

PROOF OF BUDDHISM: INTERPRETING THE BODIES OF SRI LANKAN BUDDHIST WAR DEAD

Brother, even though you have died, your name remains in our heart.
When you were alive, all your dreams were like castles in the sky.
The fact that you had an unexpected, untimely death far from us is
proof of Buddhism.¹

Memorial letter for Lance Corporal Priyanta
Kumaratne, written by his younger brother,
Bhikkhu Sumanajoti.²

I must have committed a great sin to lose you...after all of the merit
that I have done!

Memorial letter for L.R. Tilakā Kalugalla
written by his younger sister.³

On October 23rd 2007, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) staged an unprecedented attack on a Sri Lankan airbase in Anuradhapura during which commandos were supported by planes from the newly revealed LTTE air tigers.⁴ The coordination of

¹ A note on diacritics: all Sinhala and Pāli words, with the exception of proper names, are spelled according to standard Sanskrit conventions. Sinhala proper names and place names appear according to the individual spellings, if known, that are adopted by the informants, e.g., Obeyesekere rather than Obeyasekara and Anuradhapura rather than Anurādhapura.

² Goḍigamuwa, Jayasena, ed. 2000. *Magē Sita Tula Mākī Nāta Oba* (You Are Not Faded In My Heart). Katugastota: Samasta Lankā Raṇaviru Padanama. p.53.

³ Goḍigamuwa, Jayasena, ed. 2000. *Magē Sita Tula Mākī Nāta Oba* (You Are Not Faded In My Heart). Katugastota: Samasta Lankā Raṇaviru Padanama. p. 35.

⁴ This chapter is based on interviews and transcripts of sermons collected between October 2004 and March 2007, during research funded by the University of Virginia's Department of Religious Studies and a Fulbright-Hayes doctoral dissertation research fellowship. This research was performed with the cooperation of the Sri Lankan Army Media Corps and the written permission of the former commander of the army Lt. Gen. (ret.) Shantha Kottegoda. All interviews were performed in Sinhala, recorded on a digital voice recorder and then translated

land forces and air power resulted in the deaths of fourteen Sri Lankan Army or “SLA” soldiers, twenty LTTE cadres as well as the destruction of eight SLA aircraft, including a valuable MI 24 Helicopter gunship. On the evening after the attack, which lasted less than an hour, the Sri Lanka Ministry of Defense website released an article captioned, “Brave defenders’ mortal remains taken to native places.” This article, which includes a photo of three wooden caskets draped with Sri Lankan flags, praises the sacrifice of the young soldiers while emphasizing that all of the bodies were released to relatives for their “final rites and subsequent military funerals” (Ministry of Defense, October 23, 2007).

On October 26th, 2007 the Sri Lankan Ministry of Defense website ran two articles about the LTTE cadres killed in the attack. The first article, posted at 7:43 AM was captioned: “Terror Attack at Anuradhapura airbase; over 20 terrorists killed.” Photo coverage of the event juxtaposed two dramatically different images. Images of flag-draped coffins documented the death of SLA soldiers; mutilated corpses on the tarmac exposed the dead LTTE soldiers. On the evening of the 26th, another article was run with the caption: “Decomposed LTTE Dead Bodies Buried.” In this article, the author explains that “[M]any of those dead bodies were found strewn over the affected base with many organs and limbs severed as a result of the explosives those terrorists were carrying with them” (Ministry of Defense, Oct. 26, 2007). The writer elaborates, “Some of those had been reduced to lumps of flesh which were completely disturbing in nature.” No mention was given of funerals or returning the bodies to their families.

These articles represent two distinct interpretations of war dead. The first article endeavors to cloak the deaths of the SLA soldiers in dignified symbols. The bodies of the Sinhala soldiers are literally wrapped in the country’s flag. The second set of articles deliberately highlights the grotesque, depicting the bodies of the LTTE fighters as piles of flesh intended to inspire revulsion.

When stripped of all flags, uniforms, and rhetoric, the bodies of young Tamils and young Sinhala are physically indistinguishable. What is the difference between the body left behind by a young Sinhala soldier and that of a Tamil rebel? What is the difference between the bodies left to rot before burial and ones in flag-draped coffins? In the following pages, I will consider various attempts to attribute value and meaning to the deaths of soldiers. This work is based on fieldwork with the families of soldiers killed in battle, monks who minister to the military and letters written by the parents of soldiers killed in battle collected in a volume published by the Samasta Raṇaviru Padanama in Katugastota Sri Lanka. A soldier killed in battle may be viewed as a hero, who sacrificed comfort for the protection of the nation, but that does not change the inauspicious circumstances of the death nor the potential danger that those circumstances portend.

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In her groundbreaking study of the phenomenology of torture and war, *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry explains the non-referential nature of the bodies of war dead. Placed side by side, the bodies of soldiers from opposing armies often contain little to indicate the political beliefs that initially put them into opposition. Scarry argues that the bodies of soldiers scattered on the battlefield are virtually indistinguishable from one another but for the uniforms and external symbols applied to them. "Does this dead boy's body "belong" to his side, the side "for which" he died, or does it "belong" to the side "for which" someone killed him, the side that "took" him?" Scarry asks (119). She continues: "That it belongs to both or neither makes manifest the nonreferential character of the dead body that will become operative in war's aftermath, a nonreferentiality that rather than eliminating all referential activity instead gives it a frightening freedom of referential activity, one whose direction is no longer limited and controlled by the original contexts of personhood and motive, thus increasing the directions in which at the end of the war it can now move" (Scarry, 119). Dead bodies, therefore, are ideal symbols. Although they once spoke and had individual agency, now they are speechless and subject entirely to external interpretation (Verdery, 29).

In death the bodies become empty signifiers upon which meaning can be projected. As in the photographs and press releases discussed above, the death of a soldier puts in motion the production of meaning. The Sri Lankan Army media department selects some bodies (the bodies of SLA soldiers) to be heroic defenders and others (the bodies of LTTE cadres) to be disgusting lumps of flesh. Regardless of the meaning assigned to them, in death both the SLA soldier and the LTTE cadre lose their individuality and become objects to be interpreted by others.

Over the course of the last twenty-five years, tens of thousands of memorial ceremonies have been held for Sinhala Buddhist war dead. These ceremonies range from small funerals performed for individual families to the annual ceremony held at Panagoda army temple, which attracts over ten thousand grieving family members each year. Each of these memorial ceremonies, from the smallest to the largest, is accompanied by a set of rituals as well as a sermon, which attempts to suggest particular ways of understanding the bodies of those who died in the war. During Buddhist funerals, bodies are interpreted according to Buddhist principles. They become, in the words of Sumanajoti, "proof of Buddhism," but what exactly do the bodies prove?

Interpreting the bodies of Sri Lankan Buddhist soldier dead is no simple task. While these press releases by the Sri Lankan Army media corps describe the fallen soldiers as heroic, this is but one of many interpretations that will be applied before their bodies have been buried and their individuality forgotten in time. Indeed, when a Sri Lankan Buddhist soldier dies, there is often a conflict over the interpretation of the body. Two distinct, albeit not mutually exclusive, interpretations have been employed upon the corpses of Buddhist soldiers killed in battle. On the one hand, the corpses are read in the light of Sinhala culture heroes such as Dutugamunu and Vijayabahu, figures whose efforts "in defense of Dharma" insured them a positive rebirth or even *nirvāna*. On the other hand, the corpses are also read as untimely deaths, inauspicious

occurrences precipitated from negative actions performed in the past, leading to further suffering in the future and serving as “proof of Buddhism.” This tension between war dead as signifiers of heroic sacrifice for the nation and war dead as examples of untimely death caused by negative karma complicates efforts to valorize and apotheosize the soldier dead of Buddhist Sri Lanka.

In her study on Buddhism in the Sri Lankan civil war, *In Defense of Dharma: Just-war Ideology in Buddhist Sri Lanka*, Tessa Bartholomeusz argues that the stories told by Sri Lankan Buddhists to legitimate the war employ a *prima facie* just war ethic. *Prima facie* obligations refer to ethical obligations, which can be overridden when they come in conflict with each other (Bartholomeusz, 2002). For example, the obligation to speak the truth may be overridden if doing so would result in the death or injury of another and the obligation to refrain from killing or causing injury could be overridden by the obligation to preserve the life of an innocent. In the case of Sri Lankan Buddhism, Bartholomeusz explains, the obligation to refrain from killing can be overridden in instances where the survival of the Buddhist Dharma is threatened. While I have taken issue with this formulation elsewhere (Kent, 2010), it is undeniable that Sri Lankan Buddhists have and do make the decision to go to war rather than to remain passive in the face of military challenge. It would be wrong, however, to assume that this so-called “justified” war could be waged without temporal and soteriological consequences. A war may be legitimated with stories from the past as well as selective citation and interpretation of Buddhist teachings. The law of individual karma, however, may not be suspended. When the corpses of Buddhist soldiers find their way home, they become objects upon which this conflict is played out.

Buddhist Heroes

One of the most common themes of memorial sermons for Sri Lankan war dead is that of the war hero, or *raṇavīru*, who offers himself as a sacrifice (or *pūjā*) for the sake of the country, nation and religion (*raṭa*, *jātiya*, and *āgama*). In this brief excerpt from a sermon delivered to a crowd of over ten thousand relatives of war dead gathered at Panagoda army temple, Venerable Itapanna Dhammalankara also stresses the selflessness of the sacrifice made by soldiers. He preaches:

You must understand that your relatives did not die in vain. They died while engaged in the heroic service of protecting the country, nation and the *sāsana* of the fully enlightened Buddha. That is why there is no doubt that the great names (*śrī nāma*) of the war heroes (*raṇavīru*) will be recorded in history above all others. They have protected and continue to protect the country (*raṭa*). They have protected and continue to protect the race (*jātiya*). They have also protected and continue to protect the *sāsana* of the fully enlightened Buddha. That is

why there is no doubt that their names have earned a special place in this country's history.⁵

According to this rhetoric, a soldier's death is not a waste, but rather, a sacrifice, or *pūjā*, on behalf of the *raṭa*, *jāṭiya* and *sāsana*, the country, race and religion. Dhammalankara's words to the gathered families are typical of sermons delivered at the memorials of soldiers. He calls the soldiers "*raṇaviru*," or "war heroes," a term that has penetrated Sri Lankan society.⁶ The term "*raṇaviru*" is an honorific used to refer to all soldiers.⁷ Dhammalankara stresses that the deaths of soldiers are not meaningless and that the names of those who have given their lives for the country, race and religion (*raṭa*, *jāṭiya* and *sāsana*) will be preserved in history.⁸

Discussing this sermon with me a few weeks later, Dhammalankara explained why he preached this way to the families of soldiers killed in battle.

Some mothers and fathers are accustomed to saying "Our son gave his life for the country, the race and unity of the country" so they don't feel

⁵ Interview with Ven. Itapanna Dhammalankara in Rukmale on September 28, 2006.

⁶ Another term frequently used to describe soldiers, both living and dead is "*mura devatā*," or "guardian deities." It should be remembered, however, that while the corpses of soldiers may be passive objects, living soldiers often resist the definitions attributed to them by nationalist rhetoric. After hearing a sermon in which he and his fellow soldiers were referred to as "*mura devatā*," Captain Kanishka called his wife and informed her in jest that as a guardian deity he deserved more respect at home.

⁷ There is even a national holiday called War Heroes' Day on June 7th commemorated with a postage stamp. See de Mel, Neloufer. 2007. *Militarizing Sri Lanka: Popular Culture, Memory and Narrative in the Armed Conflict*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, pg. 19.

⁸ There are a few different ways of expressing country, race and religion. The most common is *raṭa*, *jāṭiya* and *āgama*. Less common are the terms *raṭa*, *dāya* and *samaya*, which come from *hela bhāsā*, an archaic form of Sinhala touted by nationalists as a pure language. Although *sāsana* is also used to refer to the Buddhist religion in sermons to soldiers and their families, it is less common than *āgama* or *dāya*. The phrase, "*raṭa*, *jāṭiya*, *āgama*," country, race and religion is repeated in all ritual activities performed for soldiers. It is also a politically charged slogan. Indeed, H.L. Seneviratne refers to it as the "refuge of scoundrels," referring to its ubiquity in the speeches of nationalist politicians (Seneviratne 1999, 67). *Raṭa* is a fairly straightforward term that refers to the country of Sri Lanka, as a unified whole. The term *jāṭiya*, on the other hand, is a little more ambiguous. While it is sometimes translated as "nation" as suggested by the term Eksat Jāṭiyaka Pakṣaya, or United National Party (UNP), it also has racial overtones. Somapala Jayawardhana's Sinhala-English Dictionary defines the term "*jāṭiya*" as "nation." The term "*jāṭiyabhēdaya*," on the other hand, is defined as "ethnic distinction" (Somapala, 93). The final term, *āgama*, is equally divisive. In contrast to the term *āgam*, which is plural, meaning "religions," in the plural, *āgama* is a singular noun translated as "The Religion." The Religion, of course, is Buddhism. The act of giving one's life for the *raṭa*, *jāṭiya*, *āgama*, therefore, is a function of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. One gives their life for this country as a unified whole; the race, the Sinhala; and the religion, Buddhism.

shocked. There are some like that, but there are also those who are inconsolable. We tell them that this is a sacrifice (*pūjā*) for the country.⁹

Dhammalankara stresses that this rhetoric of sacrifice for the country is meant as a strategy to console the families of dead soldiers. By defining the deaths of soldiers as sacrifices to the country, race, and religion, Dhammalankara hopes to help families overcome their grief by seeing the deaths as valuable acts of merit, which will be rewarded in the future.

Another strategy for aggrandizing the deaths of Buddhist soldiers is to compare them to Sinhala culture heroes, remembered today for their victories against invasions from South India. The Mahāvamsa story of King Duṭugāmuṇu, in particular, provides a particularly effective lens for viewing Buddhist soldier dead. In the 2nd Century BCE, King Duṭugāmuṇu is said to have lead his armies carrying a spear decorated with a relic of the Buddha to victory over Eḷāra, a South Indian king who ruled the Lankan kingdom of Anurādhapura for forty-four years. After establishing himself as ruler, Duṭugāmuṇu, like the Mauryan King Aśoka before him, was plagued with guilt after killing so many people. Eight *arahats* flew in from Piyaṅgudīpa and soothed the king by explaining that he was only guilty of killing one and a half human beings: one who had taken the five precepts and one who had taken refuge in the triple gem.¹⁰ According to the Mahāvamsa account, after his death, Duṭugāmuṇu was reborn in heaven to await rebirth as the chief disciple of the future Buddha Metteya. Furthermore, he is said to have explained his motives, declaring, “Not for the joy of sovereignty is this toil of mine, my striving (has been) ever to establish the doctrine of the Sambuddha.¹¹” In other words, according to the Mahāvamsa, Duṭugāmuṇu went to war not for personal glory, but for the sake of the Buddhist religion.

A number of grieving parents compared the deaths of their sons in battle to efforts of Duṭugāmuṇu and other Sinhala kings famous for fighting South Indians in a collected volume of memorial letters. The father of Captain G.L. Candana Ruvan Samaratunga writes:

Brave kings such as Vijayabāhu and Duṭugāmuṇu took action in order to save our country from the Colas and Eḷāra. In this era, brave generals such as Kobbekaduva and Vijayavimalaratna, did their duty for the country and nation. I am now old. It is difficult for me to fight to protect the country and nation, but my son fulfilled that duty. He gave his life (*divi pūjā kera*) during Operation Rivirāsa trying to save

⁹ Interview with Ven. Itapanna Dhammalankara in Rukmale on September 28, 2006.

¹⁰ Mhv. XXV vv. 103-111.

¹¹ Rajjasukhāya vāyāmo nā'yaṃ mama kadācīpi: Sambuddhasāsanasseva ṭhapanāya ayaṃ mama.

Jaffna. (In English) “Among ten men, nine are women, but my son is a lion.”¹²

In addition to recognizing his son’s sacrifice, this father compares his son to Sinhala Buddhist cultural heroes Vijayabaju and Dutugemunu as well as contemporary war heroes such as the famous general, Denzil Kobbekaduwa. Additionally, Mr. Samaratunga portrays his son as an extension of himself: providing a service for the nation that he was unable to provide.

In another memorial letter, the father of Captain Don Nilan Mādhava Bijemāna goes so far as to pray that his son will be able to gain *nirvāna* through his actions on the battlefield. He writes:

My son is a heroic war leader, who destroyed a Tiger camp and gave it to the nation! We were joined by fate and separated by fate. You have done more of your duty to sustain the existence of the country than we have. On the day that my son, the heroic war leader, destroyed the Mānkulam tiger camp and gave it to the nation, everything went well in the end. The shot that hit you was not as an insult to your fate or ours, rather, I consider it as a fatal shot for the security for the nation and region. Heroic son, I hope (*prarthanā*) that following in the footsteps of people like Duṭugāmunu and Parakramabahu will be enough for you to unlock and open the door to the city of *nirvāna*.¹³

Comparisons to Sinhala culture heroes were not limited to kings of the distant past. Indeed, Kollonawe Sumangala invoked the story of Keppetipola Disawe, from Sri Lanka’s colonial history, in order to aggrandize Sinhala soldier dead. Keppetipola Disawe was a Kandyan noble, who was sent by the British administration to quell a rebellion in the Uva province. Rather than fighting the rebels, Keppetipola joined their cause and led them against the British. He was captured and executed in 1818 by the British only to become a Sinhala cultural hero in death. Sumangala preaches:

Do you remember Keppetipola Nilametuma? When he was taken to his execution, he stepped into the Temple of the Tooth and said, “O Venerable Tooth Relic, they are not killing me because I am a murderer! They are not executing me as a rapist. They are killing me for trying to save the innocent citizens of my country; they are killing me for trying to save my Buddha Sāsana. O Venerable Tooth Relic, I

¹² Goḍigamuwa, Jayasena, ed. 2000. *Magē Sita Tula Mākī Nāta Oba* (You Are Not Faded In My Heart). Katugastota: Samasta Lankā Raṇaviru Padanama. p.23.

¹³ Goḍigamuwa, Jayasena, ed. 2000. *Magē Sita Tula Mākī Nāta Oba* (You Are Not Faded In My Heart). Katugastota: Samasta Lankā Raṇaviru Padanama. p.35.

will be reborn in this country again! When I am, I will save the Buddha *Sāsana*” (Kollonawe Sumangala).¹⁴

Sumangala is careful to emphasize the intention behind Keppetipola’s actions. Although he was to be executed for leading a violent revolt, according to Sumangala, his intentions were not to kill, but to save the innocent citizens of the country. His death, therefore, is to be viewed not as the inevitable result of negative actions, but as a sacrifice for the benefit of others. Sumangala goes on in his sermon to emphasize this parallel between Keppetipola’s circumstances and those of contemporary soldiers fighting on behalf of others. In contrast to criminals, who are only motivated by self-interest, Sumangala argues that Keppetipola and, by extension, Sinhala soldiers, are motivated by the altruistic intention to save the innocent citizens of the country from invading enemies.

While these comparisons of soldiers to heroes of the past were not surprising, it was surprising how infrequently I found these comparisons were made. The vast majority of letters in this volume expressed no nationalistic pride in the deaths of their children and made no attempts to compare their deaths with those of Sinhala culture heroes. Indeed, many parents that I spoke with believed the army to be a “*naraka rāsāvaka*,” an evil profession.¹⁵ Indeed, the majority of the parents that I spoke with felt little pride in their son’s or daughter’s sacrifice, telling me that their son or daughter had joined the army secretly without their permission.

Several of the families that I interviewed claimed that they had tried to stop them from joining, going so far as to hide their birth certificates or intercept their acceptance letters from the army before they could open them. In many cases, the parents explained that their son had secretly joined the army without their permission. Mr. Satyapala, a farmer living near the city of Mihintale and father of a soldier spoke of his son’s decision to join the army:

I told him no over and over again. I’m not lying. I’m telling the truth. I told him, “Son, if you join the army, I won’t let you come home again because they come and get you and take you back by force.” That’s why I told him not to go, but somehow he collected the papers. Even so, I didn’t sign the application. I wouldn’t give him his birth certificate.¹⁶

The sister of another soldier explained that her brother had threatened to kill himself when her parents forbade him from joining the army.

¹⁴ Sermon delivered by Kollonawe Sumaṅgala at Ratanaghara temple in Anuradhapura on March 10, 2007.

¹⁵ Interview with family on Kurunegala road near Katugastota on February 7, 2007.

¹⁶ Interview with Mr. Satyapala at his home in Bogahayaya on October 22, 2006.

I told him not to join. My younger brother studied at a Buddhist High School (*pirivena*). When my brother kept insisting on joining the army, my mother went to the monk and asked him not to give him a letter of recommendation. Afterwards, when my brother went to get a letter of recommendation from the monk, the monk said that he couldn't. Later my brother came home and said "Mother, prepare for a *pansakula*. Go and bring the monk." (Threatening to kill himself). Then I told my mother, "If he wants to go, let him go. You can't keep him." My brother had given up on life. I think that he joined because he was fed up with life.¹⁷

Aspiring soldiers often seek out local monks for character references. By asking the monk to not write for her son, this mother hoped to prevent him from joining the army. She only relented after her son threatened to take his own life.

The ambivalence of many parents towards the military is poignantly captured in the following letter written by the aunt of a soldier killed in battle. She writes:

We used to live in a small hut that we had built. In the hut were my older sister, her two sons and myself. The terrorists came to the Navak Kulama area and destroyed the whole village, cutting up people, smashing houses and setting them on fire. At that time, the terrorists came and attacked. During that attack, my older sister was shot and she lay on the ground in a pool of blood, hiding her two children underneath her. The terrorists thought that all three of them were dead. Poking us with the barrels of their rifles, they left thinking that we were dead. I pretended that I was dead. The two children were unconscious. The older boy was nine. The younger boy was seven. There was blood all over the bodies of my sons. My sister took leave from this world and so I raised the children. When he got bigger, the eldest started to say, "Let's get revenge for the death of our mother." The younger boy said, "I'll join the army to get revenge for mother." They both secretly joined the army. The younger boy gave his life during a terrorist attack. I light a lamp in the morning and the evening to give merit to my golden son.¹⁸

This memorial letter highlights the tension between the soldier as hero and the soldier as tragic victim of his own karma. While the letter, at first glance, seems to justify killing with its narration of a horrific act of violence committed by the LTTE, closer attention reveals the structure of a Buddhist morality story on the ultimate futility of vengeance. Having witnessed the violent murder of their mother, two brothers join the

¹⁷ Interview with a family on October 22, 2006 at their home near the A9 highway.

¹⁸ Goḍigamuwa, Jayasena, ed. 2000. *Magē Sita Tula Mākī Nāta Oba* (You Are Not Faded In My Heart). Katugastota: Samasta Lankā Raṇaviru Padanama, p. 15.

army secretly to take revenge. In the end, the writer of this letter, a woman who has lost family and friends at the hands of the enemy, does not feel proud that her nephews joined the army for revenge. On the contrary, she feels profound sadness and regret that she was not able to stop her nephews from joining the army in search of revenge. Her only recourse is to light a lamp for merit.

While every family of a soldier killed in battle will have mixed feelings about their child's sacrifice, Sinhala Buddhists are particularly conflicted. This is expressed with particular clarity in the 1998 Sri Lankan movie, *Pura Handa Kaluvara* (Death on a Fullmoon Day.) In the film, an old man named Vanni Hami receives news that his son, Bandara, has been killed in battle. Vanni Hami is depicted as a wise old villager in tune with the natural rhythms of the land and able to predict the weather. Shortly after receiving the news, a sealed coffin arrives draped in the Sri Lankan flag. Vanni Hami, however, refuses to accept his son's death. While others in the village, including the local monk, try to honor his son with a memorial, Vanni Hami rejects their efforts. The rhetoric of sacrifice and comparisons of Bandara to Duṭṭugāmunu can do nothing for the old man. In the final scene of the film, Vanni Hami digs up his son's coffin with the help of the other villagers. Opening the sealed coffin, they discover not Bandara's corpse, but a banana stalk and rocks. Although the villagers had struggled with Vanni Hami to accept his son's death and begin the process of interpreting his body, in the end they discover the coffin to be empty.

Dying Buddhist in Sri Lanka

In order to understand the problem depicted in *Pura Handa Kaluvara* fully, we must look towards the cycle of memorial ceremonies performed by Sinhala Buddhists. Buddhist memorial rituals begin the process of transforming a death into a Buddhist death. As empty signifiers, corpses demand interpretation. Charles Keyes and Anusaranaśāsanakiarti argue that "[T]he fact of death poses a fundamental problem of meaning..." (Anusaranaśāsanakiarti and Keyes, 1). In a later article, Keyes explains this assertion, writing that: "Memorial rituals subject death to a Buddhist interpretation and juxtapose it with a course of action that moves people away from the abyss of meaninglessness to which ultimate suffering carries one" (Keyes, 273). In other words, Buddhist Memorial ceremonies do more than simply make abstract statements about ultimate meaning; rather they attempt to supplement reality by projecting meaning onto the bodies. Viewed in this way, a memorial is an interpretive activity, assisting in the creation of memory and connecting individual instances of death to general Buddhist understandings of reality. In the words of Venerable Sumanajoti, cited at the beginning of this piece, they become "proof of Buddhism."

For Sri Lankan Buddhists, there are three key interpretive activities that must occur after a death. First is the *pansakula* ceremony, which immediately precedes burial. Second is the *mataka baṇa* or "memorial sermon," which is generally performed on the sixth night after a death. Finally there is the seventh day almsgiving (*sat davase dāne*) performed at noon on the seventh day after the death. In addition to these, families will also sponsor almsgivings three months and one year after a death with some continuing to sponsor ceremonies annually thereafter.

The Sinhala Buddhist memorial cycle begins with the body. In contrast to contemporary western funerals where the body is stored at a funeral home and only viewed—if at all—during the funeral service proper, in Sri Lankan Buddhist families the body is generally embalmed and then brought home where it remains until it is buried or cremated. The body itself is the focus of all activity. The odor of the body penetrates the home and is ever-present throughout all of the rituals. Indeed, many monks admit to getting nauseous the first time they chanted over a several-day-old corpse.

The body is normally dressed in a white shirt and sarong while the embalming process staves off decomposition giving it a somewhat lifelike appearance. In the *mala gedera*, or death house, the corpse resembles a Buddhist lay-person (*upāsaka/upāsikā*) sleeping after a visit to a temple. Dressed in the white cloth of the *upāsaka* or *upāsikā* and surrounded by monks, the body does not evoke the pain or uncertainty of death, but the virtue and calm of a dedicated Buddhist. The white color of the corpse's clothing as well as the *mataka vastra*, the pieces of cloth offered during the *pansakula*, are not coincidental. Indeed, *mataka vastra* are always white and will never have any kind of print or design on them. Many monks interpreted the white cloth as a symbol of the purity of the dead person. Venerable Ānandavaṃsa (Ānanda for short), the head of a small temple located adjacent to the 6th Sri Lanka Light Infantry Regimental HQ in Mahakanadarava, posits that the white cloth is meant to remind the people of the good things that a person did when they were alive. Ānanda explains further that the main goal behind this comparison is to “state the value and virtue of the dead person...” for the benefit of grieving relatives.

The sermons delivered at the *pansakula* ceremony and at the *mataka baṇa* further reinforce the memories of virtue and purity associated with the deceased. Ven. Ānanda explains how he memorializes the dead during a typical memorial sermon: “During the sermon, one goal is to state the value and virtue of the dead person. They sponsor the sermon in the name of the dead person, you know. There we preach for the relatives who have paid for the *pinkama*. Then we need to highlight a few points to the people so that they will remember the dead person.”¹⁹

While memorial ceremonies strive to suggest particular interpretations of the lives of the deceased, they also attempt to connect the deaths with Buddhist teachings on the nature of reality. Monks stress the importance of the body for a meditation on impermanence. The lifeless body of a family member serves as proof of the Buddhist principles of impermanence (*anicca*), the lack of an unchanging and independent self (*anattā*), and suffering (*dukkha*). Venerable Ānanda explains:

The fact that life is impermanent can be proven with evidence when a person dies. One can also perform impermanence meditation on dead bodies. So, when someone dies, we need to preach about impermanence in order to advise the living....We tell them to live a life without harming others. Through that a person can be successful in

¹⁹ Interview with Venerable Ānandavaṃsa in Bogahayaya on November 21, 2006.

this life....When people listen to sermons about impermanence, a *kusala karma* occurs. It is the *kusala karma* of meditation (*bhāvanā*).²⁰

Venerable Ānanda views death as an important time for reinforcing the Buddhist Dharma. By using the corpse as a symbol of Buddhist teachings, he seeks to ease suffering and improve people's behavior in general. After first easing the hearts of the audience members by pointing out the virtues of the deceased, he then proceeds to interpret the body in Buddhist terms with the hope of eliminating the root of all suffering.

Venerable Ratanavaṃsa concurs with Ānanda, explaining: "The sermon at this time is also a concentration on impermanence. '*Anicca vata sankhāra, uppavayadhammino. Uppajjitva nirujjhanti tesam vupasamo sukho.*' All conditioned *dhamma* are impermanent. A person who is born dies. That is to say a person who is born dies and what is created will be destroyed. So this is a very good occasion to concentrate on impermanence." As a collection of aggregate parts, the body is subject to arising and falling away. Memorial preachers, therefore, use the fresh corpse as a powerful symbol of this important Buddhist principle of reality.

In addition to reaffirming Buddhist concepts, monks are also very concerned with the emotional needs of the families and friends of the deceased. When asked about his goals as a memorial preacher, Ven. Ānandavaṃsa responded that his primary goal is to help grieving family members reduce the *dukkha* in their hearts and help them to fix their hearts by themselves (*hita hadāganna*.) He explains:

The *pansakula* (or memorial) sermon is not for the dead person, but for the people there. We need to help renew their lives. We need to decrease the *dukkha* in their hearts. We must show them that we are with them and help them to get rid of their suffering. One must preach there in order to show the impermanent nature of the world."²¹

By praising the deceased and connecting their inert bodies to universal Buddhist laws, Ven. Ānandavaṃsa seeks to ease the grief in their hearts and help them come to terms with death in general. Ānandavaṃsa illustrates by referencing the *pansakula* and the water-pouring ceremony:

Since they took the five precepts before that they also get the *kusala karma* of *sīla*. They offer a white cloth so they get the *kusala karma* of *dāna*. Three *kusala karma*, *dāna*, *sīla* and *bhavana*, all occur. The *kusal* collected there is then rejoiced in for the deceased person. We pour water as an example in order to show how water fills an empty container and spills over. From that we are saying that the deceased person's (next) life is filling and overflowing with merit. (*piṇi*). That is

²⁰ Interview with Venerable Ānandavaṃsa in Bogahayaya on February 16, 2007.

²¹ Interview with Venerable Ānandavaṃsa in Bogahayaya on November 21, 2006.



Parents of soldiers killed in action pour water at a memorial service held at the Samasta Ranaviru Padanama in Katugastota, a suburb of Kandy.

done in order to ease the hearts (*hita*) of the living. To help them fix their hearts (*hita hadāganna*). So, that is what a *pansakula* is.²²

Ānandavaṃsa summarizes the *pansakula* ritual as an act of merit that can develop three of the ten *kusala karma* (*dāna*, *sīla* and *bhavanā*).²³ By taking the precepts, offering the *mataka vastra* fabric to the monks and contemplating the impermanence of life, those who participate in the *pansakula* have the opportunity to fix their hearts and make progress on the Buddhist path.

Venerable Ānandavaṃsa also points out that the ceremony brings families together like no other occasion. Thus, Ānandavaṃsa argues that the water pouring ceremony helps to heal rifts in a family and increase solidarity in the face of grief. He illustrates with a story:

I remember at one house the oldest son....it was the oldest daughter who died. The son had a land problem with his sister. He didn't come for the sermon. He didn't come when the monks were speaking. When they were pouring water he approached his mother. Then after pouring water his mother hugged him and cried. Everyone cried. The eldest son hugged his mother and father and cried. All of the anger was over right then.²⁴

Anecdotes such as these illustrate how the crisis of death gathers extended families in one place, forcing family members to confront their disagreements and overcome them. The water pouring ceremony, more than any other event during the memorial cycle, symbolizes this gathering of the family. During the water pouring ceremony, the immediate family gathers around the water jug as the head of the family pours it into the bowl. The family huddles close around the jug, each trying to touch it as the water is poured.

Monks utilize the opportunity presented by the memorial ceremony to help families and the deceased on a variety of levels, from spiritual development to healing family rifts. The interpretation of corpses makes merit possible. By viewing the body not simply as an object for grief, but as a symbol of Buddhist concepts, participants in memorials produce very real positive effects: grief is eased and families are brought together.

²² Interview with Venerable Ānandavaṃsa in Bogahayaya on February 16, 2007.

²³ The ten *kusala karma* or "wholesome actions" are 1) giving (*dāna*), 2) being morally upright (*sīla*), 3) meditation (*bhāvanā*), 4) giving/transferring merit (*patti*), 5) rejoicing in the merit of others (*pattānumodanā*), 6) rendering service [to others] (*veyyāvacca*), 7) honoring others (*apacāya*), 8) preaching (*desanā*), 9) listening [to the teachings] (*suti*), and 10) having correct views (*ditṭhiju*). The ten *akusala karma* are the opposite of the ten *kusala karma*.

²⁴ Interview with Venerable Ānandavaṃsa in Bogahayaya on February 16, 2007.

The Untimely Death of a Soldier

When a soldier is killed in battle, however, his death triggers a crisis that cannot be completely ameliorated by a standard funeral ceremony. While the corpse of a soldier, like any other corpse, provides a convenient tool for reminding individuals of Buddhist principles, it also suggests some consequences that are more difficult for families to accept. While no death can be called “timely,” the death of a soldier is particularly problematic for Sri Lankan Buddhists. Despite the banners posted in cities across Sri Lanka, which heap praise upon soldier dead, the circumstances of a soldier’s death are inauspicious.

As a young person whose life has been interrupted, the body of a dead soldier conjures forth images of negative karma performed in the past. Indeed, the body of a young man or woman killed violently represents an *akāla maraṇa*, an untimely or inauspicious death. An *akāla maraṇa* is popularly believed to be the result of negative karma produced either in this life or a previous one. According to this belief a person’s life span is determined by the amount of life-force, or *ayusa*, that they have received as a result of past karma. When a young soldier dies on the battlefield, therefore, it seems to indicate that he must have committed some *akusala* karma in the past.

Venerable Ratanavaṃsa discusses the meaning and causes of an untimely death. He explains:

Untimely death is what you call it when a healthy person suddenly dies. There is the belief that a person dies according to their karma and the amount of life-force (*ayusa*) they have. People believe that people face untimely deaths because of big *akusala* karma from their previous lives. Even a little child could face an untimely death. Then the people will say, his life force is over (*genāpu ayusa ivarayi*). He must have created some karma in the past.... Remember how Venerable Mogallāna was killed by thieves? Whether it is today or back then, someone faces untimely death because of previous karma. I have seen people face untimely death for killing animals and because of great hatred. I have seen those kinds of people die for no reason at all.²⁵

Ratanavaṃsa compares those who die violent deaths before their times with the *arahant*, Mogallāna. According to tradition, despite his status as an *arahant* and his development as a meditator, Mogallāna was beaten to death by bandits as the karmic consequence of attempting to kill his parents in a past life.²⁶ No matter who one is, the

²⁵ Interview with Venerable Ratanavaṃsa at his temple in Mahakanadarava, February 21, 2007.

²⁶ The story of Mahā Mogallāna’s death is found in the Sarabhaṅga Jātaka (J. v. 125). According to this account, Mahā Mogallāna was captured and killed by Brigands. Below is E.B. Cowell’s translation of this passage: “On the seventh day an act committed of old by the Elder, carrying with it consequences to be recognised on some future occasion, got its chance for mischief. The story goes that once upon a time, hearkening to what his wife said, he wanted

force of one's past negative karma can take one's life away at any time.

While little has been written on the phenomena of *akāla maraṇa* in Sinhala Buddhist culture to date, S.J. Tambiah, Charles Keyes and Alan Klima have discussed it in the context of Thai Buddhism. (Tambiah 1968, 98; Anusaraṇakiarti and Keyes 1980, 14; Klima, 174). According to these authors, the bodies of victims of untimely death are actually feared in certain Thai villages. Tambiah notes that such bodies are denied cremation for fear that it may cause future descendants to die under similar circumstances (Tambiah 1968, 98). Furthermore, victims of *akāla maraṇa* in Thai Buddhist culture are denied all ritual (and thus interpretation) and buried in the ground in order to shield the family from the malevolent power of the death.

While Sinhala Buddhists do not hold such extreme beliefs about sudden death, there is no denying that it is viewed as extremely inauspicious. When looking through the photographs of Sri Lanka's war dead, one is struck by how young and proud most of them look. In their immaculate uniforms, these young ghosts allow a glimpse into the shattered hopes and dreams of countless families. The deaths of these young soldiers are untimely, inauspicious and destructive. When asked to discuss the fates of soldiers who die on the battlefield, Venerable Maṅgala, the head of a temple near Kandy, admits that they are uncertain. He explains:

Reincarnation occurs according to the thoughts at the last moment of life (*avasana situvili*). We can't say what sort of thoughts will be in a soldier's mind. If we were sitting here talking and a bomb were to suddenly go off, what would happen? We can't know? Our reincarnation could be good. That sort of thing could happen. Some people might be left without arms and legs after being hit by a bomb. They wouldn't die immediately and negative thoughts might arise. Hatred could arise. They might think: "If I see the guy who did this to me, I'll kill him and cut him into pieces." There is no way that person's next life could be good.²⁷

to put his father and mother to death; and, taking them in a carriage to a forest, he pretended that they were attacked by robbers, and struck and beat his parents. Through feebleness of sight being unable to see objects clearly, they did not recognise their son, and thinking they were robbers said: "Dear son, some robbers are killing us: make your escape," and lamented for him only. He thought, "Though they are being beaten by me, it is only on my account they make lamentation. I am acting shamefully." So he reassured them and, pretending that the robbers had been put to flight, he stroked their hands and feet, saying, "Dear father and mother, do not be afraid, the robbers have fled," and brought them again to their own house." This action for ever so long not finding its opportunity but ever biding its time, like a core of flame hidden under ashes, caught up and seized upon the man when he was re-born for the last time, and the Elder, in consequence of his action, was unable to fly up into the air. His magic power that once could quell Nanda and Upānanda and cause Vejayanta to tremble, as the result of his action became mere feebleness. The brigand crushed all his bones, subjecting him to the 'straw and meal' tortures, and, thinking he was dead, went off with his followers" (Cowell vol. 5, 65).

²⁷ Interview with Sarasiyapattuwe Maṅgala at his temple near Kandy on October 4, 2006.

While there is no guarantee that a soldier will be consumed with hatred when he dies, Mangala admits that it is likely in most situations. If one dies consumed by the pain of one's wounds, hatred is likely to arise and direct one towards future lives filled with more hatred and misery. Reflecting on the death of her son, the mother of a young Sergeant writes in a volume commemorating Sri Lanka's war dead:

....After you left, I cried everyday. Everyday, you told me that you would get a vacation and come again soon. You said, "Don't be concerned about comforting my heart (*hita*). It is no trouble for me. If my heart could be troubled, by now there would be nothing left of it. We don't trouble anyone. So the gods look after us." But the gods didn't look in our direction. We never troubled anyone in this life. I think that this must be the fruit of sins (*pav*) from past lives....²⁸

Having done everything in their power to protect their son, these parents still lost their son to the war. Not even the power of the gods could counteract the force of the Sergeant's negative karma.

Strategies of Memory

Over the course of Sri Lanka's civil war, many families were left behind with the sense that their son died from the result of negative karma while performing an unwholesome occupation. This, needless to say, is not an acceptable understanding of death for soldiers or for their families. When a soldier dies in battle, therefore, his death triggers more than just traditional Buddhist mechanisms of meaning production. When the body arrives at the home, monks, lay people and the military itself begin immediately to distinguish the body from other young corpses.

The projection of meaning onto a soldier's body begins even before the *pansakula* ceremony, when the body is brought home. To begin with, the bodies of soldiers themselves are the product of the army's selection process and training program.²⁹ In her recent book, *Militarizing Sri Lanka*, Neloufer de Mel points out the physical requirements for joining the Sri Lankan army. Men seeking admission to the army as enlisted men must be between 18 and 24 years of age, not less than 5 feet, 4 inches (1.63m) in height with chest measurements of not less than 24 inches (61 cm). Requirements for officers are even more stringent with applicants between 18 and 22, minimum chest measurements of 32 inches (81 cm), and a height of 5 feet, 6 inches (1.68 m) (de Mel, 44). Young, above average in height and toned by regular exercise

²⁸ Goḍigamuwa, Jayasena, ed. 2000. *Magē Sita Tula Mākī Nāta Oba* (You Are Not Faded In My Heart). Katugastota: Samasta Lankā Raṇaviru Padanama. p.84.

²⁹ Michel Foucault explains in *Discipline and Punish* that the body of a soldier is the result of the skillful application of state power. He argues that by the late eighteenth century, soldiers were no longer born, but made through a process of discipline. Through intensive training, a villager was transformed and given the air of a soldier (Foucault, 135).

regimens, the corpses of Sri Lankan soldiers stand out in sharp relief from those that normally arrive in the *mala gedera*.

Uniformed representatives from the army normally deliver the bodies of soldiers. In contrast to the white in which most corpses are dressed, soldiers are often displayed in their uniforms, or, in cases where the body cannot be displayed; the closed casket draped with the Sri Lankan flag stands in for the corpse. Typically, the local police will bring news of the death and later in the day, representatives from the army will deliver the body to its home.

While the white clothing of the *upāsaka/upāsikā* evokes images of a devoted Buddhist, the uniform triggers associations with duty and country. The army uniform is a powerful symbol. Many of the parents of dead soldiers explained that their children joined the army because of their attraction to the uniform. Clutching a framed picture of her son, the mother of one soldier explained: "He saw his brother come home, wearing the uniform and the hat of a soldier. When his brother left, he also wanted to wear the uniform." When I asked the mother of another soldier why he had joined the army, she explained that the young boy had seen soldiers in their uniforms and felt attraction (*āsavi*) for them.³⁰ A soldier in his uniform is differentiated from the rest of society. Like monks who are distinguished by their robes, soldiers are set apart by their uniforms, service pins and medals. Major Cakkrawartha of Panagoda army temple goes so far as to identify the uniform with service to his country. When asked why he hadn't retired after being disabled by an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) in the north, he explained: "I believe that if I am in my uniform, no matter where I serve, it will be a service to my country. That is why I am happily serving here (as the administrator of a temple)."³¹ Lying in a casket, dressed in their uniforms, the bodies of soldiers appear special in comparison to those of normal civilians. Just as white cloth transforms civilians into icons of the ideal Buddhist lay-person, the uniforms covering the bodies of soldiers evoke images of selfless devotion to the country, race and religion.

When mourners and preachers begin the process of interpreting the corpse of the soldier, therefore, they do not begin with the grotesque and broken bodies discussed above, but with bodies dressed and prepared to seem virile and heroic. If such an image is impossible or the body is unable to be recovered, the coffin remains sealed, leaving only the Sri Lankan flag as an object to be interpreted.³² Despite these symbols meant to deflect attention away from the circumstances of a young soldiers' death, when the body of a soldier arrives home, the most powerful interpretation is most likely to be that of *akāla maraṇa*, an interpretation shared by suicide victims and

³⁰ This response is very similar to the responses that Jeffrey Samuels received when asking young monks why they had joined the monastic order. Many young monks explained that they had seen monks dressed in their robes and felt "āsavi" for them. Jeffrey Samuels, Personal Communication.

³¹ Interview with Major Chandrapala at Panagoda army temple on November 21, 2005.

³² One family told me that the army actually sent soldiers to guard the coffin of their son so that they would be unable to open the coffin to discover if his body was actually inside.

criminals. Indeed, many monks go to great effort in distinguishing the deaths of soldiers from other inauspicious deaths.

During a memorial sermon delivered before a crowd of thousands near Anuradhapura, Kollonawe Sumangala, a famous preacher and founding member of the Jatika Hela Urumaya (JHU), argues forcefully that soldiers should not be viewed as criminals. He cries out plaintively to the audience:

We are not dying in a quarrel over a fence! (i.e., in a small land dispute between farmers or families.) We haven't lost arms and legs trying to save the gold and silver of our brothers and sisters. *Ranaviru*, it is true that you receive a salary. Can you measure that salary when you lose your arms and legs, when you offer your lives, or when you fight with death?³³

Venerable Ānandavamsa, whose temple abuts an army camp in Mihintale, explains this memorial strategy to me during an interview, saying:

...we talk about their sacrifice. We talk about their value....There are some people who drink poison and just kill themselves without being of use to themselves or others. There are people like that, you know. When people look at the death of soldiers, their deaths have value. In that way, when you compare their deaths to people who just committed suicide, they have value.³⁴

By using the word "sacrifice" to describe the death of a soldier, Ananda effectively distinguishes soldiers from suicide victims. While both types of death are violent and untimely, soldiers are attributed with an altruistic intention, suggesting that their rebirths could be positive.

Venerable Mangala, provides a more detailed description of this problem, explaining how he projects value onto dead soldiers:

I show the parents the value (*āgavīma*) of the death. You see, some people die because of love affairs....If something goes wrong, they drink poison and kill themselves. They jump in front of trains. They hang themselves. They jump into reservoirs. Such things happen all of the time. They destroy their lives because of various problems. They destroy their lives with liquor or drugs. As far as I know, Sri Lanka has the second highest suicide rate in the world....So, in a country where so many lives are destroyed, we need to appreciate those who sacrifice their lives for the country and the nation....When I remind

³³ Sermon delivered by Kollonawe Sumaṅgala at Ratanaghara temple in Anuradhapura on March 10, 2007.

³⁴ Interview with Venerable Ānandavaṃsa in Bogahayaya on November 12, 2006.

parents of this, they become happy. When they think that their son didn't just give his life for no reason, but that he served us, our country and our nation, they feel a little better....There are two results of this: On the one hand, they become happy with the dharma and on the other side they become happy with their son's heroism. Through these two things, their suffering naturally decreases.³⁵

It is not surprising that a monk would take great pains to distinguish the bodies of soldiers from those of individuals who have taken their own lives. Indeed, many of the monks whom I spoke with made efforts in their sermons to distinguish the bodies of soldiers from those of suicide victims. The death of a young person is always untimely and the majority of young deaths in Sri Lanka are the result of suicide. As Venerable Mangala points out, Sri Lanka has an extremely high suicide rate.³⁶ When a monk presides at the funeral of a soldier, therefore, he must distinguish the body from the suicide victim. When asked what he preaches at the funeral of a suicide victim, Ananda replies candidly: "Actually, I don't say anything good about people who killed themselves. You can't say anything good. They have done something very bad. Birth as a human is very rare. They could be married. They could have children. Their children and wives need to live. Good people do not just leave them behind and free themselves. Such a person cannot take responsibility. They just leave behind their problems for others to solve. One cannot praise such a person".³⁷ A soldier, in contrast, is always praised no matter his true character or the circumstances of his death.

In order to solve this dilemma, therefore, many monks supplement these inauspicious interpretations of the corpse with rhetoric that highlights positive aspects of the death. Rather than interpreting the bodies simply as evidence of *anicca*, *anattā* and *dukkha*, memorial preachers tend to portray the bodies as symbols of compassion and selfless devotion to others. They announce that the deceased soldier fought and died for the security of the state and its peoples and not out of individual hatred or desire. By viewing the bodies as defenders of the nation, Buddhists are able to see the soldiers not through their specific actions of intentional killing on the battlefield or through their often-horrific injuries, but through their general roles as protectors of the innocent. In other words, when viewed in the context of the nation, as opposed to the context of the individual or the family, the death is portrayed not as something inauspicious, but rather as something that is valuable and worthy of praise.

³⁵ Interview with Sarasiyapattuwe Maṅgala at his temple near Kandy on October 4, 2006.

³⁶ According to the World Health Organization (WHO) report, Sri Lanka ranks number four in suicide-related deaths per 100,000 (61.4 recorded in 1991) behind Lithuania (84.1 recorded in 2004), Belarus (73.3 recorded in 2003), and the Russian Federation (71.3 recorded in 2004). (From World Health Organization Website, 2007.

http://www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/suicide_rates/en/index.html.)

³⁷ Interview with Venerable Ānandavaṃsa in Bogahayaya on November 12, 2006.

Conclusion

Returning to the gruesome images that began this piece, the body of a soldier is a powerful and malleable symbol. As soon as a young soldier's body hits the ground, it becomes a husk of its former personhood and a receptacle for the most convincing interpretations applied to it. In Sri Lanka, during its long and bloody civil war, Sri Lankan Buddhists faced serious problems when interpreting the remains of young soldiers who died violent deaths. While there was strong nationalist rhetoric, hailing the heroes who sacrificed (*pūjā*) their lives for the *raṭa*, *jātiya* and *āgama*, this rhetoric was countered by the religious and cultural stigma attached to those who meet untimely deaths.

This conflicted attitude towards soldier dead greatly hampered the ability of the military and government to create a cult of martyrs to mobilize the population for war. While the LTTE developed complex rituals and constructed elaborate memorials for the valorization of martyrs, it was not until 2003, twenty years after the start of the war, that the Sri Lankan government established an official memorial garden for those killed in the war. Until 2003, the vast majority of memorials were privately funded, ranging from elaborate tombstones, roadside bus shelters and a poorly managed foundation in a suburb of Kandy. The following epitaph for a dead soldier sums up the problem eloquently:

Although you sacrificed your valuable life in service to the country, I think that it was a worthless thing. While we respect soldiers, saying "We Salute You War Heroes," in newspapers, in the media and on banners, the army truck could not take your body to the village cemetery and your funeral had to be held on government land. I wonder if in the end it was those people, the ones that are satisfied with banners, who pushed the dirt into your grave with a bulldozer without giving you any kind of marker to remember you by...."Beloved Brother, may you be born in our family again."³⁸

Many families never recovered from the deaths of their sons. Although they received compensation from the government, many parents of soldiers killed in action live in incomplete houses, choosing to spend their monthly compensation checks on memorials and merit-making ceremonies rather than on themselves. While some may see their dead children as heroes worthy of banners, most feel only the pain of untimely death.

³⁸ Goḍigamuwa, Jayasena, ed. 2000. *Magē Sita Tula Mākī Nāta Oba* (You Are Not Faded In My Heart). Katugastota: Samasta Lankā Raṇaviru Padanama. p.13.

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DANIEL KENT