

# Kuveni's Revenge: Images of Women in a Sinhalese Myth

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## I

The position of women has been a matter of some concern to students of Sinhalese society and culture. Nur Yalman, in his article "The Purity of Women in the Castes of Malabar and Ceylon,"<sup>1</sup> has pointed out that the protection of the purity and exclusiveness of the group through the regulation of the sexual life of women is central to South Indian conceptions of caste. He shows that the South Indian concern for the purity of women is associated with the structure of the social system and that the safeguarding of women from possible violations of their sexual integrity is an expression of the desire to safeguard the boundaries of the group.

Gananath Obeyesekere has focused on a somewhat different aspect of the position of women—the attitudes of Sinhalese women toward themselves, which in turn reflect the attitudes of men toward them. In his "Pregnancy Cravings in Relation to Social Structure and Personality in a Sinhalese Village," he says that:

Men folk in Laggala view their women as possessed of certain inherent weaknesses: *Seductiveness*—women are viewed as sexually easily excitable, inducing the male to adultery and thus a threat to the integrity of the family; *Untrustworthiness*—no woman could be trusted, neither one's wife nor even one's mother. . . . women are also *jara* (unclean). . . .<sup>2</sup>

In structural terms, women are the weakest link in the perpetuation of the caste, because impurity can enter the group through them. The Sinhalese attitude corresponding to this structural situation is that women are potentially disruptive, untrustworthy and unclean.

In this paper I will examine the representation of two female figures, Sita and Kuveni, in the Sinhalese myth of the *Kohōmba Kankāriya*. Because this myth is very long and complex and because space does not permit a full analysis, I will limit myself to a comparison of the characteristics of these two women, concentrating on the ways in which their portrayal reflects the attitudes toward women described by Yalman and Obeyesekere.

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1. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 1962:25-58.
2. *American Anthropologist*, 1963, LXV (2) : 326.

## II

Sita and Kuveni are the central female characters in the myth which is enacted in the Kandyan ritual of the *Kohōmba Kankāriya*. The full *Kankāriya* ritual is an extensive and elaborate propitiation of the gods which is now rarely performed; it is intended both to increase general prosperity and to cure individual afflictions.

The *Kankāriya* myth describes the illness and subsequent cure of the second king of Lanka, Panduasudev. As Panduasudev's illness is the result of events in the life of his predecessor, Vijaya, the story of Vijaya's conquest of Lanka is central to the myth. The *Kankāriya* version of Vijaya's life is parallel in many respects to that of the *Mahāvamsa* chronicle (fifth century AD), but there are some important differences of emphasis which reflect the focus of the *Kankāriya* on problems of illness and ritual cure. The *Kankāriya* contains other stories in addition to that of Vijaya, and themes which are related to the Indian epic of the *Ramāyana* provide the focus for a subplot which eventually contributes to the denouement of the story.

Kuveni is the demon princess who lures Vijaya into marriage upon his arrival in Lanka. Sita is the wife of Rama, the hero king of the *Ramāyana*, whose battle against the demon who captures his wife is the central event of the epic. I will begin with Sita's story and then go on to the story of Kuveni. This account is necessarily abbreviated and does not contain all the details of the original myth.<sup>3</sup>

## Sita's Story

1. Rāmā went to war against the demon Ravana, who had lured Sita away by taking the form of a beautiful deer.
2. After rescuing Sita from the demon, Rama became suspicious of her, thinking that she must have had sexual relations with Ravana during her long captivity.
3. Sita undertook an ordeal of fire in which the gods attested to her purity.
4. Later, Rama heard rumours that his subjects were still suspicious of Sita.
5. Rama sent Sita into the forest with his brother Lakshmana, with instructions that she should be killed.
6. Sita was pregnant at the time. Lakshmana felt sorry for her and left her at the hermitage of the sage Valmiki.
7. Sita bore a son. She lived with her baby in the forest under the protection of the hermit.
8. One day she left her baby on her bed while she went to gather fruit in the forest.
9. The baby fell off the bed and began to cry.

3. Except in a few instances where variant incidents are indicated in footnotes, I have not dealt with variations on the plot of the myth. The versions I recorded were quite uniform with regard to the main plot and varied only in detail.

10. The hermit did not want to touch the baby, so he created another out of a blade of grass.
11. Sita returned to discover the two infants.
12. When she refused to believe the hermit's account of the creation of the second baby, he made a third child out of a flower.
13. Sita raised the three baby boys by nursing two from her breasts and the third from her little finger.
14. The sons of Sita grew up to become the powerful kings of the land of Malaya.<sup>4</sup>

### Story of the Two Brahmins

*(Previous Incarnations of Vijaya and Kuveni)*

15. In India there lived a Brahmin and his wife who were dancers in the court of a king.
16. The king gave the Brahmin a magical wish-fulfilling gem.
17. The Brahmin made the mistake of telling his wife about the gem.
18. The wife tried to take the gem.
19. Sak a, king of the gods, saw that a woman was about to touch the gem; knowing that it would lose its powers at the touch of a woman, he snatched it away before she could reach it.
20. When the Brahmin found the gem gone, he furiously demanded the truth from his wife.
21. The Brahmin and his wife agreed to an oath before the sun-god.
22. The Brahmin swore that she had taken the gem (which was not true) and his wife swore that she had neither *seen* nor touched it (which was not true because she had *seen* it, but not touched it).
23. Since both were lying, both died from the effects of the oath.
24. Just before they died, they swore that they would be reborn as husband and wife so that they could have revenge on one another.
25. They were reborn as Vijaya and Kuveni.

### Kuveni's Story

26. Kuveni was a princess born to a king and queen in Lanka.
27. At birth, she had three breasts and the astrologer pronounced her extremely inauspicious; he also predicted that the third breast would fall off when she saw her future husband.

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4. In the *Ramāyana*, Sita has twin boys who grow up under the tutelage of Valmiki and eventually learn the epic he has composed about their father. When they go to their father's palace to sing it to him, he recognizes them and reinstates them as his sons.

28. She was cast out by her parents and left to be raised by demons (*yakās*).<sup>5</sup>

29. Kuveni grew up to be very beautiful. In the meantime Vijaya, an Indian prince, was banished from his homeland because of his unruly behaviour and sailed to Lanka with seven hundred followers. He landed on the island on the day of the Buddha's *parinirvāna* (death).

30. Kuveni was hidden along the shore and watched him land.

31. When she saw him her third breast fell off, indicating that he was to be her husband.

32. Kuveni turned herself into a bitch, an animal which the men would take to indicate human habitation on the island.

33. The bitch lured all seven hundred of Vijaya's followers into the interior, where she hid them.

34. When Vijaya went to investigate, the beautiful demon princess was sitting spinning.

35. She told him that he would have to marry her to get his followers back.

36. Vijaya agreed to marry Kuveni. She helped him build a palace and houses for his followers.

37. Kuveni also helped him to destroy her relatives, the demons, who were the original inhabitants of the island (these demons are also referred to as "Veddas," the aboriginal population of Lanka).

38. After Kuveni had lived with Vijaya for several years and borne him two sons, his followers began to complain that they did not want a demomess for a queen.

39. Vijaya cast out Kuveni and her children. He then married a princess from South India.

40. Kuveni returned to the remnants of her people, who took in her children but were unwilling to accept her.

41. Kuveni used magical weapons to attack Vijaya (she sent a long tongue into his chamber while he was sleeping) and he died.

The myth goes on to relate how Vijaya's successor, Panduasudev, is also attacked by Kuveni. He becomes ill, but the gods intervene and arrange for the three sons of Sita to be lured to Lanka to effect a cure. This they do, enacting the first *Kankāriya* ritual. The reason they are powerful enough to counteract Kuveni's magic is that the Malayan king is born of a flower, not of a womb.

### III

The story of Sita and the story of Kuveni provide the crisis (Kuveni's revenge) and the resolution (the intervention of Sita's sons) which are the major elements in the plot of the *Kankāriya* myth. Thus even the full myth centers on questions of the intention, purity and suitability of the two women.

5. There is an obvious contradiction here between Kuveni's royal parentage and the contention that Lanka was inhabited only by demons until Vijaya's arrival. In some versions Kuveni is simply the child of demonic parents. Regardless of her parentage, she is usually regarded as having been born as some kind of demon child.

Sita and Kuveni have several characteristics in common:

They are desirable (1, 34).

They have three sources of milk (13, 27).

The people (Rama's subjects and Vijaya's followers) question their suitability (purity) as wives (4, 38).

The two women are both rejected by their husbands (5, 39).

But there are also a number of differences:

<i>Sita:</i>	<i>Kuveni:</i>
is passive (1, 5)	is aggressive (35, 41)
is of the same caste as her husband	is of a different group (non-human) and lower than her husband (28)
is pure (proved by ordeal) (3)	is impure (a demoness) (27)
is attacked by a demon in the form of a deer (1)	lures Vijaya's followers in the form of a bitch (32)
eats fruit (8)	eats flesh (a characteristic of demons)
defends Rama even when she is rejected by him	attacks her own people (37)
calls on the gods for help (3)	uses her own magical powers to take revenge on Vijaya (41)
is protected by the hermit (7)	is rejected by her own people (40)
produces pure, powerful children (14)	produces impure, powerless children (38)
her children are entitled to their father's status (14)	her children are rejected by their father (40)

Sita and Kuveni are both beautiful, seductive and fertile. Thus they can cause men to behave in extreme ways. They are both suspected of being impure and are rejected by their husbands. The configuration of the two stories is therefore similar: a beautiful woman turns out to be of uncertain purity and is given up by her husband.

Within this simple outline, however, there are a number of characteristics which distinguish the two women. First, there is a difference in the kind of impurity which causes them to be rejected. Kuveni's impurity arises from the simple fact that she is a demon: it is intrinsic to her nature. Sita, however, has merely come in contact with a demon. When Rama wins her back he asks: "What man of honour would give reign to his passion so far as to take back a woman who has dwelt in the house of another?"<sup>6</sup> Sita, just because she is perfect as a wife for Rama, is also extremely vulnerable to assaults on her purity. She cannot defend herself because the mere suggestion of contact is enough to implicate her.

6. Hari P. Shastri (trans.), *The Ramāyana of Valmiki*, London: Shanti Sadan, 1952, p. 335.

A second and crucial difference between Sita and Kuveni is that they are of different statuses in relation to their husbands. Sita is of the same caste as Rama whereas Kuveni is not only lower than Vijaya, she is not even human. This is the source of the pure/impure dichotomy which differentiates them; Sita is pure as a wife to Rama and her purity is essential to his honour; Kuveni's impurity which could be overlooked while Vijaya was still a newcomer to Lanka, becomes important once his kingship is established and a successor required.

Sita and Kuveni are also opposed in terms of activity and aggressiveness. Whereas Sita is won by her husband (in the *Ramāyana*), Kuveni tricks Vijaya into marrying her. Sita is passive in relation to her rejection, allowing herself to be left in the forest and asking for help only from forces stronger than herself (the gods, or the sage); Kuveni, on the other hand, is aggressive in her own defence. She turns on Vijaya with magical weapons and is not satisfied with killing him but must also take revenge on his successor. The long tongue with which she invades the king's chamber is symbolic of her aggressive nature.

Finally, the differences between the two women are apparent when it comes to their children. In both female figures there is a symbolic indication of fecundity: the possession of a third source of milk. But whereas Kuveni's third breast implies an excess which is non-productive, Sita nurses an actual child from her little finger. Kuveni's children are demons like their mother and belong therefore with their mother's people. Two of Sita's children, on the other hand, are produced without even touching a woman (and are thus extremely pure) and all three are powerful and noble and acceptable to their father.

The story of the two Brahmins prefigures the themes in Kuveni's story. The Brahmin's wife is aggressive and untrustworthy. Her touch is impure (simply because she is a woman) and dangerous to the wish-fulfilling gem (19). A line from one of the *Kankāriya* texts sums up the situation:

Women's qualities cannot be trusted  
The wife pretended she knew nothing about the gem. . . . .<sup>7</sup>

The Brahmin's wife, like Kuveni, demonstrates that there are two sides to the desirability and fertility of women. On the one hand, Kuveni's attractiveness is dangerous and her children are undesirable. On the other hand, Sita's attractiveness makes her vulnerable and susceptible to attacks upon her purity

#### IV

Sita and Kuveni seem to indicate a conflict between the desirability of women and the need to maintain the dividing lines of the social structure. The problem explored by the portions of the *Kankāriya* myth which deal with them is: how can the fertility and seductiveness of women be contained? Levi-Strauss has suggested that:

(A) myth is certainly related to given (empirical) facts, but not as a representation of them. The relationship is of a dialectic kind and the institutions in the myths

7. J. E. Sederaman, *Lankave Yaksha Yugea: Kohōmba Kankāriya Upata*, Colombo: M. D. Gunasena, 1955, p. 38.

can be the very opposite of human institutions. This will in fact always be the case when the myth is trying to express a negative truth. . . . the extreme positions are only *imagined* to show that they are *untenable*.<sup>8</sup>

In the stories of Sita and Kuveni we seem to have an imaginative exploration dependent on one of the empirical bases of Sinhalese society—the rule that “like marries like.” This is a rule which must, in real life, be threatened by the attractiveness of women who are outside the group. Yet women must be kept from contact with low caste men, and men cannot claim the children of low caste concubines. The myth sets out positive and negative aspects of the concern for the purity of the group, and indicates the danger that inheres in the crossing of group boundaries.

Space does not permit giving enough of the myth to be able to show the larger “dialectic” which is involved. Here, however, we can see that Sita and Kuveni represent two types of women, one pure and good, the other impure and bad. The marriage of Rama and Sita is “acceptable” because they are of equal status, and Sita’s character is appropriate to her position as a vessel containing the purity of her caste; she is passive in relation to Rama and yielding in the face of his rejection of her. The results of the union of Rama and Sita are powerful children who belong to the same caste as their father and mother. That they are particularly pure is indicated by the fact that two of them do not come from their mother’s womb at all.

Kuveni and Vijaya form a socially non-productive union. Kuveni is completely outside the boundaries of Vijaya’s social world and in order to have him as a husband she must trick him into accepting her. The marriage is doomed from the start, as is indicated by the story of their previous birth in which the untrustworthy nature of women is clearly stated. The union is negative and the children are not acceptable to their father but must return to their mother’s group. Vijaya cannot be a king and have a wife lower than himself; furthermore Kuveni is powerful and dangerous to him.

The myth then explores the contradiction between the natural fertility and desirability of women and the bounded nature of the social structure. It presents a dichotomy between pure/impure and socially productive/socially non-productive. Sita is “bounded” and the concern is for her integrity; Kuveni is “unbounded” and the emphasis is on her aggressiveness. Thus the myth can be seen to represent, in Levi-Straussian terms, the limits of institutions. The Sita incident is positive, the Kuveni story negative. Taken together they constitute a pairing of two options, one productive, the other “untenable.”

There is, however, a further complication, one which indicates that there is more to these two extreme positions than a simple dichotomy of good and bad. The complication arises because Sita is not simply pure; she is also suspected of having been unfaithful to Rama and of being contaminated by contact with a lower status being. She too is rejected by her husband and is considered unsuitable as a wife.

8. “The Story of Asdiwal,” in E. R. Leach (ed.) *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism*, London: Tavistock Publications, 1967, pp. 29-30.

Sita and Kuveni represent two different ways in which women can be impure. Kuveni is impure because of her structural position; she is a demon and inherently low because of her birth. Her marriage does not change her degree of purity and she remains dangerous and unsuitable throughout. Sita is pure to begin with and becomes impure because of an assault on her from outside her group. She is vulnerable to change because of the contamination of contact with a demon; her integrity can be violated and her condition changed against her will.

Sita, then, must be protected from aggression. When the protection breaks down she is sullied and is no longer suitable as a wife. The mere suggestion of impurity spoils her as a perpetuator of Rama's status. Kuveni is already impure and her aggressiveness seems to be related to her low status; her condition cannot be changed and she has "nothing to lose."

The purity of women is depicted here as problematic in two ways. When the concern is with women of the same status the problem is to protect their extreme vulnerability, and when the concern is with lower-status women, the problem is protection against their aggressive seductiveness. Both can be a danger to the integrity of the group.

We come now to Obeyesekere's comment that women are regarded as seductive and untrustworthy. The story of the two Brahmins brings out the idea that women are untrustworthy, and the theme of lack of trust is repeated in the stories of both Sita and Kuveni. What unites all three women is that they can't be trusted—there is no way for Rama to know for sure whether Sita is pure, for the Brahmin to know whether his wife took the gem, or for Vijaya to know what Kuveni has done with his followers—or that she will eventually kill him. The women in all three stories are desirable, yet possessed of an inherent ambiguity.

This suggestion that there is an ambiguity and uncertainty inherent in the very nature of women implies that the images of women contained in the *Kankāriya* myth not only indicate structural aspects of femininity and fertility, but also express certain attitudes toward female sexuality in general. The purity of women is relative and there is no way to be completely certain of it. Thus, women are problematic not only in their potential vulnerability or aggressiveness, but also in their very nature as the focus of men's desire.