* in which he supported Mount Meru after the chief of the *nāgas* had entwined himself around the mountain’s base and a fierce wind threatened to topple it over. The verses to Viṣṇu conclude with how, as “Pulvan *dēva*,” he alone, of all the gods, stood firm beside the Buddha during the paradigmatic struggle with Māra on the night of the enlightenment experience. While there are no mythic instances that are new in this description, instances that haven’t been alluded to before as being incorporated into the profile of the “Buddhist Viṣṇu,” the combination of all of these specific attributes within one telling is novel.

What is also new are additional verses that allude to a myth of great salience. It is a myth with a fairly common Purāṇic theme: how an *asura*, either through the practice of austerities or through the acquisition of knowledge, gains great power and threatens to destroy the universe. In this instance, the myth is about how Bhasma Asura had learned a mantra from Śiva, which, when recited, in connection with placing the hand on the head, would reduce any physical body to ashes. Having discovered this great power, Bhasma began to chase Śiva himself with the intention of destroying the great deity and taking over the universe. While Śiva was in flight from Bhasma, he told Viṣṇu of the predicament. Viṣṇu assumed the form of a beautiful young woman

in a swing who was singing love songs. When Bhasma encountered her, he was overcome with infatuation and began to make passionate overtures to the young woman. Viṣṇu, in the guise of the beautiful young woman, enamored him further and so possessed Bhasma's attention that he became single-minded in his pursuit of her by falling deeply in love. With his bait so hooked, Viṣṇu, as the beautiful young woman, asked Bhasma to swear his undying fidelity to her by reciting an oath with his hand placed upon his head. As he did so, Bhasma was immediately incinerated, completely reduced to ashes.

In Obeyesekere's account of the main ceremony of the *gammaḍuva* series of rites chiefly held in honor of Pattini, there is a set of observances known as the *kāla pandama*, or the "ritual of the torch of time." He explains the significance of these observances in this way:

The torch of time, according to informants, is meant to avert "bad times." It is planted in honor of three gods: Viṣṇu, time past; Kataragama, time present; and Dēvatā Baṇḍāra, time future. . . . Viṣṇu is the head of the pantheon, but he is a benign god; he belongs to the time past. In fact, in the past he was less benign and more involved in the affairs of man. . . . Kataragama is today widely propitiated for overcoming current problems: he belongs to time present, the operative here and now. But according to karmic logic . . . his rise must eventually result in his downfall; when this happens a lesser god like Dēvatā Baṇḍāra must take his place. This is in fact what is happening now. Thus, Dēvatā Baṇḍāra represents time future.²⁵

I cite Obeyesekere's comments about this ritual context now because it is the venue within which he recorded the following oral continuation of the myth of Viṣṇu and Bhasma. The "torch of time" observances function as a preliminary liturgical invocation in a way similar to the chanting of the *Satara Dēwāla Dēvi Puvata*, although in regard to a different set of deities. In any case, the fascinating continuation of the myth at hand that Obeyesekere has recorded is as follows:

Bhasma the *asura* was so infatuated that he forgot his hand was charmed. He touched his head and swore fidelity to the beautiful woman and thus was consumed into ashes. Out of those ashes arose Devol Deviyo and Gini Kurumbara.

Īśvara [Śiva] meanwhile saw no sign of Bhasma, so he came back from hiding. He saw instead the same beautiful woman on the swing. He was also infatuated and wanted to marry her. But the woman [Viṣṇu] asked him: "Are you married?" He said, "Yes." "Then I can't marry you." "Go tell Umayanganā that there is a beautiful woman on

the swing singing love songs, and ask her if you may bring her as your chief queen [*mahesi*].”

Īśvara went to his palace and asked Umayanganā’s permission to bring home the beautiful woman as his queen [*mahesi*]. “Yes, go bring her,” said Umayanganā.

But when Īśvara came back, the beautiful woman was pregnant. She said, “I can’t marry you now since I am pregnant. So ask Umayanganā’s permission to bring home a pregnant woman.” Īśvara went back to Umayanganā, and once again Umayanganā agreed. But when he returned this time the woman had had a child and was once again pregnant. She said, “This cannot be done, you have to ask your wife’s permission to bring home a pregnant woman with a child.”

This happened six times. Meanwhile, the eldest child was big enough to walk, and he was away picking flowers. When Īśvara came for the seventh time he thought that this was a wonder, a miraculous creation, not a normal birth. So Īśvara brought Umā to see the woman. Viṣṇu saw them come and shed his female guise. He awaited their arrival with the six children, since the eldest was away picking flowers. Īśvara’s wife saw the child and said, “*Ane*, my brother has a heap of children [*kanda*, “heap,” “mountain,” “lot of”]. She embraced the children together saying, “*is kandak*” [“a mountain of heads”]. Thus Skanda [i.e., Is-kanda] was born with six faces and twelve arms. The eldest brother escaped this transformation. He was named Aiyāyaka, “eldest brother,” “chief brother.”²⁶

Obeyesekere points out that there is also a Tamil version of this myth. In the Tamil version, only Aiyāṇār is born, and he is born of a sexual union of Śiva and the beautiful woman (Viṣṇu).²⁷ Obeyesekere adds: “The Sinhala myth is their own invention, I suspect. The folk etymology of Skanda as ‘Is’ plus ‘Kanda’ cannot be justified in Tamil. In the Tamil myth Viṣṇu as female (Mōhinī) has intercourse with Śiva; this would be much too indecorous for the Sri Lankan Viṣṇu.”²⁸

This continuation of the myth at hand, and Obeyesekere’s comments, raise a number of interesting issues. Though the provenance of this continuation is somewhat removed from the context of the medieval literature I have been surveying (since it was recorded in the late twentieth century), it still provides an interesting opportunity to ascertain something additional and something unique about the “Buddhist Viṣṇu.”

The first is that the myth has been reworked in such a way that it not only establishes Viṣṇu as the most clever of the deities, the deity with the ingenuity and power to reduce *asura* usurpers, but it also

casts him in the role of being responsible for the birth of a number of other deities. In this myth, it is through his creative *māyā* that Skanda (Kataragama Dēviyō), Devol, and Aiyaṇār are all born. Other mythic traditions elaborate upon these “Vaiṣṇava” introductions. The process illustrated within this particular myth would seem to represent a re-working of Viṣṇu’s power to be incarnated as *avatāras*, a way of explaining the origins of particular deities in relation to a higher, divine creative power or principle. In several other myths about the introduction of deities to the island, Viṣṇu plays the role of the deity who grants them permission to land and to take up residence on the island. That is, he provides a warrant for their presence, a warrant that, in turn, is based on his own warrant derived from the Buddha to protect Laṅkā. Both of these ways of accounting for the presence of a myriad of deities who become important within the Sinhala cultic context illustrate how the “Buddhist Viṣṇu” occupies such an exalted and powerful position, and why he is regarded as an eventual Buddha. In this mythic retelling, he is the presence of the ethical voice throughout: by means of his guile, saving Śiva and the world from the power-crazed Bhasma Asura, and then correctly instructing Śiva on what is proper so that the final end of accessible benevolent power (in the presence of Skanda and Aiyaṇār) is realized.

Obeyesekere has made the very interesting observation in his discussion about the nature of deities within the Sinhala pantheon that “while the Buddha is made into a kind of god, the god is made into a kind of Buddha.”²⁹ What he is suggesting here is that the Buddha functions as the ultimate legitimator of all benevolent actions in the world. Viṣṇu, for instance, receives his warrant or instructions to act for the benefit of the *Buddhasāsana* and therefore for the benefit of those who understand their existence in light of the *sāsana*’s soteriological significance. Furthermore, Buddhist deities are meant to personify Buddhist virtues. They, in fact, are ethical postulations expressed in the mythic mode. The higher the deity, such as Viṣṇu, the more virtue he embodies, and thus the closer he is to *nibbāna*’s realization. Viṣṇu’s responsibility in introducing powerful benevolent forces into the world is a virtuous act, part of his guardian or “warrant” deity responsibilities for the benefit of those in existential need.

The second point is related to this first and has to do with the manner in which “divine sexuality” is conceptualized in Sinhala Buddhist culture. While there is one instance in *sandēśa* literature where Upul-

van is seen as an attractive figure for Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī (Viṣṇu's and Brahma's traditional consorts or *śaktis*), the Sinhala deities *in general*, and Viṣṇu in particular, are decidedly *asexual* in orientation. In the *past*, Viṣṇu may have been sexually impassioned, as indicated in the *Rāvaṇa Puwata* where he hides Sītā's clothes, is enamored, and marries her. But as Obeyesekere has pointed out, Viṣṇu having intercourse is too "indecorous" for the Sinhala, or it is too anomalous to be compatible with the image of a deity who is now a bodhisattva and who is, relatively speaking, close to the attainment of *nibbana* (i.e., the extinguishing of *taṇhā* or desire). The "Buddhist Viṣṇu's" profile, then, stands in sharp contrast with his image as it has been cultivated in popular Tamil myth. Shulman describes a related cycle of myths that celebrate Viṣṇu's sexual transformations and reproductive powers.³⁰ Here, for example, is how he briefly retells the myth of Bhasma Asura:

A demon worshipped Śiva and was given the power to turn anything to ashes with the touch of his hand. He tried to turn Śiva himself to ashes; the god fled from him, and Viṣṇu took the form of Mohinī and bewitched the demon into imitating the hand movements of her dance. Mohinī put her hand on her head, and the demon followed suit—and turned himself to ash. Śiva made love to Mohinī, and their son, Aiyaṇār, was born.³¹

Note that in this myth, Śiva's engaging in sexual intercourse with Viṣṇu is reported as almost a matter of fact. In the Sinhala version of the myth, great care is taken to avoid the mention of sex altogether, and the beautiful woman (Viṣṇu) is insistent on propriety in asking for Umā's permission for accepting an increasingly ridiculous demand, one that is eventually abandoned. For several pages after retelling the Tamil version of this myth, Shulman proceeds to discuss the meaning of the "widely distributed insistence on Viṣṇu's female capabilities" in the Tamil Śaiva Hindu context. He notes that it may reflect a sectarian effort to turn Viṣṇu into Śiva's *śakti* and, hence, signal the subordination of Viṣṇu within the context of Śaiva interpretive frames. Or, he muses, perhaps this myth can be seen as "expressing syncretistic or harmonizing tendencies between the two cults of Śiva and Viṣṇu."³² Whatever may be the socio-political origins or significance of this mythic version, the point is that Viṣṇu's sexual transformations are a celebrated, rather than avoided, aspect of his divine personality. On the other hand, in the Sinhala context, the "Buddhist Viṣṇu" is kept at a distance from the sexual act, and the reproduction of the six children

who become Kataragama and the seventh who becomes Aiyaṇār are understood as the products of his magical, rather than sexual, capabilities. This is completely consistent with Viṣṇu's image as it has been cultivated among the Sinhalese. In *dēvālayas* dedicated to his propitiation, he is never represented iconographically with a *śakti*, a spouse or consort. *In situ*, he is always presented alone, presumably a celibate deity, yet his reproductive abilities are acknowledged in different ways.

In conclusion, I don't think I can do much better than to quote from Martin Wickremesinghe, the early twentieth-century Sinhala novelist, essayist, and part-time anthropologist who has become something of an icon of traditional Buddhist cults in Sri Lanka:

Buddhists in a very late stage in their history borrowed the Vishnu image from India, and it found a shrine in their temple. But they do not worship the new god or offer flowers to him [as they do the Buddha]. They merely ask favours and make offerings of tokens, or bribes. To make an immortal god mortal requires, I believe, originality as daring as that required for creating an immortal god for a pantheon, if not more so.³³

NOTES

1. This essay was initially presented at the conference celebrating the 20th Anniversary of the Numata Endowment at the University of Calgary. Portions of it were used as the basis of a section for chap. 4 in my *The Buddhist Visnu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

2. *Mahāsamaya Suttanta*, in *Dīgha-nikāya* II:253.

3. Wilhelm Geiger, among others, has identified Viṣṇu with the indigenous deity Upulvan, who in the seminal *Mahāvamsa* myth recounting the first migration of “Sinhalese” to the island, is appointed by Sakka (Indra), who was in turn appointed by the Tathāgata, to protect the Sinhalese and their religion on this island where the dhamma will flourish. See Wilhelm Geiger, *The Mahāvamsa or The Great Chronicle of Ceylon* (Colombo: Ceylon Government Department of Information, 1912), 55 (VII:1–8).

4. Frank E. Reynolds (in “*Rāmāyaṇa, Rāma Jātaka, and Rāmakien: A Comparative Study of Hindu and Buddhist Traditions*,” in *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman [Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994], 60) has said, in relation to the fact that the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s significance has not been studied much, if at all, by scholars interested in Theravāda Buddhism: “In part, this serious lacuna in Theravāda scholarship can be traced to some very influential Buddhologists, who have concluded from the seeming paucity of classical Rāma traditions in Sri Lanka that these traditions do not play a significant role in Theravāda culture as a whole.” I think Reynolds is very right here. While I would hesitate to identify the Rāma traditions I will examine as “classical” in nature, I think they are much more important than what Richard Gombrich (in “*The Vessantara Jātaka, the Rāmāyaṇa and the Dasaratha Jātaka*,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 105 [1985]: 427–437) has indicated. On the other hand, the Sri Lankan sources are not nearly as important as the Rāma traditions in the traditional Thai-Lao historical and cultural contexts that Reynolds has studied.

5. Hugh Neville, trans., *Sinhala Verse (Kavi)*, ed. P. E. P. Deraniyagala, 3 vols. (Colombo: Ceylon National Museums, 1954), 3:97; 1:205; 3:99, and 1:38.

6. B. Gunasekera, *The Rajavaliya or a Historical Narrative of Sinhalese Kings from Vijaya to Vimala Dharma Surya II* (Colombo: George J. A. Skeen, 1900).

7. For an excellent study of the many various “crystalizations” of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in various Indian and Southeast Asian contexts, see Paula Richman, ed., *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), especially the articles by A. K. Rāmanujan, “Three Hundred *Rāmāyaṇas*: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation” (pp. 22–49) and Frank Reynolds, “*Rāmāyaṇa, Rāma Jātaka, and Ramkien: A Compara-*

tive Study of Hindu and Buddhist Traditions” (pp. 50–63). Rāmanujan points out that there are some twenty-five Sanskrit recensions, in addition to a legion of other versions in diverse languages from Central Asia to the Indonesian archipelago. The variations in substance and in didactic intention are so great that Rāmanujan is finally forced to illustrate the issue by referring to “Aristotle’s jack knife” (p. 44): “When the philosopher asked an old carpenter how long he had had his knife, the latter said, ‘Oh, I’ve had it for thirty years. I’ve the changed the blade a few times and the handle a few times, but it’s still the same knife.’”

8. The *Daśaratha Jātaka* (see E. B. Cowell, *The Jātaka* [New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1990], 4:78–82) in Pāli confirms the fact that the *Rāmāyaṇa*, at least in part, goes back to possibly the later centuries of the first millennium BCE. It adaptation here stresses the Buddhist virtues of detachment and awareness of change, as the major focus is upon how Rāma-pañḍita responds to the news of his royal father’s death. There is no mention of Ravaṇa, Laṅkā, or Ravaṇa’s abduction of Sītā, and Sītā is simply known as the younger sister of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa (Lakṣmaṇa). The conclusion to the *jātaka* adds that the Buddha was Rāma in this former life, “Rāhula’s mother” was Sītā, and Ānanda was Bharata, Rāma’s half brother whose mother had tried to claim the royal throne for Bharata when it rightfully belonged to Rāma. Rather than Ayodhyā, the setting is Benares. A summary of the story is given below in relation to the *Rājāvaliya*’s account of Rāma.

9. Cowell, *The Jātaka*, 4:78–82.

10. In Vālmiki’s *Rāmāyaṇa*, Daśaratha is king of Ayodhyā and Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa (and his twin Śatrughna who is not mentioned in this *jātaka*) are born of separate mothers. Sītā, of course, is not Rāma’s sister but the bride he wins by stringing his enormous divine bow.

11. In Vālmiki’s account, it is Daśaratha’s youngest queen, Kaikeyī, who had previously saved King Daśaratha’s life and consequently had been rewarded with two boons, who gives birth to Bharata. Fearing Rāma, she first requests that he be banished to the forest for fourteen years and that Bharata become the heir apparent to rule in the meantime. Rāma accepts these conditions and departs with Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa, but Bharata has misgivings and pursues Rāma in the vain hope of persuading him to return, which he doesn’t because of his loyalty to his father’s, King Daśaratha’s, wishes. Bharata says he will reign only until Rāma returns, and in the meantime places his slippers on the throne as a symbolic gesture of the true kingship.

12. See Gunasekere, *Rajavaliya*, 1–7.

13. *Ibid.*, 8.

14. *Ibid.*, 9.

15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 10.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., 11.
19. Anuradha Seneviratne, "Rāma and Rāvaṇa: History, Legend and Belief in Sri Lanka," *Ancient Ceylon* 5 (1984): 235.
20. Neville, *Sinhala Verse (Kavi)*, 1:205.
21. The identification of Saman in this story with Lakṣmaṇa lends more support to the assertion that the first formulation of the "four guardian deities" of Laṅkā were drawn from the *Rāmāyaṇa* epic.
22. Neville, *Sinhala Verse (Kavi)*, 1:38.
23. This very question is raised and explored at some length in Kathleen Erndl's "The Mutilation of Śūrpaṅakhā," in *Many Rāmāyaṇas: the Diversity of Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 67–88. It would seem that the question is even more sharply focussed in the Sinhala context, insofar as it is Rāma, rather than Lakṣmaṇa, who mutilates Śūrpaṅakhā. Neville (*Sinhala Verse [Kavi]*, 98–99) also makes a lengthy comment on this episode, but focuses instead on Śūrpaṅakhā's "unmaidenly conduct." Here is part of it:

I think this is important and an ancient and intentional feature. It probably reflects the contempt felt by the people of Northern India, for the ancient and matriarchal custom still kept up by the Nairs and others, in southern India, by which the wife has full authority over her affairs, selects her own husband, and gives her son the right of inheritance to her mother's brother's estate. A connected custom exists among the Sinhalese, called a *binna* marriage, under which the woman selects and discards her husband at her will.

Neville's explanation of *binna* marriages is a bit overwrought, but I think his point in general about some tension between northern and southern, or Aryan and Dravidian, has an element of merit in it. In addition to the more favorable way that the Sinhala depict Rāvaṇa, some communities in Tamilnad even today understand Rāvaṇa as a great culture hero. For an extended example, see Richman, *Many Rāmāyaṇas*, 175–201.
24. Neville, *Sinhala Verse (Kavi)*, 3:98–99.
25. Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Cult of the Goddess Pattini* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 113.
26. Ibid., 114. Henry Parker (*Ancient Ceylon* [1909; repr., New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1981], 156–158) collected another and more extended ver-

sion of this myth early in the century. In Parker's version, among the various differences, the seventh and eldest child is Kaḍavara.

27. Obeyesekere, *Cult of the Goddess Pattini*, 114. Viṣṇu's role as a progenitor of deities, or as a god providing their warrant, is also seen in myths related to the cult of Aiyaṇār. Aiyaṇār seems to have been worshipped in Laṅkā since at least the time of *Kokila Sandēśa* (vs. 203), which refers to his shrine at Man-nar. H. B. M. Ilangasinha, in "A Study of Buddhism in Ceylon in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries (Circa 1400–1600)" (PhD thesis, University of London, 1972; subsequently published as *Buddhism in Medieval Sri Lanka* [Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1992]), says that Aiyaṇār may have come to Laṅkā with the "Aryans" who migrated to Kandy during the Gampola reign of Bhuvanekabāhu IV (1335–1341). He wonders if the worship of the god had something to do with the emergent power of the Jaffna *āryacakravarti* at that time. What is interesting here is that the *Ayyanāyaka Devi Kavi* (L. D. Barnett, "Alphabetical Guide to Sinhalese Folklore from Ballad Sources," *Indian Antiquary* 29 [1916]: 7), another Sinhala folk ballad, notes that Aiyaṇār came to Laṅkā after having been born from the right side of his mother by virtue of the power of Upulvan, and that it was Upulvan who granted him permission to come to Laṅkā (Ilangasinha, "A Study of Buddhism in Ceylon," 371).

28. Obeyesekere, *Cult of the Goddess Pattini*, 114–115.

29. *Ibid.*, 59.

30. David Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South India Śaiva Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 308–316.

31. *Ibid.*, 308.

32. *Ibid.*, 309.

33. Martin Wickramasinghe, *Aspects of Sinhalese Culture*, 4th ed. (1952; repr., Dehiwala, Sri Lanka: Tisara Prakasakayo, 1992), 8.