Customs, Rituals and Traditions Grown Around the Maha Bodhi Tree in **Anuradhapura**

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Chapter 10

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Cult of the Tree

Very often a special and significant kind of tree is selected by a group of people in a specific human culture as a cult object to be worshipped and propitiated for their protection, well-being or prosperity. Because of their usefulness and importance to society, these trees are considered to be of religions simificance. They are also symbols of man's innermost feelines and beliefs. These trees are sometimes believed to be the abode of gods and goddesses. In fact the worship of trees has played an important role in the history of religion originating in a very early period of human history.

There were the sacred groves in the ancient world in which every tree was regarded as divine. In the ancient Western world, for instance, in Greece and Italy, tree worship was practised from the beginning of history. In the life of the Romans the fig tree is still considered sacred. Ancient man not

only considered trees and plants to be living entities in the universe but also thought that they too had souls like himself. Any harm caused to them had to be compensated by man. The Bhagavatgita, the Sacred Book of the Hindus, in its fifteenth chapter speaks of an imperishable Asvattha tree (peepal tree) as having "its roots above and branches below". Its leaves are the Vedas and he who knows this is the knower of the Vedas. Futher it says that "its branches extend below and above, nourished by the modes; with sense objects for its twigs and below in the world of men stretch forth the roots resulting in action." The Vedas² and the Upanishads³ agree that with roots above and branches below, this world tree is eternal. The Asvattha tree is also considered to be Samsaravrksa, the Cosmic tree. The Mahabharata⁴ compares the Cosmic process to a tree which can be cut off by the mighty sword of knowledge. Dr. Radhakrishnan commenting on the above stanzas from Bhagavatgita says that "as the tree originates in God it is said to have its roots 'above', as it extends into the world its branches are said to go 'downwards'. The world is a living organism united with the supreme."5

The trees are sometimes considered sentient because they harbour the souls of the dead. In Korea the souls of people who die of plague or by the roadside, and of women who die in childbirth, are believed to invariably take up their abode in trees. To such trees people make their offerings of food. In China, it is the custom from time immemorial to plant trees on graves in order to strengthen the soul of the dead person. Thus the trees that grow on graves are s netimes identified with the soul of the departed.⁶ In this manner, it is believed, tree spirits are born who are known to u. as Vrksa devata or tree gods or spirits. These spirits, as time goes on, become powerful. They are sometimes believed to cause rain and sunshine. They also make the crops grow. The tree spirits, in addition to the above beneficial activities, also make the herds to multiply and further bless women with offspring.⁷ The story of Suiata offering milk-rice to the tree spirit and pleading for the birth of a son is a famous incident in the life story of Gautama Buddha. The worship of the oak tree both in the Greek and Italian civilizations remind us of the worship of the Oak god, Zens, or Jupiter, the divinity of the sky, the rain and thunder. We see from our own history that tree worship was popular in Sri Lanka even before the introduction of Buddhism to the Island. During the reign of Pandukabhaya in the fourth century BC the banyan, the mango and the palmyrah palm trees were regarded as the abodes of oracles.

The Asvattha Tree

The Asvattha tree of which the Botanical name is ficus religiosa figures as the holy tree in the Indus Valley civilization. Its wood was used for preparing charms and amulets. The Asvattha tree (hereafter called pipal or Bodhi Tree) was worshipped as a cult tree. The imprint of this tree is found on the Indus Valley seals. Sastri who examined these seals thought that 'the pipal tree depicted on such seals was regarded by the Indus Valley dwellers as the Tree of Creation or Knowledge (Brahmataru). He further thought that the pipal God was the Supreme Deity of the Indus Valley."8 The Vedas say that the gods of the third heaven dwell at the foot of the Asvattha tree. It has the power to destroy enemies.9 Mahabharata identified the Asvattha with Vishnu.¹⁰ The Padma Purana explains that Vishnu himself appears in the form of the ficus religiosa and identified himself. It says that at its sight and touch, all sins, sorrows and dangers disappear.11

This same pipal Bo-tree is considered to be sacred as it is regarded as the dweining place of the Hindu Trinity—Brahma, Visnu and Mahesvara. It is described as the tree of creation. The use of the Bodhi Tree as fuel is strictly prohibited as gods live on it. It is also sacrilege to harm it in any way. No Hindu dares to touch it with the slightest intention of cutting it down. Women pray to god to be favoured with a male offspring, sitting under its shadow.¹²

Bodhi-The Tree of Enlightenment

It is in this context that the Asvattha tree has gained even

more importance with the rise of Buddhism. Gautama Buddha attained enlightenment at the foot of Asvattha tree, which thereafter became known as the Bodhi Tree to Buddhists throughout the world. This sacred tree now symbolises the Enlightenment. The Maha Parinibbana Sutta names the place of Enlightenment as one of the sacred places of worship after the passing away of Buddha. The Emperor Asoka himself in the third century BC sent his own daughter Sanghamitta to Sri Lanka along with a sapling of the Bodhi Tree at Gaya. It is this tree planted in Anuradhapura, the then capital of Sri Lanka, that exists even today and is thought to be the oldest known tree in the world.

In the Buddhist tradition the cult of the Bodhi Tree is well recorded in texts such as the *Kalingabodhijataka* and other commentatorial works. According to these texts the homage paid by Emperor Asoka to the Bodhi Tree included: (1) bathing the tree with scented water; (2) offering flowers; (3) lighting lamps; (4) hanging garlands; (5) hoisting flags and banners; (6) burning incense; (7) placing vases of plenty (*Punnaghata*); (8) construction of railings, platforms and entrances; (9) sprinkling the surroundings with silvery and/or golden sands; (10) playing music; (11) circumambulation; (12) exclamation of pious joy; (13) paying homage with clasped hands, and (14) construction of pillars.¹³

None of the above rites and rituals of the Buddhists spring from belief in the pre-Buddhist-Brahmanical though, and practices. The Bodhi Tree is never thought by Buddhists to be the abode of Visnu. The Hindus treat the Asvattha tree .s the abode of Visnu and Buddha as the ninth incarnation of Visnu. The only value of this sacred tree in Buddhist thought is that it symbolically represents Buddha, for, it is at the foot of this noble and sacred tree that he attained supreme Enlightenment. The significance of the Bodhi Tree is described in the Sinhala Bodhivamsaya in the following stanza:

> Yassa mule nisinno va Sabbari Vijayan aka

Patto sabbannutam sattha Vande tam bodhipadapam

which means—I pay homage to the Bodhi Tree at the foot of which the Noble Teacher sat and conquered evil and attained Enlightenment.¹⁴

Bringing of the Bodhi Tree to Sri Lanka

The bringing of the sapling of the Great Bodhi Tree of Buddha Gaya to Sri Lanka is well described in the chronicles Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa and in the Vinaya commentary-Samantapasadika-as well as in the the Sinhala Bodhivamsaya. In the eighteenth year of the reign of King Dharmasoka, the great Bodhi sapling was brought and planted in the Mahameghavana (park) in Anuradhapura during the reign of King Devanampiya Tissa under his royal patronage. A mission from Anuradhapura had gone to Pataliputra with the message from Thera Mahinda and King Devanampiya Tissa. Their request for the Bodhi sapling and the arrival of Theri Sanghamitta in Sri Lanka were approved by King Asoka. The King himself made elaborate arrangements to despatch the Bodhi sapling to Sri Lanka through his daughter the Theri Sanghamitta. The chronicles go on to tell us that the great King assigned for its protection eighteen persons of royal blood. eight from families of Ministers, eight from Brahmin families, eight each from families of guild chiefs, cowherds, hyena and sparrowhawk clans, weavers, potters and all guilds. Theri Sanghamitta who was accompanied by eleven theris departed from Pataliputra on board a ship, taking with her the Bodhi sapling.¹⁵ The members of the Sri anka mission headed by Arittha, the nuns headed by Theri Sanghamitta, and other relatives of the King Asoka headed by Bodhigupta sailed in one ship and the rest of the mission in another ship. The Mahavamsa has recorded that Theri Sanghamitta with the Bodhi sapling reached the Sri Lankan port of Jambukola on the seventh day of the bright half of the month of Maggasira (October-November). On arrival of the Sacred Bodhi the Sri

Lankan King Devanampiya Tissa offered the sovereignty of the island to the Bodhi Tree and entrusted the administration of the kingdom to the sixteen persons of noble birth who accompanied the Theri from India, and himself took the position of a door-keeper to symbolize his veneration for the sacred object. The same action was repeated on the day of planting the sapling. The Sinhala Bodhivamsaya records that Emperor Asoka sent four maidens of royal birth alongwith the retinue for the purpose of sprinkling water on the Bo-sapling, each with eight gold and silver pitches.

Rites and Duties

The origin of the ritual associated with the Sacred Bodhi Tree in Sri Lanka begins with the planting of this Bo-sapling. It is reported in the Chronicles as well as in the Sinhala Bodhivamsa that he entrusted the sovereignty of the State to the sixteen Kulinas and himself took the position of doorkeeper as an honour to the Bo-tree for the second time since its arrival. The list of companions to the Bodhi Tree differs from one source to the other. The Sinhaia Bodhivamsaya compiled in the thirteenth century gives us a detailed list of the missionaries and their duties. But at the very outset it is clear that the great Emperor had two aims in entrusting the Bodhi Tree to two sets of people one representing the royal court and the other from the social organisaton representing various guilds. They were:

- 1. To perform religious rites, and
- 2. To protect the Bodhi Tree.

Two ships $\epsilon \rightarrow 0$ sailed to Sri Lanka bringing the two groups separately. The social division based on status is shown clearly by this action.

Ritual and the Social Institutions

A careful examination of the list of people who accompanied the Bo-sapling to Sri Lanka and the duties assigned to them will show the link between the ritual and the social organisation of the day. According to Samantapasadika, the Vinaya commentary, King Asoka despatched the following persons along with the Bo-sapling to Sri Lanka in order to protect the Bodhi Tree (Mahabodhirakkhanatthaya) and to perform rituals necessary for its maintenance.¹⁷ They are:

- 1. 18 families of royal blood (Devakula)
- 2. 8 families of Ministers (Amaccakula)
- 3. 8 families of Brahmins (Brahmanakula)
- 4. 8 families of wealthy householders (Kutimbikakula)
- 5. 8 families of herdsmen (Gopakakula)
- 6. 8 families of Taracchakula.
- 7. 8 families of Kalinga natives (Kalingakula).

These people were sent with eight gold and silver pots for the purpose of sprinkling water on the Bodhi sapling. The sixteen families of noble birth (Solasannam jatisampanna kulanam)¹⁸ were entrusted with the administration of the kingdom by the ruler Devanampiya Tissa himself for three days. The Mahavamsa also confirms that weavers and potters were included in the above list of participants.

It is said that when the Bodhi Tree was planted at Mahameghavana (park) there was a cloud burst and that it rained. "Cool and dense mists from the region of snow covered the Bodhi Tree." According to the *Mahavamsa*, eight uncles of Theri Sanghamitta accompanied the Bodhi sapling representing the royal family. The heads of the royal families were Bodhigupta and Sumitta.¹⁹

The Sinhala Bodhivamsaya compiled in the thirteenth century contains an elaboration of the list giver in the Chronicles.²⁰ It may be taken as a reflection of the political and social conditions of the contemporary society and not necessarily the conditions which prevailed at the time the Bodhi sapling was brought to Sri Lanka during the third century BC.

According to the Sinhala Bodhivamsaya the eight members of the royal family and eight others representing various guilds and artisan families were entrusted with the specific duties to be performed at the Bodhi Tree.²¹ The Mahavamsa says that the eight Setthikulas who brought the sacred Bodhi Tree were known as *Bodhihara-kula*.^{21a} The *Sinhala Bodhivamsaya* refers to these princes as kinsmen of Asoka himself,^{21b} and gives their specific duties:

- 1. Prince Bodhigupta-to protect the Sacred Bodhi Tree.
- 2. Prince Sumitta—to perform rites and rituals in honour of the Sacred Bodhi Tree.
- 3. Prince Chandragupta—to play the golden drums during the great festival in honour of the Sacred Bodhi Tree.
- 4. Prince Devagupta—to carry the *paritta* water in a golden goblet riding on an elephant and tour round the city during the Bodhi festivals.
- 5. Prince Dharmagupta-to blow the conch at the Bo festival.
- 6. Prince Suryagutta—to sprinkle *paritta* water to the Bodhi Tree with the golden goblet.
- 7. Prince Gotama—to hold the white parasols over the Bodhi Tree.
- 8. Prince Jutindhara—to guard the Bodhi Tree during the festivals.

The chiefs of the guild lords to be in charge of guarding the Bodhi Tree holding the sword during the nights, the chief of the Brahmins to bless the Bodhi Tree, the chiefs of the Kelembi families to raise gold and silver parasols during the festivals of the Bodhi Tree, the chiefs of the merchant families to offer incense, the chiefs of the archers to guard the Bodhi Tree with bows and arrows in order to protect it from crows, etc., the chiefs of the Sara, families to hold umbrellas, the chiefs of the Kalinga families to offer new flowers to the Bodhi Tree, the chiefs of the Kapu families to offer five kinds of flowers to the Bodhi Tree, the chief of the Balat family to guard the main entrance to the premises of the Bodhi Tree. the chief of the weavers to provide strainers and threads, the chief of the potters to provide pots, the chief of flower suppliers to provide garlands, the chief of incense suppliers to provide four kinds of incense, the chief of the tailors to provide screens, flags and hangcars, the chief of the cooks to provide

the alms for offering, the chief of the balcksmiths to provide scissors, knives, etc., the silversmiths to provide gold and silver mirrors, etc., the goldsmiths to provide gold and silver lamps and pots, the chief of the carpenters to provide stages and canopies necessary for the Bodhi Tree festivals, the chief of the painters to provide painted and decorated canopies, the chief of the musicians to provide hewisi drum music thrice a day, the chief of the parasol families to provide white parasols necessary for the Bodhi Tree festivals and the chief of the curator of the park to plant the necessary flowering trees used in the ritual offering. All these people were to take orders from Prince Sumitta. In addition, four royal maidens were to sapling. The Sinhala sprinkle water on the Bodhi Bodhivamsaya further states that eleven bhikkhunis or nuns and Sanghamitta accompanied by Arittha, the Head of the mission to Sri Lanka and people of noble birth (jati sampanna kula) headed by Bodhigutta were put into one ship and the other belonging to (avasesa kula vassan) other family groups were put into other ships by Emperor Asoka himself. This clearly shows that there was recognition of a social division depending on occupation and class at the time of writing of the Sinhala text.

The words jati, gotra, kula have the same meaning. It is the position identified at birth whether it is the rank, family, race, or lineage. However, according to the Pali commentatorial works (atthakatha) the social division according to one's birth seems to be of two kinds, namely, noble birth (jati sampannakula) and low birth (hina jhaccakula).22 According to Paramatth Jhotika the commentary to Suttanipata the Kshatriya, Brahmana and Vaisya (or gahapati) of the Indian caste system are considered noble and the fourth, the Sudras are treated low.23 The Sumangalavilasini also categorises crafts as as being low or high.²⁴ For example, such crafts as pottery and rattan weaving were considered low, and secretarial work and accountancy were considered high. According to Sammohavinodani²⁵ agriculture, poultry farming and trade were considered high status professions. When appoint-

ments to various state posts were made by the rulers it is said in the Sumangalavilasini that such posts were always given to people of high birth.26 The Saddharmaratnavaliya the thirteenth century Sinhala literary work enumerates raia. brahmana, vyaparaya (traders), govi and hinajati in translating the terms brahmana, vessa, sudda, candala and pukkusa from the Milindapanha.27 However, according to Sinhala Buddhist society, the caste was no barrier to ascending the social ladder provided the person concerned was skilled in his profession. The King had the right to elevate him or her to a higher caste or to degrade them. Elevation is termed as "cleaning the caste" (jatin sodhetum). This custom may have been in practice at the time of writing this description found in the Sammohavinodini.28 Such incidents are also recorded in the great Chronicles even dating back to the second century AD.29

The Kutimbikas or householders of the above list are considered to be Moriya (Mauryas). The Lambhakarnas are considered to be descendants of the Bodhihara kula or the families entrusted with the task of bringing and protecting the Bodhi Tree.³⁰ The Kutimbikas are considered to be equal in the Sinhala society with the Setthikula (mercantiles).³¹ The Kutimbikas were entrusted with the task of protecting the Bodhi Tree and held high positions in the state administrative structure. They appear to have continued in this position for a long period of time. Thus King Dhatusena of the fifth century is considered to be the grandson of a Kutimbika and started the Moriya line of rulers in the ifth century. The above named Prince Dharmagupta was also given the position of Moriya situ, the headship of the mercantile guild of the Mauryas and was settled in the Moriya Janapada.

The duties assigned to the various persons who accompanied the Bodhi Tree depended much on the caste or class he belonged to. The people who performed the less important and ordinary service such as supplying various ritual objects to the Bodhi Tree may have belonged to the lower strata of the social structure. The duty of protecting the Bodhi Tree fell upon the Prince Bodhigupta. But the ultimate responsibility of the organisation and the leadership of the mission fell upon Prince Sumitta. This Prince is considered to be the founder of the Lambhakarna clan in Sri Lanka. A number of kings who played a very important role in the political history of Sri Lanka such as Sri Sanghabodhi and Vasabha belonged to the Lambhakarna clan. This shows that Mauryas and Lambhakarnas who were associated with the Sacred Bodhi Tree had the legitimate right to govern this country. The Mehenavaras and the ganavasis also belonged to this group. It is said in the Dambadeni Katikavata that only a monk belonging to the Ganavasi sect could hold the office of the supreme High Priest (Mahimi).³²

The two groups that were associated with the rituals and ceremonies of the sacred Bodhi Tree were the monks of the Ganavasi and the members of the Kilingu families. These Kilingus had the same kind of functions to perform at the palace that they performed at the Bodhi Tree at Anuradhapura.33 It is interesting that even in the times of Parakramabahu II at Dambadeniya (in the fourteenthe cantury) the members of these two groups played an important role in the rituals associated with the Sacred Tooth Relic. The casket containing the Tooth Relic was taken out in the presence of the head of Utumlumula College and the representatives of the Ganavasi and Kilingu groups and placed on an ornamental chariot. The members of the Kilingu may have performed the same function at the Temple of the Tooth, but as the relic is said to have been original brought to Sri Lanka by a prince from Kalinga, it is not unlikely that the Kilingu family associated with the Temple of the Tooth claimed descent from that personage.34

We are fortunate to have inherited a large number of historical and literary works on the history of the Sacred Bodhi Tree. The Dipavamsa, Mahavamsa, Samantapasadika, Thupavamsa, Sinhala Bodhivamsaya, Cula Bodhivamsaya, Dharmapradipika, Bodhivamsa gatapadaya are among those worth mentioning. However, none of these works shed light on the nature of rituals performed in honour of the Bodhi Tree in the past though a book like the Dalada Sirita gives much information on the rituals conducted in honour of the Sacred Tooth Relic. Therefore, going by the references found here and there both in historical and literary works we are able to form a scant idea of the ritual in the past. The duties assigned to various families in connection with the Bodhi Tree by King Devanampiya Tissa at the very beginning show the complexity of the ritual. Sprinkling water on the Bodhi Tree by four virgins³⁵ (a practice which continued for a long period of time) is a fertility ritual associated with the Sacred Tree. The later kings had problems in maintaining this institution. The virgin princesses were replaced by bronze statues during the reign of Dhatusena in the fifth century.³⁶ Later the bhikkhunis or nuns themselves took over the responsibility of sprinkling water over the Bodhi Tree. A ninth century inscription at Mahakalattewa in the Anuradhapura district mentions that seven chief bhikkhunis cr Buddhist nuns watered the Bodhi Tree daily, residing in the nunnery called Nal-Aram which "probably" stood close to the Bodhi Vihara.³⁷ The sprinkling of water by virgins was to ensure the growth of the Tree. Here the Bodhi Tree is conceived as a male power. The union of the two-the virgins and the Bodhi Tree-is through the sprinkling of water. Fertilized by the water, the Tree grows.

Festivals of the Bodhi Tree

The rituals and ceremonies, as we understand through th division of various duties assigned to the group of peop' who accompanied the Bodhi Tree to Sri Lanka, consist of two main features, namely, protection of the Bodhi Tree and $p \varepsilon y$ ing reverence to it. This ultimately is believed to bestow beneficence on the people at large. People believe that the Bodhi Tree is capable of conferring good on the people if asked for through penance, devotions and one's firm belief in its power. The ritual is performed by paying homage with music, raising flags, parasols and canopies over it, by burning incense, offering flowers, food and sprinkling water on it.

The protection of the Bodhi Tree was ensured by guarding it from both humans and animals. The sprinkling of paritta water is a means of protecting it from the evil. Performing Santi karma (benedictory rites) by ritual priests is another method. There was also a third group that supplied the necessary objects needed to achieve the above two objectives. This group consisted of people like the smiths who supplied axes. seissors and hoes, gold and silversmiths who made gold and silver pots, goblets, mirrors and lamps necessary for the ritual of offering alms and lighting. The curators of gardens grew flowers, and flower suppliers, the painters, the weavers, the cooks and tailors all performed their assigned functions. So we see that the institution created to maintain the Sacred Bodhi Tree had a very large number of participants. It involved a large amount of human labour. When the Sinhala Bodhivamsaya speaks of Bo-mangula or the festival of the Bodhi Tree it is quite clear that there was such a ceremony in honour of the tree celebrated every year. The Chronicles very often refer to Mahabodhi puja or great festivity in honour of the Bodhi Tree but their nature is not explained in detail. The early kings may have carried out various construction works at the site of the Bodhi Tree in its honour and for its safety. An object of worship at the beginning of Buddhism in Sri Lanka was the asana or throne. The throne represented the Vajrasana under the Bodhi Tree on which the Buddha conquered the Evil one, Mara. Such asanas are said to have existed at the Bodhi Tree at Anuradhapura.³⁸ Sometime later. Buddha statues were placed at the f ir quarters under the Bodhi Tree. King Vasabha made four beautiful Buddha images and an image house in the courtyard of the Bodhi Tree.³⁹ Further, we also find reference to kings who costructed Bodhi shrines known as Bodhighara was built in order to protect the Bodhi Tree. King Dhatusena built a similar Bodhighara.⁴⁰ Again King Dutugemmunu held a bodhipuja "spending one lakh".41 So did kings such as Mugalan II,42 Udaya43 and Mahinda.44 According to Mahavamsa, the succeeding kings in Sri Lanka have performed festivals in honour of Bodhi Tree

until the twelfth year of their ascending the throne.⁴⁵ The Mihintale Tablet of Mahinda IV mentions of two kinds of Bodhi pujas, namely, ruwan asun maha bo mangula and somnas maha bo mangula.⁴⁶ There are controversies over the meanings of both these phrases and also over the place of the puja, as the reference may be either to the Sri Maha Bodhi at Anuradhapura or to the Bodhi Tree at Mihintale. Whatever the place may be, the first ceremony mentioned may refer to Buddha's Enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree and the second to a victory celebration which may have been a thanksgiving ceremony by the ruling king, in honour of the Bodhi Tree. The King Asoka has venerated the great Bodhi Tree in India with offerings at the festival of Kartika.47 We are anyhow certain that a similar festival was held every year, together with a procession in honour of the Bodhi Tree.48 The Kartika festival is celebrated even today at the Sacred Bodhi as one of the four great festivals.

A miraculous feature of the Bo sapling was that it was said to be associated with rain clouds. When it was planted at Mahameghavana it rained. After reverence and offering to the Bodhi Tree the devotees expected timely rain. So it came to be believed that when prayers were made and rituals performed in honour of the Bodhi Tree it would rain. Therefore the expectation of the people from the auspicious Bodhi Tree was the life-giving rain. We see that King Dhatusena had performed a Nanumura festival for the Bodhi Tree. This was an annointing or bathing ceremony. Earlier, King Bhatika Abhaya (BC 19-AD 9) also held a festival in honour of the watering of the great Bodhi Tree. This practice continues even today. During the droughts, it is customary to bathe the Sacred Bodhi Tree with the waters brought from the neighbouring Tissa tank. Once this bathing ritual is performed, it is supposed to rain as expected. King Bhatikabhaya had ordered an annual great festival of watering the great Bodhi Tree.⁴⁹ Referring to King Dhatusena the great Chronicle says that "for the Bodhi Tree to whom was vouchsafed the highest enlightenment be instituted a bathing festival like the Bodhi Tree festival instituted by Devanampiya Tissa." He set up sixteen bath maidens in bronze and arranged for the adornment and consecration of the Bodhi Tree. Since the planting of the Bodhi Tree, the rulers of Lanka have instituted in every twelfth year (of their reign) a festival for the Bodhi Tree.⁵⁰

The Sacred Bodhi Tree at Anuradhapura also played an important role in the consecration (Abhiseka) ceremony of a king. Clay for the pots used in the ceremony of Abhiseka had to be collected from seven places including the great Bodhi Tree and the Great Thupa.⁵¹ Today even after many centuries rituals of the past still continue to be performed with modification suiting the present-day conditions. The Sacred Bodhi Tree is considered to be living Buddha and daily rituals are performed in the morning, mid-day and in the evening. The morning ritual start at 6 a.m. with the ritual drum music (hewisi) played from the sand terrace and the monks offer the early morning milk-rice and drinks to the Sacred Bodhi Tree and pay their homage. At the same time offerings are made at the Shrine Room of the Bodhi Viharaya. Similarly, the mid-day meal (dawal Buddha pujawa) is also offered. The evening ritual starts at 6 p.m. with the offering of drinks or gilanpasa. Very often the devotees who flock to the sacred site make their offerings through the officiating Buddhist monks. Lamps are lit. illuminating the whole area. Hewisi music is played on all these three occasions.

Four Great Festivals

There are four great festivals held at the Bodhi Tree annually, namely: 1. Alutsal mangalle or the new rice fortival; 2. Avurudu mangalle or the New Year festival; (3) Nanumura Mangalle or annointing ceremony and (4) Kartika Mangalle or the festival of Kartika.

On the Full Moon day of *Durutu* in January, the annual *Alutsal Mangalle* is performed in the Bodhi Viharaya. The tenants of the *Uda Maluwe Bodhi Viharaya* who live scattered all over the Province bring their share of the food crop, the harvested rice and fill the large bowl now placed in the Vihara

premises as offering to the Sacred Bodhi Tree. It is well known that the whole country was dedicated to the Sacred Bodhi Tree by the ancient rulers including Devanampiya Tissa and as such no one should consume anything before the products from their fields are first offered to the Bodhi Tree in the name of the Buddha. The Sinhala Bodhivamsava says that since the whole country belongs to the Buddha, land belonging to the country too was offered to the Sacred Bodhi Tree. Therefore, what is harvested from the lands whether rice, fruit. leaves or fruits should be first offered to the Buddha and no one should consume anything first without offering to the Buddha and not to do so amounts to a great sin."52 To symbolise this event the devotees living in and around the ancient city of Anuradhapura bring their crop to the sacred premises and offer it to the Bodhi Tree. Boiled milk-rice in two gold bowls are offered to the Sacred Bodhi Tree and to the Great Thupa.

The Parana Avurudu Mangalle or the Old Year Festival is held annually on a day selected before the dawn of the New Year that falls annually on the fourth day of April. The Atamasthana Sabhava or the Committee of Custodians of the Eight great spots meet and decide a date to hold the festival. The Chief (Maha duraya) of the Vihara gam or temple villages numbering nine are informed of the festival date. He will in turn inform the nine chiefs of the nine villages. The people will then come and first clear the premises, bring flowers and utensils necessary for the ritual festival. This is considered a preparation for the hopeful dawn of a New Year. The Bodhi terrace is swept and cleaned. N w sand is spread over the Vali maluwa or sand terrace. In the evening five kinds of drinks are offered to the beat of the drums. The monks, headed by the chief monk of the Atamasthana, that is, the Bomaluwa Viharaya, and laymen headed by a member of the Nuwarawewa Walauwa family get together and offer their respects and veneration to the Bodhi Tree. The monks then chant paritta and at the end bestow merit on all the devas.

and proceed to the Great Thupa for worship. On the following day two gold bowls of new boiled milk rice is offered-one to the Sacred Bodhi Tree and the other to the Great Thupa. With the dawn of the New Year, again on a specific day, the new milk-rice is offered to both these places with respect and veneration and the Bodhi Tree is ornamented with precious jewellery offered by kings and dignitaries of the past. Seven measures of rice are cooked for offering. This special festival during the New Year is called the Nanumura Mangalle or the anointing ceremony of the New Year. An auspicious time for the anointing ceremony or bathing ceremony is fixed in consultation with the astrologers. Various kinds of utensils for this ritual such as Ata pirikara (robe and utensils necessary for a monk) fan, towel, whisk, bell and mirror are made ready. The nanu which is a shampoo needed for the ritual bath is prepared with lime and other herbs. The chief monk of the Bodhi Viharaya perform the bathing ceremony early in the morning of the day wishing a long life and good health to the Bodhi Tree and in general to all beings. The bathing ceremony is performed at the Buddha image in the shrine and the jewellery put on to the Sacred Bodhi Tree.

The Kartika festival is performed on the Full Moon day of the month of "il" which falls in November. This is primarily performed in order to ask for divine intervention for the suc cess of cultivation. Offering of milk-rice and lamps and ritual music to the Sacred Bodhi are the main features of the ritual. According to Padma Purana, the Kartika festival is held in honour of God Visnu, but according to the Buddhist traditions Kartika is elebrated because it marks the beginning of the rainy season. Lighting of oil lamps in veneration of the gods is the main feature of this festival. It is stated that King Asoka made offering of Kartika lamps to the Maha Bodhi at Buddhagaya. Whether it was held in order to mark the beginning of the rainy season or to pay his respects to the presiding gods, we are not quite certain.

Besides, these four main festivals, Vesak, Poson and

Unduvap (on which the Sacred Tree was planted), Full Moon days are special for the devotees who go to pay their respects to the Sacred Bodhi Tree.

Ritual and Belief

Much of the responsibilities of caring for the Bodhi Tree and performing rituals are shared by the monks of the Bodhimalu Viharaya and the people of the nine villages belonging to the Viharaya who are carrying on the service today. These people are called Villidura (meaning the holder of the position of Archer), an occupational group, who live in nine villages called Viharagam (Villages of the Vihara). They are: (1) Vihara Palugama; (2) Vihara Halmillakulama; (3) Vihara Kallanchiya; (4) Vihara Tirappane; (5) Vihara Bulankulama; (6) Vihara Medawachchiya; (7) Vihara Keppitiyawa; (8) Vihara Iluppukulama and (9) Vihara Puliyankulama. The word Villi or Velli is derived from the Sanskrit word Vedhi meaning one who shoots. Thus we have the words: Sara Vedhi, Valavedhi and Aksana Vedhi. The word Villi for archer is also used in the Dravidian languages. The Sinhala Bodhivamsaya has the name dunuva kula for the archer families, the duty assigned to them is to carry with them the bow and the arrow and guard the Sacred Tree from crows and not allowing them to rest on it. This is exactly what the present generation of people under that designation are supposed to perform even today. They take turns one after the other every two days.

The duties assigned to other performers of services in the past can also be recognised but most of the services and servicemen of the old generation have gone into extinction. Certain villages like Malaberiyawa, Aluvirawewa, Palukandavewa and Sinharakalanchiya are assigned for drummers but none of them serve the Bodhi today. The position is the same with villages assigned to potters, weavers, smiths, painters, etc. The above *Villi* people are the only survivals of a lost and historic generation of an institution created to serve a religious place of worship. But, unfortunately, they have to bear

the burdens of other services which were originally assigned to various service groups. Therefore, their survival today is very important and significant. The chief of the clan is called *Villi Maha duraya* (short form is *Maha duraya*) meaning Chieftain of the Archers or Chief of the position.

As can be seen today, the uppermost terrace where the Sacred Bodhi Tree is cleaned by the monks of the Vihara and the Vellis are permitted to clean only the terraces below that level. However, the present composition of the Atamasthana Committee has nothing in common with the ancient service system or the traditional Bodhi institution. It was the practice in ancient times to have a royal cremation for the dead branch of the Bodhi Tree taken in a funeral procession to the premises of the Thuparama. In this regard the services of the funeral drummers were made use of. These drummers were assigned the Malaberiyagama in return for their services. But today there are no drummers nor are such rites performed.

A similar function performed in the premises of the Sacred Bodhi Tree was the Festival of the Mahinda Maha Thera held in the month of Vap (October-November) each year. This was introduced for the first time by King Meghavanna in the fourth century. During this festival, the statue of Mahinda Maha Thera was taken to the premises of the Sacred Bodhi Tree from Mihintale and kept for veneration for three months. Thereafter, the statue was taken to a special house constructed near the royal palace and kept there.⁵³ This practice continued for a long period.

When life of the peasants who live in and around Anuradhapura is studied closely it is quite clear that they depend more or less on the belief in the Sacred Bodhi Tree. For all their needs and grievances, the humble peasants approach the Sacred Bodhi Tree and plead with veneration for divine intervention and relief. This plea which is called *yatikawa* is done through an officiating lay priest called *Kapurala* who pleads before a deity called *Kalu devata Bandara* (Black deity). He is thought to be looking after the Sacred Tree. The shrine room dedicated to this *devata* or deity is seen on the upper terrace just below the Bodhi Tree facing the West. People go to the Kapurala with their hopes, wishes and anxieties of all kinds (for protection of their lives, cures for illness, safe child-birth and plenty in harvest, protection from evil eye and so on). The devata thus propitiated can be Visnu who, as time passed, lost his identity as the original Hindu god except that his traditional blue colour was retained. God Visnu's abode is considered to be the same Asvattha (Bodhi) Tree. The whole area of the Bodhi Tree is sacred. The Sacred Bodhi Tree on the topmost terrace is surrounded by 41 other "retinue" Bo-trees called parivara Bodhi. The uppermost terrace where the Sacred Bodhi Tree is on a platform 27 feet high above the ground level. On it are three Bodhi Trees including the Sacred Bodhi Tree.

People safeguard their cultivations from damage by sowing the sacred sand of the lower terrace of the Sacred Bodhi. When they come to this sacred spot for worship they also bring along with them a pot of sand collected from the neighbouring Malwatu Oya (river), which is then spread on the terrace, a pot of sacred sand from the Vali naluwa (sand terrace) is collected in its place. They take this pot of sand thus collected from the terrace and spread it on their fields. thus hoping for protection. Lots of devotees make vows before the Bodhi Tree. When their appeals are granted, they come back to fulfil their vows which is very often a simple gift like lighting lamps or offering flowers, incense, perfumes and food c- simple ornament or sometimes their own image on a silver late, a symbolic gift of life for life in the case of a ill.ess cured or safe child-birth. During the period of severe drought paritta chanting is performed by the monks within the Bodhi terrace and the sacred water is sprinkled on the Sacred Tree. The water for this purpose is supplied from the neighbouring Tissa tank. The flowers used for offering are always lotus.

Everything that is found in the premises of the Bodhi Tree is sacred. Nothing can be touched, harmed or even removed without replacement. The peasants in the Anuradhapura district pay a visit every year to the sacred Bodhi Tree. This usually takes place during the month of *Nikini* which falls in August. When they come to the Sacred City they bring along with them pots, pans, foodstuffs and even firewood for cooking. They do not want to burn even a piece of wood belonging to the sacred area. Such is their level of faith and devotion. Because of the firewood that they bring in procession, people call it the *daramiti perahara* or the firewood procession. During the long centuries when the Anuradhapura kingdom was abandoned and deserted, it was people from these villages who safeguarded the Bodhi Tree by making big fires to drive away wild elephants and prevent them from harming the Sacred Tree.

Even today the people in Sri Lanka believe that the two sacred objects, namely, the Sacred Bodhi Tree in Anuradhapura and the Sacred Tooth Relic of the Buddha now in Kandy are capable of producing rain in times of drought. Therefore, agricultural people whose lives depend very much on water rely on the divine powers of these sacred objects. Kings and rulers, on the other hand, pay their respect to these religious objects in order to ensure rain and secondly, to symbolize their commitment to the Buddha *Dhamma*. Thereby they also make the people happy. Therefore rulers looked after sacred objects with care and extended their royal patronage to maintain the rituals associated with them. The Sacred Bodhi Tree even today is looked after by the Government of Sri Lanka in keeping with the ancient traditions.

The Sacred Bodhi Tree in Anur Ihapura has protected the Sinhalese for two thousand and three hundred years, nourishing their culture and religious thought. It is sure to play a significant role in the future too.

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