

Elephants in the Service of the Buddha and Gods

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ABSTRACT

My research to the Devales in 2012-2013 led me to a selection of over forty sites in the Central and Sabaragamuwa Provinces. All these Devales are associated with the ‘Four main Devales’ (Satara Maha Devale) of the Temple of the Tooth and further connected with a larger web of the 32 Devales and some Rajamaha *Viharayas* of the Malvatta and Asgiriya Chapters. In order to sustain the traditional rituals, land grants have been made by kings to custodians called “Praveni” and to their helpers called “Bandaras”.

The supply of elephants for the annual rituals and processions too is closely knitted with this network. As such, my choice of 32 Devales is a fairly representative sample which has revealed similar ritual practices, also regarding traditions of sharing elephants during festivals. The first research question to be addressed is, if there is a special category of elephants totally devoted to performing rituals or if ‘working elephants’ are used as ‘temple elephants’ when the demand increases during peraharas. Interviews with custodians and trustees of the Devales have revealed that the elephant in the temples has to undergo a specialized training. As such “Temple Elephants” are not interchangeable during “off season” to work.

In my initial survey, I have mapped this network, located the roads where elephants traditionally were moved from temple to temple during festivals, the time frames and itineraries. I have also gathered information regarding care of elephants such as food and nutrition, medicine, roaming space, type and length of chains, bathing times, and protection during the night. Generations of elephant keepers (*Ath Govva*) have been in charge of the daily routines now moving into hands of elephant tamers and elephant businessmen.

The pilot study conducted at the ‘*Aluth Nuvara Devale*’ has revealed that caring for captive elephants requires a specialised training involving many rituals such as ‘Devata Basma’ (දේවතා බැස්ම), ‘Dorata Vadamaveema’ (දොරට වැඩමවීම) and protection of elephants from ritual impurity called ‘Kili’.

At the conference ‘Asian Elephant in Culture and Nature’, I shall present the methodology used in my research that will lead to the production of a documentary film by the Samkathana Research Centre at the University of Kelaniya.

Keywords: *Temple elephants, working elephants, traditional rituals*

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