

Deloraine Brohier rises early to participate in an ancient Hindu ritual.

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The entrance to Kataragama.

Pilgrims wending their way to the Kataragama shrine increased in numbers as we reached the town. Beside the road, boutiques and markets stirred to activity, pulling up their shutters and setting their merchandise on display. The sky brightened to a lush rose-red.

It was a scramble to get ready in the wee hours of the morning at the rest house of Tissamaharama where we had spent the night. Soon we were speeding along the road towards Kataragama. The first streaks of dawn stretched across the eastern sky and the pathway up the sacred hill of Kataragama twinkled with pin-points of light.

This was the final day of the annual Festival of Kataragama. We were there to participate in the colourful and significant "Water Cutting Ceremony." According to tradition this ceremony is supposed to be held at the precise hour of the full moon in August. However,

the custom has been abandoned and it is now held in the morning following the beginning of the full moon.

The night before, we visited the shrine of Kataragama and huddled together with hundreds of devotees in the quadrangle outside the Maha Devale (temple). The relic of Skanda, the god of Kataragama, had been taken out at the auspicious time for the last perahera of the Kataragama season. It was carried on the back of the temple elephant on a prescribed route through the grounds.



The Menik Ganga, the sacred river that flows through Kataragama.

All the colour and excitement accompanied the perahera procession: the tongues of flame from torches lighting up faces of devotees, the bright clothes of the whispering crowd, the smell of sweat and the perfume of flowers mingling. All watched and worshipped the ponderous animal who bore the precious burden.

Throughout the night of the full moon, the image remained in the temple of Valliammamal,

the divine consort of the god Kataragama. In the early hours of the morning, the temple authorities and the kapuva (lay priest) began to get the stage for the traditional ceremony that marked this, the final day.

The main elephant, dressed in traditional regalia, took the devini kapuva (honoured chief lay priest) on its back to the temple of Valliammamal. Here, the priest, covered with a white cloth, removed the sacred image and returned with it to the Maha Devala, placing it in the shrine room.

Meanwhile, temple helpers started to make a quadrangular basket out of palm leaves and mats. The basket looked like a palanquin and was carried on stout poles. The work took until nine o'clock when the morning sun was already high.

The temple bell was struck as a sign of departure. The lay priest, covered in a white cloth and having performed various rituals, took the image and seated himself in the basket palanquin. This was borne aloft on the shoulders of two men and taken to the Menik Ganga, the sacred river that flows through Kataragama.

Lay priests and temple officials hustled close around the palanquin which was followed by the temple's premier elephant, the oldest one of the trained group of many elephants that formed the procession. For the water cutting ceremony, the animals taking part in the perahera were bereft of their finery, the trappings and ceremonial regalia with which they are usually adorned. Each animal wore only a large bell hanging on a coil of red cloth tied around its neck.

We, who had come so early, were advised to take a vantage point along the bank of the Menik Ganga to watch the main drama. Stout khaki-uniformed guardians of the law had begun to take up their positions.

"You cannot imagine the rush," they cautioned us, "so go further up stream to where the main ceremony of the water cutting takes place." We crept along the river bank through thickets and thorny bush, tumbling over large ant hills and the thick roots of trees. For purposes of film and photography, the portly sergeant permitted us to be at what was ideally chosen.

By this time the perahera procession with the palanquin and the chief lay priest concealed from view with the venerated relic, had moved along the bank of the Manik Ganga to a point of historical significance about 200m upstream. Here, a small shelter of branches of the khohomba or margosa tree together with mango leaves had been built. It was on a spit of dry river soil in midstream with shallow water eddying around it.

The shelter had a small opening through which the palanquin was carried. Immediately, devotees closed the opening with leafy branches for no one outside must see what happens within. The chief lay priest remained alone in the shelter to perform one of the most magnificent rituals of the festival of Kataragama.

The priest brought with him, so we were told, a sanctified sword or rod with which he first draws a symbolic diagram on the river's sandy bed. This consists of two triangles on a common base, the symbol of the deity. The priest strikes the shallow water running through the shelter with the sword, and the sacred image is dipped in. This is "the cleansing bath" that is given the deity, after his "wedding night" in the temple of Valliammal, during the hours before.

I have also heard other descriptions of what takes place in the enclosed shelter, relating how the premier elephant carries a large golden pot which is attached to a rope that hangs from its mouth. The pot is taken by the priest into the shelter of the river, together with the relic he has brought with him in this palanquin.

The priest with the long sword strikes at the river bed or "cuts the water in two," simultaneously filling the pot with the water that has been cut. He then dips the vantra, or relic, into the pot, filled with the now purified water. The pot with the water is taken back to the temple where it is kept throughout the succeeding year.

Some of the water is taken by couriers to a leading Hindu temple in Colombo, after which another festival, the Vel, takes place. A little of the water is also given to other temples around the island in which the god Kataragama, more popularly known as Skanda, is venerated. All these temples are affiliated to the temple of Palni, in southern India.

As soon as the ceremony was over, the priest climbed back into the basket-palanquin and, concealed by twigs and branches, made the return journey to the Maha Devale with his retinue. The entire procedure lasted only a few minutes yet we, with all the other onlookers, had waited long. As soon as the priest and his retinue left the sacred shelter pandemonium erupted.

Flouting the strong cordon of police and defying the dangerous presence of elephants, the crowd went berserk. The shelter of margosa and mango leaves disintegrated before our eyes, pulled apart by people trying to get a token of the occasion.

The water flowing down the river was now considered purified. A jug or cupful taken after this ceremony is regarded as "a most precious and effective medicine for all illnesses and

ailments; it cleanses, purifies and heals; it drives away and neutralizes all evil and badness; ghosts and demons are banished and conquered with it." We lost sight of the palanquin bearing the priest and the precious symbols. The mahouts or keepers of the elephants adroitly guided their charges through the frenzied crowd while a happy carnival spirit prevailed.

People leaped around in the water, splashing each other and drenching themselves in gay abandon. The place had an air of animation and life, combined with devotion and piety, scarcely to be experienced in any other place of Hindu worship in Sri Lanka.

We spent the entire morning by the riverside and then wended our way back to the main temple. Preparations were underway for the final act of dana, or feeding of the poor. A large bowl filled with cooked rice was placed on top of a stone pedestal and from every direction came the needy, holding up small receptacles for a few spoonful of the blessed food.

I have been to the festivals of Kataragama on many occasions and observed the varied rituals connected with this shrine. The most bewitching, for me, is the water cutting ceremony. It is the final act of the faithful, after which the quiet curtain of jungle retreat fold down for another year.

Water cutting at Kataragama



Inside the temple at Kataragama