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Rituals of Development: The Accelerated Mahavāli Development Program of Sri Lanka

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# rituals of development: the accelerated Mahavāli development program of Sri Lanka

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Almost 20 years ago, Abner Cohen complained that “there is as yet very little analysis of . . . ‘political ritual’ in contemporary polities” (1969:228).<sup>1</sup> Since then, the traditional anthropological preference for sacred rather than secular rituals has been challenged, and interest in modern political rituals renewed (Moore and Myerhoff 1977).

Theoretical discussions of secular rituals in general, and political rituals in particular, tend to be framed within—as well as critical of—the Durkheimian ritual paradigm. For instance, in their introduction to the volume *Secular Ritual*, Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff contend that Durkheim

accepts at face value the success of the very messages that many rituals are designed to propagate: the myth of cultural unity and social continuity, the myth of unchanging common tradition, the myth of shared belief [1977:7].

Rituals, whether sacred or secular, they argue, are sociocultural constructs, endowing

authority and legitimacy to the positions of particular persons, organizations, occasions, moral values, views of the world, and the like . . . [they] structure the way people *think* about social life [emphasis in original] [1977:4].

Steven Lukes’s critique of the Durkheimian legacy in political rituals offers, in more detail, very similar conclusions. He also argues that by authorizing certain definitions of society, ritual effectively “define[s] away alternatives” (1975:305).

Lukes focuses his critical attention on the social integrationist side of the Durkheimian theoretical legacy. He maintains that ritual analysis cannot yield social integration and value consensus because that is what official interpretations claim rituals do. Indeed, official explanations raise further questions, the answers to which require us to expand significantly our Durkheimian horizons:

we should go beyond the somewhat simplistic idea of political ritual expressing—producing—constituting value integration seen as the essence of social integration (which is the banal but widely applied aspect of Durkheim’s theory) and take up instead the fertile idea that ritual has a cognitive dimension (this being, in any case, the central and original part of Durkheim’s theory), though placing it (as Durkheim did not) within a class-structured, conflictual and pluralistic model of society. [Accordingly] such rituals can be seen as modes of exercising, or seeking to exercise, power along the cognitive dimension [Lukes 1975:301].

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*Modern political rituals—and within that genre, rituals of development—highlight vividly the engagement between culture and politics. This article analyzes a development ritual from Sri Lanka from the multiple perspectives of its planner-participants as well as its audiences. The levels of complicity and conflict that emerge corroborate as well as complicate the notion of the cultural-political dialectic, thereby also expanding the reflexive/comparative task of anthropology. [modern political ritual, the dialectics of culture and politics, modernization and tradition, national development, Sri Lanka]*

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There emerges from these critiques the recognition that modern political rituals in any society are symbolic as well as ideological events and that their analyses must take into account what Cohen, defining the agenda of a (then) fledgling political anthropology, called “the dialectical interaction between two major variables: relationships of power and symbolism” (1969:231). In other words, not only is “ideology [constructed] as a cultural system” (Geertz 1973:193-233), but also, “there are . . . ideological aspects of symbol systems” (Giddens 1979:187).<sup>2</sup>

It is such a dialectic between ideology and culture that is explored in this paper. I investigate specifically the cultural legitimations of ideal political arrangements and political ratifications of selective cultural representations in a development ritual in modern Sri Lanka.

### **development discourse: the Mahavāli program**

Development rituals are a species of political rituals in Sri Lanka. To avoid confusion, let me explain that in this paper, I focus on a unique set of development rituals—the Kotmale water offerings. On this occasion, I will not discuss the more generic celebrations of development, namely, “opening ceremonies.”<sup>3</sup> This distinction is relevant only insofar as politicians consider some development projects (such as Kotmale) of sufficient national significance to merit not only the usual opening ceremony but also additional *ritual* attention. Furthermore, as my analysis demonstrates, the term ritual, with its connotations of the sacred, is more appropriate than the relatively “neutral” ceremony. However, mindful of Moore and Myerhoff’s attempt to disturb traditional dichotomies of sacred and secular (1977:19–23), I hasten to add that it is the apparent sacredness of this ritual that was crucial to the way in which it valorized (secular) development.

In Sri Lanka, “development” (*samvardhana*) refers not only to the production and distribution of material benefits—water, land, houses, roads, education, jobs: it is also a form of discourse. Until nudged into second place by the recent preoccupation with “national security,” “development” was the chief priority of the postcolonial state.

Development is the subject of, as well as context for, political speeches transformed into news headlines and disseminated nationwide through the press, radio and television. Development also produces national- and international-level conferences and meetings, as well as extensive local media coverage of these events. The media are further saturated by development advertisements, development journals and special publications of the various ministries, and countless documentary and feature productions on radio and television. (Notable in this regard are the new, single-episode television dramas spun around specific state development projects). Development discourse pervades the pedestrian consciousness in the guise of noisy Development Lottery ticket booths and vivid posters advertising upcoming development celebrations. Today, the genre of development celebrations includes opening ceremonies, rituals, exhibitions, carnivals and concerts. As a senior cabinet minister acknowledged in a newspaper interview, celebrating development—in modes sacred or secular—has become an indispensable tradition in Sri Lanka (Athulathmudali in *Divayina* 20/v/86).

These textual and performative contexts elaborate to varying degrees the meaning of modernization and tradition in Sri Lanka, of history, colonialism and independence, national identity and culture, material and spiritual well-being.<sup>4</sup> How these issues are cross-referenced in development discourse is particularly well illustrated in the context of the Accelerated Mahavāli Development Program (*kadinam mahavāli samvardhana vyapāraya*).

Described as Sri Lanka’s “core development project,” the Accelerated Mahavāli Program is an ambitious attempt to optimize the use of Sri Lanka’s longest river, the Mahavāli. The Mahavāli begins its approximately 337-kilometer journey in the central hill country and flows in a northeasterly direction until it reaches the ocean at Trincomalee (Figure 1).

The first plans to develop the irrigation and hydropower potential of the Mahavāli river were launched in the late 1960s. In 1978, the United National Party (UNP) government decided to

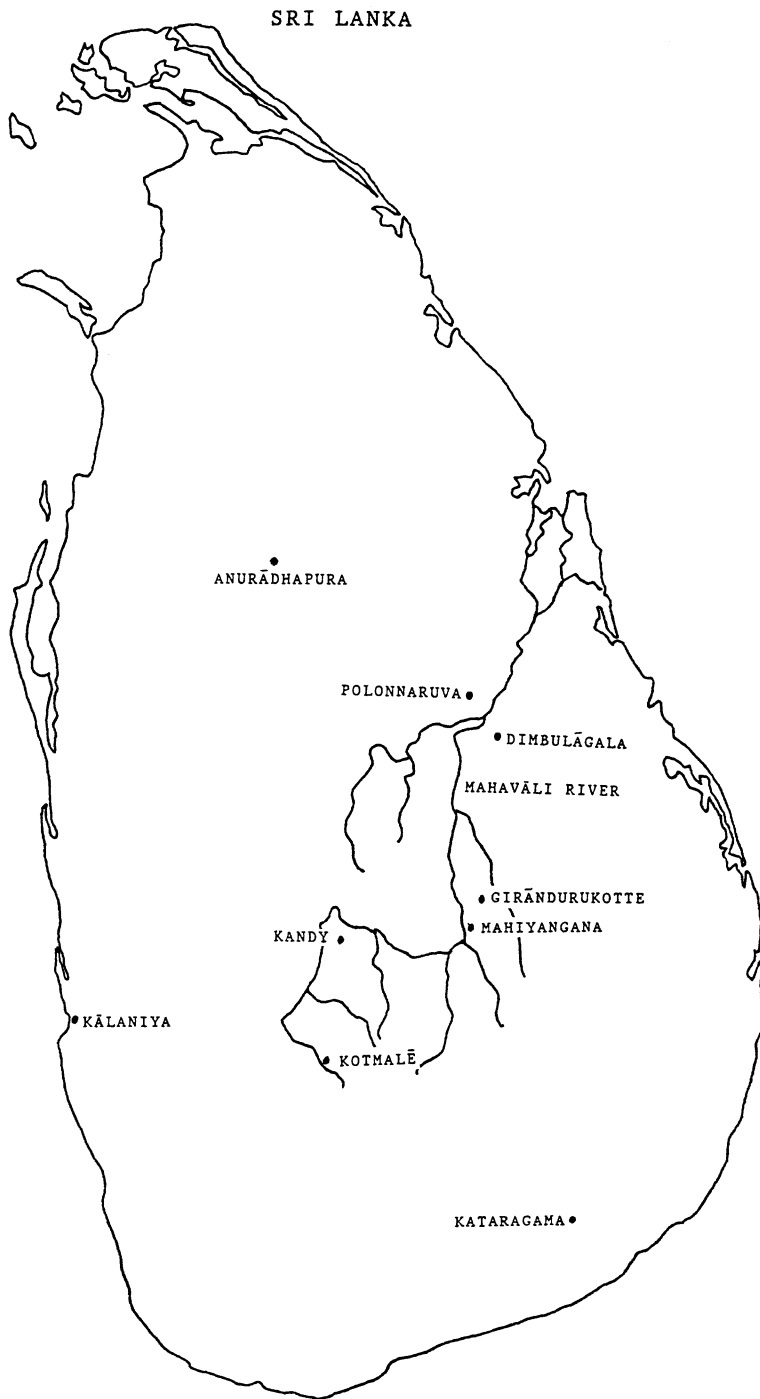


Figure 1.

“accelerate” the 30-year development program then underway with a view to completing it within 6 years. At its inception, the Accelerated Program was expected to provide irrigation to approximately 130,000 hectares of new agricultural lands and 37,000 hectares of existing paddy lands, more than double the country’s hydropower capacity to 400 megawatts, and expand job opportunities. A total of about 140,000 families, many of whom are landless peasants

and evacuees from the upstream reservoir sites were to be resettled in the new Mahavāli agricultural settlements (Economic Review II, 4 and 5, 1985). At present (1987) almost all the upstream hydropower projects and many of the downstream irrigation networks are in operation. However, resettlement work is behind schedule: by the end of 1985, only 13 percent (18,150 farm families) had been settled. Financed with a combination of local resources and foreign loans, the Accelerated Program constituted 35 percent of the national budget from 1978–1984 and is expected to exceed 40 billion Sri Lanka rupees or 1.5 billion US dollars. (Economic Review II, 4 and 5, 1985).

The Mahavāli Program establishes the material conditions of modernization as well as a correlative system of modernity that privileges science and technology and a centralized state bureaucracy, and incorporates agro-industrial production and distribution into a capitalist market-economy. On one level, modernity thus defined is viewed in Sri Lanka as an essentially Western-derived model which is, therefore, alien at best or antithetical at worst to indigenous culture and tradition. At another level of popular and political consciousness, modernization through irrigated agricultural development is not just compatible with, but a reincarnation of, an ancient, indigenous, national culture whose features are indisputably ethnic (Sinhala) and religious (Buddhist). In other words, agricultural development is a nationalist enterprise.<sup>5</sup>

In 1983, when ceremonially commissioning the first of the Accelerated Mahavāli projects—the Maduru oya reservoir—the Minister for Mahavāli Development, Gamini Dissanayake declared:

The soul of the new Mahavāli society . . . will be the cherished values of the ancient society which was inspired and nourished by the Tank, the Temple and the Paddy field [*Daily News* 2/vii/83].

Such symbolic declarations—constantly confirmed by government officials on numerous occasions—were also endorsed in more concrete form. The Mahavāli Ministry commissioned a 41 meter-high Buddha statue at the Maduru oya dam and a *dāgāba*—named the Mahavāli Maha Sāya—on the bank of the Kotmale hydropower reservoir. The Maduru oya Buddha deliberately recalls a well-known 5th-century parallel, the Aukana Buddha who gazes over the Kala vāva reservoir built by King Datusena. The Kotmale *dāgāba* attempts to reconstruct materially and symbolically—in a very different time and place—the nostalgic, nationalist landscape of Sri Lanka's ancient hydraulic culture.

In contemporary Sri Lanka, the tank (*vāva*) and (Buddhist) temple (*dāgāba*) are used, both officially and popularly, as metonyms for material prosperity and spiritual well-being, respectively. Together, they constitute an iconographic code for the *dharmistha samājaya* (righteous society) slogan espoused by the UNP government. They signify a particular type of past as well as the (desired) shape of the present and future.

Tanks and temples commissioned by ancient monarchs constitute some of the more dramatic remains of Sri Lanka's hydraulic civilization, which spanned the first 12 centuries of the Christian era. Concentrated in the North Central Province—popularly known as Rajarata, literally, King's Country—this civilization radiated from the kingdoms of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruva. It was Sri Lanka's Golden Age. According to popular and official historical narratives, the next several centuries of history represent a (temporarily) entropic trajectory, punctuated by invasions from South India which destroyed the Rajarata civilization, the drift to the southwest of Sinhala kingdoms, fragmentation of polities, and the gradual encroachment of Western colonialism culminating in the British capture of the last Sinhala kingdom in 1815 (see generally, de Silva 1981).

However, Sinhala historical consciousness is cyclical rather than linear, insofar as the past is imagined as realizable in the future. When independence from colonial rule was declared in 1948, nation-building (in a political-economic and cultural sense) became imperative. As in many postcolonial societies, in Sri Lanka nation-building could be characterized as oriented simultaneously past-ward and forward. It is articulated consistently in terms of reclaiming (for

the future) the past; in this case, that ancient (Sinhala) heritage of tanks and temples signifying material and spiritual prosperity.

With specific reference to the Mahavāli Program, this symbolic process of historical reclamation also includes a demographical and geographical dimension. As noted already, under the Mahavāli Program a total of 140,000 families will be resettled eventually in new agricultural settlement zones within and around the Rajarata. Recycling a rhetoric that recurs throughout modern agricultural settlement policy, the Minister of Mahavāli Development declared that the Mahavāli resettlement program represented “a return of the people to the ancient homeland . . . in the Rajarata” (Dissanayake 1983:6).<sup>6</sup>

### **the Kotmale *jala puja***

The nationalist contours of development discourse outlined above are dramatically elaborated in the *jala puja* or water offering ritual, which was performed to mark the successful completion of the Kotmale project. This ritual involved the distribution of Kotmale water to five important Buddhist centers in Sri Lanka.

The *jala puja* was performed on 17 August 1985, a week before the Kotmale reservoir and powerhouse were officially commissioned. It commenced on the bank of the newly filled Kotmale reservoir, which is located near the confluence of the Mahavāli and its tributary, Kotmale oya, about 20 kilometers south of Kandy (see Figure 1). At an auspicious time close to dawn, while Buddhist monks chanted blessings (*pirit*), 30 silver pots were filled with Kotmale water and conducted in a motorcade to Kandy.

In Kandy, the water pots were dispatched in separate processions. Two pots were conveyed to the Dalada Maligava, the Temple of the Tooth Relic of the Buddha—the Dalada—which is the national palladium of Sri Lanka. There, amidst more *pirit* chanting, the Mahavāli Minister offered the “first water” from Kotmale to the Tooth Relic.

Four processions bearing the remaining 28 water pots fanned north, south, east and west from Kandy. The northbound procession headed for the Sri Maha Bodhi—the sacred Bo tree—at Anuradhapura, the southbound for the Kiri Vehera at Kataragama, the westbound procession for the Kālani Vehera near Colombo and the eastbound one for the Mahiyangana Vehera (see Figure 2).

These five ritual destinations designated the center and four cardinal points of Sri Lanka. Thus, the processions of Kotmale water, in particular, and the Mahavāli Program, in general, conveyed symbolically the Mahavāli Program throughout the “length and breadth” of the country.

These processions also traced the axes of a sacred geography. The destinations—Kandy, Anuradhapura, Mahiyangana, Kataragama and Kālaniya—are popular, national, Buddhist pilgrimage centers. The Temple of the Tooth in Kandy and the Sri Maha Bodhi at Anuradhapura are the two most sacred Buddhist sites in Sri Lanka. The Sri Maha Bodhi is believed to be a direct descendant of the tree under which Gautama Buddha attained enlightenment. Kālaniya, Mahiyangana and Kataragama are believed to be three of the 16 places in Sri Lanka visited by the Buddha. Kataragama—the main shrine of the Hindu god, Skanda—is sacred to Hindus and also Moslems, while its popularity as a Buddhist pilgrimage place has grown in recent decades (Obeyesekere 1977).

The symbolic rather than geographic importance of these ritual destinations is especially clear in the choice of the eastern and northern destinations. Both Mahiyangana and Anuradhapura are situated significantly inland from the eastern and northern boundaries of the country. In fact, it is Nagadipa—the ancient Buddhist shrine off the Jaffna peninsula—that would have qualified as the logical northern point. At present, the northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka—where Tamils are the majority—constitute the disputed territory in the conflict be-

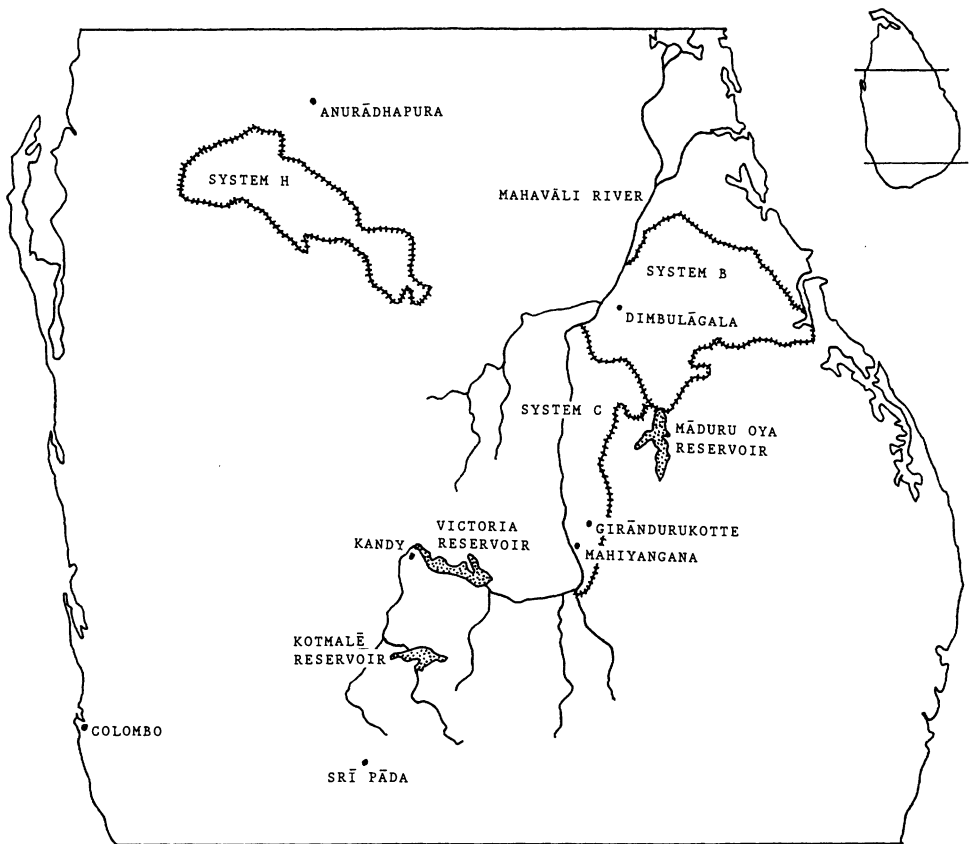


Figure 2. The accelerated Mahavāli Development Program.

tween Tamil militants and the UNP government. Thus, in effect, the *jala puja* destinations demarcate the parameters of a shrinking Sinhala Buddhist state, a state that no longer appears to control the entire island of Sri Lanka. (In this regard, it is ironical that the territory mapped in this ritual coincides roughly with the Sinhala state as defined in the maps of the Tamil nationalists.)

All four processions shared certain features. Each consisted of a small truck, decorated with traditional art motifs, that carried the water pots, and vehicles for the monks, drummers and officials. The procession routes were decorated with flags—notably Sri Lankan and Buddhist flags and, in some areas, also Mahavāli Ministry flags bearing the coiled cobra insignia. Banners, emblazoned with congratulatory messages, and decorative arches (*toran*) framed important junctions. These decorations had been financed by local merchants and executed by community groups. As the procession approached a town along the route where a reception had been planned, chanting monks and drummers signaled their arrival. Curious crowds lined the streets and some offered flowers to the water pots. The reception committee greeted the procession participants and served them refreshments. Then local government officials made speeches—of welcome and congratulation—which were reciprocated by the chief Mahavāli official escorting the procession. Invariably, these speeches extolled the achievements of the Mahavāli Program and emphasized the importance of safeguarding religious, cultural and national values alongside economic development.

The north and eastbound processions had a special significance for those people most immediately affected by the Mahavāli Program: these two processions traversed through parts of the new agricultural settlement areas. The Anuradhapura procession proceeded northwest from

Kandy, across the settlement zone of System H to the Sri Maha Bodhi. The Mahiyangana procession took a circuitous route to its destination, to pass through the two new settlement areas of Systems B and C (see Figure 2).

The Mahiyangana-bound procession was unique for two reasons. It included not one but three *jala puja* destinations—the Dimbulagala hermitage in System B, the Girandurukotte Buddhist Center in System C and the Mahiyangana temple. The first two temples received offerings of water as well as land. The grants of land—20 acres of paddy fields to the Dimbulagala hermitage and five acres to the Girandurukotte Buddhist Center—were recorded on rock inscriptions that had been commissioned specially for this occasion.

### **interpreting the *jala puja*: precedents, ancient and modern**

The Kotmale *jala puja* ritual was not the first of its kind. According to its organizers—the public relations officials at the Mahaväli Ministry—it was modeled on ancient historical ritual precedents. But before I investigate these more ancient ancestors, let me briefly turn to more recent, development-ritual predecessors.

The first project to be completed under the original Mahaväli Development Program was the Polgolla diversion. In 1976, the Polgolla dam—which channeled Mahaväli waters to the North Central Province—was declared open by the (then) Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) government. The development celebrations organized for this occasion began the day before the opening ceremonies with a water procession. At the conclusion of an all-night *pirit* ceremony at the Polgolla dam site, seven pots of Mahaväli water were conducted in a “royal procession” (*raja perahāra*)—of elephants, drummers, dancers and temple chiefs—along the approximately six-kilometer route to the nearby city of Kandy. There, the water pots were conveyed to the Temple of the Tooth, and the shrines of the four guardian deities of Sri Lanka—Natha, Vishnu, Kataragama and Pattini.

It was 9 years later, after a change of government and the “acceleration” of Mahaväli development work, that another *jala puja* was arranged. This time, the ritual marked the completion of the Victoria hydropower project, which is located about 26 kilometers east of Kandy. Victoria water was collected in nine silver pots and offered by the Mahaväli Minister to the Tooth Relic and the Sri Maha Bodhi at Anuradhapura.

The Victoria water ritual was also complemented by a fire ritual, which evidently represented the hydropower aspect of the project. Whereas water was dispersed, fire was unified. Four torches were carried from four temples, three of which are located in or around Mahaväli settlement areas. The torch-bearers converged in the center of the country, at the sacred mountain of Sri Pada, where, together with the Mahaväli Minister, they lit a single Eternal Mahaväli Flame.

It is clear that the Kotmale *jala puja* borrowed and elaborated various features from the Polgolla and Victoria water (and fire) rituals. And this is not altogether surprising since there is some degree of organizational continuity: notably, a few of the officials who planned the Polgolla ritual were also responsible for initiating the Victoria and Kotmale *jala puja*. In general, these officials are Sinhala Buddhist men from rural or suburban backgrounds, educated mainly in Sinhala (but also proficient in some English), with a keen sense of Sinhala history and culture.

As I mentioned earlier, for these officials, who choreographed and also participated in such development rituals, the Kotmale *jala puja* continue an ancient (national) ritual tradition that links water (irrigation) and religion (Buddhism), the tank and the temple. In turn, this understanding of Sinhala culture is linked to the larger dilemma that underlies all development discourse in Sri Lanka: “tradition” versus “modernization.”

In the words of one planner-participant of the Kotmale ritual:

“Sinhala Buddhist culture is spiritually inclined; it was influenced by Hindu culture and hence, developed an abstract philosophy of consciousness. Economic or material development is given very little attention. The eastern philosophical system stresses the spiritual over the material.”



The definition of Sinhala culture as essentially spiritual (*adyatmika*) in contrast to materialistic (*laukika*) Western culture is widespread in contemporary Sri Lanka. This categorization is particularly popular among the nationalist ranks of the Sinhala intelligentsia who evoke it, most notably, in their critiques of the UNP government's free-market, "Open Economy" policies. Of course, the spiritualist-East, materialist-West dichotomy is hardly new. In fact, it derives from orientalist world views of the colonial period and today is spiked with Sinhala nationalism. Accordingly, the East is conceptualized as materially poor but spiritually secure and culturally rich, while the materially secure West is considered spiritually bankrupt and culturally impoverished.

This basic dichotomy of spiritualist-East versus materialist-West is further complicated within development discourse. The official quoted above also stressed: "economic development must take place in accordance with our spiritual orientation. . . . We must guard against the excesses of economic development." The Mahavāli Minister would undoubtedly have agreed; on one occasion, he had declared,

economic viability is only the outer rind of a society while virtue and morality form its inner core. . . . Though economic progress leads to culture, the physical and spiritual well-being of man and the harmony and contentment within a society depends also on its ethical values and moral virtues. It is because of the absence of these virtues that even the most affluent nations are today facing decline and disaster [Dissanayake in *Daily News Supplement* 2/vii/83].

Obviously, "development" is regarded with ambivalence. On the one hand, it is synonymous with Western materialism and hence accused of endangering indigenous culture and corrupting traditional morals. On the other hand, "development" also improves physical living conditions, and thus it is fundamental for the economic progress of "third world" societies. It is both derided and desired at the same time.

The *jala puja* ritual evidently offered one type of solution to the (Mahavāli) development dilemma: presenting (or posing) modernization in the guise of tradition.

The choice of a water-offering ritual format was, according to its organizers, particularly consonant with a long tradition of similar water rituals in Sri Lanka. One official pointed out to me that according to the Sinhala chronicles, in ancient times, the Sri Maha Bodhi was bathed ritually with water from neighboring irrigation reservoirs. Moreover, he added to clinch his point, Bodhi bathing rituals are still practiced by villagers in the North Central Province during times of acute drought.

Indeed, textual evidence as well as current ritual practices demonstrate the centrality of water not only in the worship of the Sri Maha Bodhi but also of the Tooth Relic. The 6th-century chronicle, the *Mahavamsa* (1964) and its successor, the *Culavamsa* (1953) record at least three occasions when the Sri Maha Bodhi was ritually bathed by a monarch (*Mahavamsa* XIX:50–51, XXXIV:58–59 and *Culavamsa* XXXVIII:55). Furthermore, in his study of the "rituals of the Kandyan state," H.L. Seneviratne describes the water-related rituals of the Tooth Relic. The most important of these is the *dalada perahāra*, or Procession of the Tooth Relic, performed every August in Kandy and concluding on the bank of the Mahavāli river with a water-cutting ceremony (*diya kāpima*). This procession is a celebration of (military) victory as well as a rain-making or (agricultural) fertility ritual (Seneviratne 1978).

These mytho-historical antecedents—some more consciously evoked today than others—share a common feature. In general, they can be defined as illocutionary magical acts (Tambiah 1973:219–222) designed to ensure proper rainfall and agricultural prosperity. However, the modern *jala puja* ritual, performed in honor of the successful completion of a hydropower reservoir, is hardly a rite for rain. Rather, it is a rite signifying culture, the culture of a bygone era that evidently produced those original fertility rituals, a culture whose basis was Buddhism and irrigated rice agriculture, a tank and temple culture. Therefore, if the ancient precedents are a first-order "ritual language" signifying fertility and prosperity, then the Mahavāli *jala puja* are

a “metalanguage . . . a second language in which one speaks about the first” (Barthes 1984:115), a ritual language signifying national (Sinhala Buddhist) culture.

### **the religion and politics of ritual**

That the signification of culture through development ritual is a political act was explicitly and implicitly acknowledged by the Mahavāli officials I interviewed. According to one of the organizers of both the Victoria and Kotmale *jala puja*, if historical accuracy was the main consideration, then the appropriate ritual for this occasion was not a water procession but a *Bodhi puja*, a communal ritual in which a variety of special offerings are dedicated to a sacred Bo tree. The issue here is not the veracity of this official’s ritual expertise but the fact that in his opinion, the Mahavāli *jala puja* did not follow exactly some historical ritual formula. In fact, he admitted, since it was designed as an island-wide procession, the *jala puja* guaranteed the Mahavāli Program far greater publicity than a single *Bodhi puja* could have. Or, put another way, the *jala puja* was a compelling ritual advertisement for the Mahavāli Program. It seems then, while the Mahavāli Ministry intended this development ritual to emphasize the protection and promotion of religious/cultural values in or through (economic) development, in turn, religion/culture were also the media through which development was publicized. The medium was the message and vice versa.

Another official was more explicit about the relations between religion, politics and development. He offered the following syllogism:

“Religion is something people accept without question. So when you connect religion to the Mahavāli [Program], people are likely to accept it in the same way. There is political gain involved.”

According to this logic, religion (and culture) appear to be mythic in Barthes’ sense. Religion ritualized for development gives development and the politics that organizes it “a natural and eternal justification . . . a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact” (Barthes 1984:143).

This process of “naturalizing” or “mythifying” development becomes clearer if we scrutinize the form adopted by the *jala puja*, the Buddhist procession. The paradigmatic model in this case is the annual procession of the Tooth Relic—a pageant of whip-crackers, drummers, dancers, flag-bearers, temple officials, and elephants, including the special tusker bearing the replica casket of the Tooth Relic (*karanduva*) (see Seneviratne 1978). In general, Buddhist and Hindu processions display sacred objects, from relics of the Buddha, to the insignia or images of deities.

Consider, in contrast, the Kotmale *jala puja*. It displayed a rather secular object—water from a hydropower project. Although the Kotmale water pots were not enshrined in caskets on the backs of elephants,<sup>7</sup> they were certainly treated as if they were ritual objects. The water was collected at an auspicious time to the chanting of *pirit*; it was transported in specially decorated vehicles (*sandarshana riya*, literally, “exhibition vehicles”) to sacred places; the processions were accompanied by ceremonial drummers and *pirit*-chanting monks; en route, public receptions were choreographed; notably, flowers were offered to the water pots; and the water was blessed and offered to objects of veneration—the Bodhi and temples. In short, the *jala puja* rituals sacralized Kotmale water, the Kotmale project and the Accelerated Mahavāli Development Program. If, in the wake of Durkheim, Marx and Weber, social theorists as well as planners and politicians fear that modernization precipitates secularization, the *jala puja* strove to demonstrate (in illocutionary mode) that that process is reversible: development ritual can sacralize the secular and traditionalize the modern.

### **“the thread of cultural continuity:” the land grants**

While the water rituals were modeled on a religious paradigm—the procession—the land grants appropriated a monarchical paradigm. The epigraphic record in Sri Lanka reveals that

in ancient times, monarchs and officials of the king issued grants of land to temples in order to amass merit—not to mention the support of the *sangha*. The Mahavāli official who was chiefly responsible for arranging the land grant ceremonies (he also composed the text inscribed on the stone markers) was very much aware of the political significance of imitating this tradition. In this case, the politics was underscored by the fact that the beneficiaries were two important Buddhist institutions located within the administrative jurisdiction of the Mahavāli Ministry.

The Mahavāli Minister also holds the portfolio of Minister of Land and Land Development. In this capacity, he has compensated many Buddhist temples that lost their lands to Mahavāli projects. However, Dimbulagala and Girandurukotte do not fall into this category. Dimbulagala—a popular pilgrimage site—is an ancient forest hermitage, run by a monk who is, reputedly, an energetic and controversial Sinhala Buddhist nationalist. In contrast, the Buddhist Center at Girandurukotte is a new institution, the establishment of which was aided by the Mahavāli Ministry.

The Minister of Mahavāli Development has frequently expressed the need for state patronage of culture and religion in the new Mahavāli settlements. (Since a majority of Mahavāli settlers are Sinhala Buddhists, the religion is Buddhism and the culture is Sinhala). He has pointed out that “the cultural sustenance of the settler” is often ignored by planners who expect “the cultural infrastructure to grow endogenously.” In other words, so far, culture has been up to the settlers. This was completely unrealistic because “[t]he thread of cultural continuity could snap under the stresses and strains of resettlement.” Therefore, he maintained, it was “the responsibility of the State . . . to replicate the cultural milieu that existed in the village in the new settlements.” Specially with reference to Systems B and C—which were sparsely populated areas before the influx of new settlers, and hence considered culturally “arid”—the Minister proposed that,

[t]he Mahaweli Authority will perforce have to meet the new challenge of providing for temples, as our temples and shrines were, and still are the well-springs of our cultural heritage. Our customs, rituals, arts and crafts, song and dance all derive from our places of worship. . . . These facets of our culture have to be preserved no matter the cost, as they, and they alone give us our distinct national identity (Dissanayake 1983:5).

The Dimbulagala and Girandurukotte land grants are material and symbolic manifestations of this policy. They suggest the beginnings of state patronage extended to Buddhist institutions within the new agricultural settlement zones. Further analysis into the types of working relationships that will emerge between these (and other) temples and the Mahavāli administrative bureaucracy would be necessary to determine the importance of this “encompassment” of religion by the political-economic domain (cf. Dumont 1970).

It is also significant that the land donations are publicly proclaimed in the form of rock inscriptions. On previous such occasions, land donations made by the state to Buddhist temples have taken the form of the ceremonial transfer of *sannas*, or title deeds. In the case of the Mahavāli temples, the *sannas* were inscribed on stone, and the texts imitated loosely the style of ancient royal inscriptions.

Both the Dimbulagala and Girandurukotte inscriptions began with an introduction to the Kotmale project and proceeded to describe the *jala puja* processions conducted “in accordance with our cultural heritage” (the Dimbulagala text). Specified in the text was the extent of land gifted, its precise location and injunctions pertaining to its use. It was stipulated that the income from the lands should support religious and cultural activities, such as an annual Asala (August) procession. The inscriptions ended by recording the date and year of the grant followed by the identity of the grantor. Written in the first person singular, these inscriptions were signed by Gamini Dissanayake in his capacity as Minister of Lands and Land Development and Mahavāli Development.

The Mahavāli inscriptions also reproduced ancient iconography, the sun and moon symbols. The sun and moon signify eternity (“for as long as the sun and moon will shine”) and, since

various Sri Lankan monarchs have proclaimed themselves heirs of the Sun or Moon dynasty, these symbols also have connotations of royalty. In contemporary Sri Lanka, this heavenly pair frequently adorn the large decorative arches (*toran*) that are erected at religious and political celebrations.

On the inscriptions, placed between the sun and moon, was the insignia of the Mahavāli Ministry, a circular emblem depicting a seven-hooded, four-coiled *naga*. On the upper semi-circle were the words “Mahavāli” in English, Sinhala, and Tamil and two stalks of rice curved around the lower half. According to the archaeological record as well as current popular belief, the *naga* (cobra) is the guardian of water and treasure and hence considered a particularly fitting symbol for the Mahavāli Program.

## power politics of development celebrations

The installation of development projects by unveiling stone or concrete plaques and monoliths, is an essential “tradition” in an opening ceremony. However, there are some noteworthy differences between these ubiquitous development markers and the Mahavāli inscriptions. First, the latter did not strictly “open” a development project, but recorded a land donation. Second, development markers are invariably in the three national languages, while the land inscriptions were in Sinhala only. Third, while development activities are usually recorded in the third person (as reported speech), the Mahavāli inscriptions were in the first person and “authored” by the Minister; in fact his personal authorization was clearly established by the fact that his signature was attached to the texts. Fourth, unlike the usual markers of development, which bear the insignia of the state, the Mahavāli inscriptions displayed the insignia of the Ministry of Mahavāli Development.

These contrasts suggest that it is not just politics—or the legitimation of state power—which is at issue in these development rituals, but personal politics—legitimizing the power of individuals who represent the state. Such an interpretation is corroborated by other aspects of Mahavāli development discourse as well as intra-party politics which cannot be detailed here. Suffice it to mention just one relevant example, the Kotmale project’s publicity campaign.

The central slogan of this campaign was “Kotmale, The Golden Valley, Where Past, Present and Future Meet.” This historical convergence was achieved most notably by drawing parallels between the Sinhala hero-king Dutugamunu—who had briefly sought refuge in Kotmale—and the Mahavāli Minister—whose home town was in Kotmale. Stressed in the publicity campaign as well as in speeches and interviews by the Minister was the fact that the king had united his country by recapturing the north from Tamil occupation, while the Minister hoped also to “unite the country” through economic development programs such as the Mahavāli. Undoubtedly, this close association between a popular Sinhala hero and the Mahavāli Minister served to enhance the latter’s reputation as the heir to (or reincarnation of) Dutugāmunu.<sup>8</sup>

That the Mahavāli land grants and the *jala puja* rituals were attempts to legitimize individual—over and above group—claims to power is also supported by a more general phenomenon: development celebrations have become domains in which—and symbolic modes through which—competing claims to power are articulated.

In contemporary Sri Lanka, political competition among senior members of the ruling party, the UNP, is focused specially on the issue of future party leadership. Although the principle of dynastic succession has been a prominent trend in electoral politics since independence, President Jayawardene—who is 81 years old—has not yet groomed a successor.

The chief contenders for the job of future party leader-cum-eventual head of state are three senior ministers, each of whom is closely identified with an important aspect of the national development enterprise. Each man has maintained a highly visible public profile partly through the mass medium of development celebrations.

The Prime Minister, in his capacity as Minister for Housing and Construction, is the architect of the Gam Udava (Village Awakening) Program. Under this countrywide program, old villages are rebuilt, renamed and “returned” to the villagers. A Gam Udava lottery further publicizes and collects money for this scheme. In addition to the individual “village awakening” ceremonies, the Prime Minister also presides over an annual event (which coincides with his birthday), a week-long Gam Udava festival combining entertainment, education and commerce.

The National Security Minister—whose former portfolio was Trade—was chiefly responsible for deregulating and restructuring the economy on a capitalist, free trade model. In this case, the benefits of the “Open Economy” are publicized in the form of Mahapola (literally, Great Fair)—massive trade fairs regularly held in different parts of the country. Here, too, a Mahapola Lottery has been organized to collect funds for university scholarships. In spite of his present high profile—as the man responsible for managing the guerilla war in the North and East—the National Security Minister continues to preside over Mahapola celebrations.

Recall, in this connection, his astute observation quoted earlier that development celebrations are a well-established “tradition” in Sri Lanka. It follows from this that not only does the public expect a ceremony, but they also know what that ceremony will probably include: a procession of politicians, plaque unveiling, lamp lighting, *pirit* chanting and speeches, just to mention a few routine features. In other words, development “traditions” such as these are familiar, predictable and standardized. The distinctive and extravagant Gam Udava, Mahapola and Mahavāli celebrations are therefore designed to stand out, to add a tang of novelty to the “routinized” development ceremonial scenario. Indeed, they vie with each other to catch and impress the biggest crowds; they engage in what Steven Lukes (following Schattenschneider) called the “mobilisation of bias” (Lukes 1975:305). And in articulating the symbolic dynamics of political competition, the *jala puja* ritual, in particular, as well as the innovations sketched briefly above, could be described as a sort of (development) ritual potlatch.

## criticism and complicity

So far, I have focused entirely on the production and presentation of development ritual. However, my analysis would be incomplete without considering audience reactions as well. By audience, I refer not only to those who experience these rituals directly, but also include those who learn about, as well as express their views on, development celebrations through the media. My observations are informed by conversations with those who attend these events as well as culled from newspaper commentaries on development celebrations.

The immediate audience of the Kotmale rituals was by no means homogeneous. The areas traversed by these rituals ensured a predominantly Sinhala (and, for the most part, also largely Buddhist) audience. As is usually the case, there were more men than women, and a mix of mostly young to middle-aged people. It was also possible to distinguish at least two categories. There were the organizers and their supporters who do not usually criticize (except in innuendo) either the ritual or the development project it honors, and the people in whose area the procession or ritual takes place.

While specific motives differ, people in the latter group are usually motivated by a fundamental “let’s go see” curiosity, especially when novelties such as water processions and well-known politicians (like the Mahavāli Minister) are featured. Perhaps as a consequence, in the context of development celebrations, political coercion does not generally apply, although this may be a factor in the case of local, small-scale events such as political meetings. In fact, in the case of the *jala puja*, the event was the incentive: as suggested by the official quoted earlier, culture—especially religion—was used in development to draw the crowds.

It is not surprising that audiences—both direct and indirect—have mixed reactions to the development rituals and the projects they celebrate. Several factors, such as prior political con-

victions, the degree of familiarity with the development project being celebrated, and, sometimes, also a sense of cultural and religious expectations shape audience perceptions. Generally, left-leaning members of the Sinhala intelligentsia (who rarely attend development rituals), those who have been adversely affected by the project in question, and confirmed cultural/religious purists are the strongest critics of development rituals. In contrast, the reactions of government supporters, those who have benefited from the development project and those who are not particularly concerned with how culture or religion is appropriated by the state, range from the enthusiastic to the apathetic. Of course none of these factors operates singly, but rather in combination and complicated by other personal and political considerations.

Criticism of development rituals in particular (and development discourse in general) operates at two levels. There are the critiques that are constrained within the parameters of the genre itself, such as the comparative comment, "Gam Udava celebrations are much better [grander] than the Mahavāli ones," or, "the *jala puja* rituals are manipulating religion."

The latter criticism is more radical than the former, deconstructing the forms as well as intended functions of development celebrations. For example, some critics were skeptical about the Mahavāli Ministry's pretensions to safeguard and promote culture and religion through rituals such as the *jala puja*, when little effort was made to save numerous ancient religious monuments from being submerged under upstream reservoir projects like the one at Kotmale. Of course, these may not be accidental ironies: the elaborate and innovative Mahavāli celebrations, including the ritual just described, could be seen as a now-redundant gesture of religious/cultural concern, an attempt to enshrine the spirit once the heritage was destroyed.

The escalation of the ethnic conflict between the government and the separatist Tamil groups during 1985 also sharpened the criticism of development celebrations. Among others, newspaper critics drew scenarios of power-hungry politicians who impress (or dupe) the masses (Disanayaka in *Divayina* 12/v/85), pointed to the vast sums of money wasted on celebrating development (de Silva in *Divayina* 18/ix/85) and alleged that cultural preoccupations serve to camouflage real economic and political problems (Medananda in *Divayina* 17/iii/85).

As for cultural camouflage, some members of the audience whose former, familiar livelihoods were destroyed by Mahavāli development certainly agreed. According to one young man, a swidden cultivator, newly resettled as a paddy farmer in System C, development rituals and extensive media publicity amount to "make-believe" (*mavā pām*).

In fact, the politically tempered inventiveness of development rituals was parodied in the press soon after the performance of the Kotmale *jala puja*. Whether or not the timing was coincidental is unclear. Be that as it may, the satirist described a dream in which he witnessed a religious/political procession. The details of the procession were laden with antigovernment allusions. Its climax was not a tusker—as, for example, in the *dalada perahāra*—but a donkey, decorated with tinsel trimmings, carrying a sign (not a casket) that announced, "Majestic tusker, [only] short-legged." The dream interpreter (with the allegorical name, Janasena, or "people's army") unraveled the dream's meaning: "when you can't turn a donkey into an elephant, you can stick a sign on it decreeing it to be an elephant (Sadi in *Divayina* 23/viii/85).<sup>9</sup>

This parody dramatizes the point that emerged earlier, namely, that political ritual is both literally and semiotically a system of signs. It reassigns meaning. It displaces and replaces the meanings of objects and events—whether they are donkeys, or water pots, processions, inscriptions, hydropower projects and even the Development enterprise itself.<sup>10</sup>

It is also clear that audiences who witness political ritual—and not just in satiric hallucinations in popular newspapers—are aware and some, even critical, of the fact that this semiotic process is political. It is the politics of ritual—that ritual is appropriated to legitimize individual and/or group interests—that critics object to most vociferously. However, criticism at this level does not preclude complicity at another. That political rituals such as the *jala puja* establish a certain image of culture slips by hardly noticed.

The *jala puja* rituals portray, indeed privilege, an essentially Sinhala Buddhist cultural identity. It “define[s] away alternatives” (Lukes 1975:305). Although all Sinhalese are not Buddhists, most Sinhalese—including officials who plan rituals and audiences who witness them—share a fundamentally Sinhala Buddhist sense of national identity. Political discourse actualized in state ceremonials reaffirms this “imagined community” (Anderson 1983) linked, presumably by blood, geography, history, language, culture and (for many) religion. In doing so, it levels, perhaps temporarily, economic (class), social (caste) and political (party) differences within this community.<sup>11</sup> The boundaries of difference are drawn not within the Sinhala Buddhist community, but, implicitly, outside it, between ethnic groups.

As national identity is defined (both materially and symbolically) exclusively as Sinhala Buddhist, other ethnic identities are marginalized, a process that undoubtedly contributed to the rise of a militant Tamil nationalism. The bitter and bloody ethnic conflict that ensued diminished the prospect for a multi-ethnic national culture and instead encouraged strident as well as subtle forms of exclusive (Sinhala and Tamil) nationalisms. Especially at such a time, under such volatile conditions, the political inflections of culture disseminated through state development ritual can hardly be ignored.

### rethinking the dialectic of culture and politics

The *jala puja* development ritual provides a particularly vivid demonstration of the dialectical engagement between the cultural and the political. While political power is defined and displayed in shared cultural forms, culture itself becomes politicized: Ideology is a cultural system just as Culture is ideological.

On the ethnographic level, the many voices heard in this text also complicate this dialectic. Insofar as the the selection and recomposition of Sinhala cultural features as national culture remain largely unchallenged, or even unproblematized, culture remains opaquely ideological. However, the cultural construction of politics/ideology appears far more transparent, not only to its strongest critics, but also to the planner-participants of political ritual.

This tension between, and containment of, complicity and criticism toward political rituals has another implication. It complicates the task of comparing Western political theories—which separate the symbolic from the material, the cultural from the political—with non-Western practices and theories (cf. Geertz 1980). As colonialism, nationalism, the dilemmas of economic modernization and political conflict transform “non-Western” societies such as Sri Lanka, notions regarding the political and cultural, as well as the modern and traditional and Western and Eastern, are disturbed and have to be renegotiated. As our analyses of these processes uncover multiple centers and levels of cultural critiques (cf. Marcus and Fischer 1986), it is certain that the reflexive enterprise of anthropology will become not only far more complex but, as a result, also more challenging.

### notes

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<sup>1</sup>On this occasion, Cohen referred to the political rituals of “contemporary industrial societies” (1969:228). However, he did not acknowledge studies of British and American political ritual already pub-

lished—for example, Shils and Young's analysis of a British coronation (1953), Warner's discussion of U.S. Memorial Day (1959) and Bellah's account of "civil religion" in the U.S.A. (1967). (See Lukes 1975, for a critique of these). By this time (1969), the subject of political ritual had also been addressed generally in Apter's essay on "political religion" (1963) and Edelman's study on "the symbolic uses of politics" (1967).

<sup>2</sup>Also informative here are Pierre Bourdieu's exploration of the various domains of symbolic power (1977), and Stuart Hall's survey of Marxist theories of culture (with special reference to the media) and ideology (1979).

<sup>3</sup>Opening ceremonies (*vivurta kirime utsava*) regularly include variations on the following features: the procession of chief guests led by traditional drummers and dancers, unfurling ceremonial flags and unveiling a plaque or monolith recording the event; declaring the project open; lighting a traditional brass oil lamp to the tattoo of ceremonial drums; religious blessings; speeches of the chief guests; a vote of thanks and the national anthem. In the case of important Mahavāli projects such as the "ceremonial commissioning" of hydropower projects, these events are heralded by extensive multimedia advertising campaigns, and also include a "cultural procession" of local school children performing traditional dances, the Mahavāli song—which is sung by school children—and the cancellation of a special commemorative stamp.

<sup>4</sup>James Peacock has made similar observations with regard to the development (modernization) process in his innovative study of modernization in East Java, through the dramatic genre of *ludruk*. However, I do not think that development performances in Sri Lanka (which are mainly political rather than community-inspired productions) are "rites of modernization" as *ludruk* appear to be. Rather than modernizing the traditional (as in the case of *ludruk*), development rituals and ceremonies attempt to recast the modern as traditional (cf. Peacock 1968).

<sup>5</sup>In Sinhala, *jatika* connotes both ethnic and national; hence the ethnic identity of the majority—who are Sinhala Buddhists—is conflated with national (Sri Lankan) identity (see Roberts 1979). Unless otherwise specified, when I use the word "national," I imply this ethnic-as-national ambiguity.

The nationalist potential of (irrigated-rice) agricultural policies was first realized and refined by D.S. Senanayake, who envisioned a nation of patriot peasant farmers. His contributions to irrigation and agricultural resettlement were initiated while serving in the British colonial regime, and completed during his tenure as the first Prime Minister of independent Ceylon. Since then, consecutive governments have continued to privilege the development of agriculture over other sectors. In doing so, they continue to confirm very explicitly the bond between (Sinhala) nationalism and agriculture (see Moore 1985).

<sup>6</sup>The resettlement of mainly Sinhala peasants in areas adjacent to, or within the bounds of, what Tamil nationalists claim are "traditional Tamil homelands" has become politically charged in the context of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka (see Coomaraswamy 1986, for a discussion of myths for and against "traditional homelands"). In fact, Land Settlement continues to be a bitter issue in spite of the arrangements of the July 1987 Peace Accord. A detailed examination of settlement policies would be necessary to determine whether the Mahavāli resettlement program constitutes a calculated effort to disturb existing ethnic demography, or whether it is dictated solely by other imperatives internal to the Mahavāli Program (such as the needs of evacuees and the landless, the majority of whom are counted as Sinhalese). It is possible that these imperatives are neither completely devious nor utterly innocent, but a complex of both.

<sup>7</sup>In the case of the Victoria water ritual, a temple official of the Dalada Maligava—the Gajanayaka Nilame—conveyed the first pot of water on the back of a ceremonially dressed elephant.

<sup>8</sup>These connections between the Minister and King Dutugāmunu also emerge in two histories of Kotmale commissioned by Minister Dissanayake. They are Somapala Jayawardana's *Kotmale Vistaraya* [An Account of Kotmale] (1983) and Dr. Anuradha Seneviratne's *The Civilisation of a Valley*, an unpublished manuscript, excerpts from which have been used in the texts of the Kotmale newspaper advertisements.

<sup>9</sup>The elephant in this context has a double meaning: it is not only the animal which carries a sacred casket but also the symbol of the ruling party, the UNP.

<sup>10</sup>See Barthes' semiotic analysis of myth, particularly his observation that "[t]he relation which unites the concept [signified] of myth to its meaning [signifier] is essentially a relation of *deformation* [emphasis in original]." While Barthes conceptualizes the mythic process as a "full" signifier becoming an "empty" signified (1984:122), I suggest that this "distortion" involves the reassignment of different meaning. Cohen also observed a similar process: "a continuity of symbolic form need not automatically entail a continuity of symbolic function, for the same form can fulfill new functions" (1969:219).

<sup>11</sup>Although I do not explore "class" in the economic sense, I do in a political sense: my discussion of "power" hinges on the hierarchy maintained by rulers vis-à-vis the ruled.

Important in this connection is the class-versus-ethnicity issue, which has been investigated recently by social scientists writing in the shadow of the ethnic conflict (for example, Jayawardana 1985, Anandalingam and Abraham 1986). The subordination of class to ethnic interests is what I mean here by nationalist complicity. Nationalist complicity also resembles Gramsci's description of how "hegemony" works, by creating an amalgam of the "national-popular." As elaborated by Chantal Mouffe, for Gramsci,

[a] successful hegemony is one which manages to create a "collective national-popular will," and for this to happen the dominant class must have been capable of articulating to its hegemonic principle all the nationalist-popular ideological elements, since it is only if this happens that it (the class) appears as the representative of the general interest [Mouffe 1979:194].



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