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A Proposed Classification of Contemporary Sinhalese  
rituals with special reference to the Matara  
District in the Southern Province of Sri Lanka.

by

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ABSTRACT

The formal pattern of the traditional rites and rituals of the Sinhalese Buddhists of the Matara District in the Southern Province of Sri Lanka, has been transformed through contact with local and other beliefs, into a broader unity of domestic and communal ritual. Inevitable contact between strata has, over the centuries produced an exchange of beliefs and practices, and the most important repository of the cultic beliefs has been within the traditional village religion. It will be seen that the ritualistic behaviour of the Sinhalese in any particular locality is not so much a confusion of Buddhist and non-Buddhist rituals but rather an integration. Ideological distinctions found within the pattern of cultic behaviour can only be a matter of academic analysis; they do not seem to be important to the common man in Sri Lanka.

The Sinhalese ritual is a unitary structure which comprises several ritual complexes, viz. (1) Pinkama, (2) Magula, (3) Set-sāntiya, that work

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in conjunction with the basic concepts of karumaya, vāsanāva, avāsanāva, or apalaya. These basic concepts can be seen to provide the underlying motive for every rite and ritual.

The ritual action of the Sinhalese Buddhists can also be classified into the following three-fold categories:

1. motor behaviour,
2. offerings, and
3. verbal behaviour,

which can be seen in every rite and ritual performed by the Sinhalese. Cosmological and supernatural categories invoked in the rituals chart the geography and define the structure of sacred space and are expressed through material symbols.

The rituals of Sinhalese Buddhists can be classified into three groups, according to their occurrence:

1. calendrical rituals (recurrent cyclical),
2. crises rituals (recurrent non-cyclical),
3. life-cycle rituals (non-recurrent non-cyclical).

Any type of occurrence both individual and communal which falls under this triadic classification

can be further considered as commemorative, expressive and instrumental.

Ritual purity (pēvīma) is observed as it is an important condition for achieving the desired results of a ritual, specially supernatural protection. The non-observance of ritual purity involves killa or ritual pollution which may make the subject suffer affliction brought about by the supernatural element (vas dos). Thus it is that ritual purity is strictly observed and precautions taken to avoid ritual pollution and that great attention is paid to ritual prohibitions (tahanci - taboos) when most rites and rituals are performed.