

TOWARD A THEORY OF RITUAL AND VIOLENCE: THE RECENT SINHALA EXPERIENCE

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During the past several years, as violence in Sri Lanka has exacerbated and become an almost normative mode of political expression, several studies analyzing the confluences between religious myth and ritual on the one hand and socio-political behaviour on the other have been advanced in an effort to understand the causes of this unfolding tragedy. In this brief paper, I want to contribute to the discussion of the relationship between ritual and violence *per se* by determining the relevance of the principal ideas set forth in Rene Girard's well-known and highly influential essay, *Violence and Sacred*.¹ The basic principles of Girard's seminal theoretical constructs will be considered within the context of the Sinhala experience of violence and ritual occurring during the period from July, 1989 through March 1990.²

The theoretical assumptions governing previous studies of the relationship between religious expression and political behaviour in Sri Lanka belie two different philosophical orientations. In the first type, attempts have been made to determine the manner in which religious ontology, articulated through myth, symbol and ritual, has made a formative impact upon the structures, dynamics and substance of traditional political behaviour and political institutions in Sri Lanka. A primary example of this type of approach is found in the collection of historically-oriented essays edited by Bardwell Smith entitled *Religion and the Legitimation of Power in Sri Lanka*.³ In most of the essays of this carefully crafted volume, the manner in which myth and symbol "make history", or have become paradigmatic or causative for political behaviour and ethno-political identity in various periods of Sinhala history has been explored in considerable detail. Another yet more graphic example of this first type of theoretical approach, which holds traditional unconscious or "semiconscious" cognitive structures

¹ Trans. from the French by Patrick Gregory Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press (1977); originally published in Paris as *Le Violence et le sacre* by Editions Bernard Grasset (1972).

² My account of the events during this period is based almost exclusively upon personal observation.

³ Chambersburg, PA: Anima Books (1978).

responsible for the fruition of specific types of political behaviour, e.g. violence, is the provocative analysis advanced by Bruce Kapferer in his *Legends of People, Myths of State*.⁴ In this tract, Kapferer argues that a deep-seated social psychology of exorcism, evident in the mythic expressions of the fifth century A.D. monastic chronicle *Mahavamsa*, is ultimately responsible for the violent manner in which Sinhala Buddhists behaved in "exorcising the Tamil demon" from their midst during the tumultuous breakdown of civil order and human rights in July, 1983.

The second type of study focusing on the relationship between cognitive modes of religion and expression and political behaviour in Sri Lanka stresses the ways in which social and economic changes in society have fostered transformations in religious formulations. The primary example of this approach is the recently published study by Gananath Obeyesekere and Richard Gombrich entitled *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka*.⁵ Here, deteriorating economic conditions caused by population explosion, especially in urban areas, are cited as the chief reasons for the appearance of new and sometimes bizarre forms of emergent religious belief and behaviour. Obeyesekere's earlier study of "Protestant Buddhism"⁶ is also a very good example of this second type of approach. In contrast to the first approach, social, economic and political conditions are understood to make a concerted impact upon the substance and structures of religion rather than vice versa.

Rene Girard's universalistic approach is basically of the second type: religious ideas and sentiments, especially as they are articulated in ritual, are understood as unequivocally responsive to acts of violence. Specifically, all forms of ritual sacrifice are regarded by Girard as precise distillations of violence, functioning as surrogate means for displacing violent aggressive drives. I will try to show, however, that Girard and others of both approaches, have managed to consider only half of the equation in determining the dynamic relationship that exists between religious thought and ritual on the one hand and social and political behaviour on the other. That is, I want to argue that forms of religious thought and cultic expression usually stand in a dynamic dialectical relationship to the reality of social and political behaviour in a traditional society. While this discussion will demonstrate the limitations of Girard's analysis of the relationship between ritual and violence, I also want to highlight how his specific discussion of the

⁴ Washington D.C: Smithsonian Institution (1988)

⁵ Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press (1988).

⁶ "Religious Symbolism and Political Change in Ceylon", *Modern Ceylon Studies* 1 (1970), reprinted in Bardwell Smith ed. *The Two Wheels of Dhamma* (Chambersburg), PA: AAR Monograph no. 3 (1972), pp. 58-78.

psychology of victimisation is especially relevant to understanding the consequences of violent events which transpired during the final months of 1989. Finally, in following the work of Geertz and Ricouer⁷, I want to assert that ritual activity and symbolic cult are especially genuine indices, almost barometers, of the manner in which a community copes with the psychologically deleterious impact of violence.

II

Kandy's annual Asala perahara is an almost textbook example of how public symbolic ritual processions can express the dynamics and structures of social and religious hierarchy in a traditional society. Sri Lankan scholars explaining the symbolic significance of the perahara have noted that this pageant simultaneously articulates: 1) public reaffirmation of the supremacy of the Buddha and the relative hierarchical importance of deities in the religious lives of the people; and 2) a magical ritual prescription for social order and material prosperity during the ensuing annual cycle.⁸ H.L. Seneviratne, in particular, remarks that this rite, more than any other, symbolizes fundamental socio-cosmic structures and the collective material well-being of Kandyan society.⁹ Thus, as I have intimated, observing the perahara proceedings can be somewhat analogous to reading a barometer of Sinhala Sri Lanka's contemporary socio-religious and politico-economic health.

In August of 1989, many will recall that the perahara was almost not held at all due to concerns about the prevailing political and security climate of the hill country. From March through May, a periodic series of hartal (strikes) had been orchestrated successfully by the Janata Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) which, in turn, had been

⁷ Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 90-117 and *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books (1973) pp. 126-141; Paul Ricouer, "The Symbol gives rise to Thought," in *The Symbolism of Evil*. trans. from the French by Emerson Buchanan (New York: Harper and Row (1967).

⁸ In the former times of Kandyan kingship, the circumambulation of Kandy town by the royally sponsored procession symbolized the "righteous capture" or ritual ordering of society on the one hand, and the magical hope of producing rain - torches and whips symbolizing lightning and pounding of drums thunder - insuring prosperity on the other.

⁹ For detailed analysis of the rite's symbolism, see H.L. Seneviratne, *Rituals of the Kandyan State* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press (1978), pp. 89-114.

accompanied by acts of violence against those who failed to observe them. Systematically executed murders of public workers and officials which, in turn, had the effect of eliciting brutal government reprisals against suspected JVP members and/or their sympathizers, had created what was then popularly referred to as a public "fear psychosis."¹⁰ When JVP-inspired hartals were announced by the appearance of posters at key intersections in Kandy town, it was not uncommon for people to refer to them sarcastically as "orders from the unofficial government". During this same time period, the university system was shut down completely due to a strike by "minor staff" demanding compensation (Rs.2,5000 per month) in parity with Janasaviya (the government's new poverty alleviation program) recipients. The university strike was followed in June and July by a total strike against the Sri Lanka Transit Board by workers (widely thought to be supported by JVP sympathizers) who made similar demands. The latter strike, accompanied by periodic shut-downs of water and electricity in the hill country, brought commerce in the area to an almost complete standstill. Within days following the settling of the transportation strike, the JVP announced plans for public demonstrations to be held on the two year anniversary of the Indo-Lanka accord - the agreement between Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lanka's President J.R. Jayewardene that had brought as many as 70,000 Indian Army troops to the island's newly emerged North and East Provinces, an action that had resulted in the unintended consequence of galvanized strength and support for the JVP's declared intention of toppling the UNP government. In June and July, rumours filtered throughout the hill country that the JVP imminently intended to declare a provisional government with Kandy as its capital. It was within this unsettled context that a decision was made by the Diyawadana Nilame (the lay official in charge of the ritual proceedings at the Dalada Maligawa) to proceed with the perahara festivities in limited fashion. It was decided to reduce the procession to only three nights of observance and to drastically scale down the normally climactic final day observance.

¹⁰ While the term "fear psychosis" adequately conveys the deep anxieties that many people experienced during these days of great uncertainty, it is a bit of a misnomer, for "psychosis" implies irrational delusion. In fact, my sense is that the terrible fears experienced by many were entirely rational. That is, there were very good reasons for many to be fearful in the prevailing context of JVP and government activity. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the crisis was experienced as a paralysis, or a suspension of normal responses to life's circumstances. Caught in a vice-like grip between two violent and unpredictable forces, the common person had every reason to be paralysed. What I am arguing is that the kind of psychological paralysis experienced by many during the crisis months of 1989 is but an individuation of the social anomie that accounts for the absence of ritual.

It would probably be more accurate to say that the perahara limped rather than triumphantly processed through the streets of Kandy in 1989. In other years, larger crowds have attended village peraharas in outlying areas of the hill country. Not only were the Kandyan crowds paltry (security personnel decidedly outnumbering the few naive tourists and brave residents who attended the three night-time processions), but the ritual performances of pomp and dance were atypically and depressingly uninspired. During the final day perahara, the ritual procession had been planned so that only "temple square" would be circumambulated three times, a drastic curtailment of normal procedures. But after the first round, drummers, flag-bearers, dancers and even the whip-bearing dwarf began to drop out. At the conclusion of the second round by the procession's dwindling remnant, a decision was made to wrap the matter up immediately, thus bringing the perahara to a spasmodic, desultory end.

What is obvious from this account is that the scope and depth of social distress and disorder characterizing the social, economic and political dynamics of the contemporary Kandyan region were thoroughly reflected in the quality of ritual proceedings of the perahara. If the perahara traditionally and normatively symbolizes order and prosperity, then its atrophic and lacklustre performance seemed to mirror perfectly the prevailing conditions of social anarchy, economic deprivation and fear. More than a few anxiously wondered about the country's (and culture's) future in light of such a spectacular ritual disconfirmation of the past.

In the three months that followed until November, there was an astounding *absence* of ritual in and around Kandy. At the same time, unprecedented degrees of violence swept throughout the upcountry region. a government counter-offensive consisting of "comb and search operations" against suspected JVP members and their sympathizers, usually conducted under the cover of night, began in late August and resulted in the disappearance of hundreds or perhaps even thousands of individuals. In this climate of fear and uncertainty, not only were the traditional peraharas in outlying areas cancelled, but village *devalayas* were closed on Wednesdays and Saturdays, when normally *kapuralas* would be fielding the problems of everyday life and petitioning the gods on behalf of their clients. *Pirit* was nowhere to be heard at night, *danes* and *banas* were postponed indefinitely, and *kathina* offerings were cancelled for the season. In short, the traditional ritual cycle had been occluded, a fact that seemed to reflect in tandem the relative occlusion of normative social and religious values in society-at-large, values that these rites usually articulate.¹¹

¹¹ The absence of ritual correlates with the seeming suspension of a normative world view, a breakdown in confidence in the traditional order of values and respect for human life. *Pirit* was not being chanted; for, there seemed to be little hope for peace and prosperity. It also seemed to make sense that in the current

There was, of course, one major exception to the absence of ritual during the months from July through mid-November of 1989. Funeral rites, when not interfered with in sometimes incredibly sinister and sadistic ways, were performed with unprecedented frequency, serving as constant reminders of the spectre of death then threatening the conditions of life. Here, following Girard's theory, ritual not only remains responsive to violence, but in some cases yet another occasion for its expression.

¹²

On the night of November 18, 1989, Rohana Wijeweera, the revolutionary leader of the JVP movement, was arrested in a small village just off Gampola while posing as a middle-class planter. Amidst questionable circumstances, Wijeweera and his second-in-command were killed within hours of capture. In reaction, public sentiment regarding Wijeweera's death was one of uncertainty (rumours expressing disbelief) and bewilderment (how could the erstwhile champion of the underprivileged have lived in such material conditions of comfort?). But as days and weeks passed, as it became apparent that Wijeweera had actually been killed, a pervasive sense of relief was almost palpable in public life, egged on in part by government officials, who seemed to gloat that victory was now inevitable. Government security forces continued their program of arrests, but one side of the threat to the public was clearly diminishing.

context, the ritual cycle at *devalayas* had been suspended; for , the absence of *kapuralas* chanting their *yaticas* to the gods seemed to reflect the loss of faith in traditional conceptions of order and reciprocity in Sinhala culture. What I am suggesting is that the absence of ritual, like the shut down of the entire educational system, clearly indicates that life is regarded as too tenuous a proposition for normal modes of public behaviour to continue. In turn, the suspension of ritual indicates the suspension of its normative function of world view maintenance. The suspension of ritual indicates the social experience of pure liminality or anomie.

- ¹² What I am suggesting here is that funeral rites during this period not only continued to function as normative means for coping with the sting of death, but in many cases they were actually used by various parties to impart a political message in humiliating and grotesque fashion. In some instance, written messages were left on the bodies of mutilated victims, which not only stated the purported reasons for their deaths (as traitors), but also demanded that funeral obsequies be observed in a particularly "fitting" fashion to characterize the rationale for the murder itself. Moreover, it became clear that the increasing public display of mutilated victims had become a ritualized means for political expression to both sides of the conflict. Patterns of display soon became evident, making it possible to surmise which side had been responsible for the killings and who was to take note of it.

By mid-January, crowds began to appear once again in Kandy and Peradeniya in connection with pilgrimages being made to Sri Pada by ever-increasing numbers of villagers. Over the subsequent weeks, newspapers reported that the number of pilgrims journeying to venerate the footprint of the Buddha was the largest in memory. In early February, a ten day exhibition of the Dalada ("Tooth Relic") at the Maligawa in Kandy attracted unprecedented numbers of villagers from surrounding areas to "take darsan". During three days of the exhibition, the dense queues were so long that one extended over a mile down Trincomalee Street to Trinity College, while two others extended around opposite directions of the Lake (almost two miles) until they collided in front of the Hotel Suisse. Newspapers estimated that during the ten-day period of the exhibition, over one million people (by appearance almost exclusively villagers) had made the pilgrimage to Kandy.

III

Rene Girard's theory of violence and its relation to public ritual is somewhat similar to Freud's¹³ and Konrad Lorenz's¹⁴. In relation to the former, a collective murder stands at the historical origins of religion and culture; in relation to the latter, ritual is a surrogate displacement of violence (civilization's means for channelling aggression constructively). To understand how a collective murder could stand at the beginning of human culture, how an act of violence could possibly define both the problem and the solution for social formation, Girard suggests that humans have no innate "breaking mechanism" for intraspecific aggression. Once unleashed, interpersonal rivalries naturally will not stop short of manslaughter. Violence, according to Girard, is endemic to human beings. Since the only response to murder is yet another killing, cycles of reciprocal retaliation can perpetuate an unending series of revenge murders.¹⁵ Ritual sacrifice is the socio-cultural mechanic that has been collectively instituted to serve as a surrogation for violence that can short-circuit the cycle. Girard therefore argues that:

¹³ See Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul (1950).

¹⁴ See Konrad Lorenz, *On Aggression*, Marjorie Kerr Wilson, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich (1966).

¹⁵ See further the lucid discussion of Girard's views in Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, ed. *Violent Origins: Ritual Killing and Cultural Transformation* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press (1987), pp. 1-70.

"[Ritual] sacrifice is the most crucial and fundamental of all rites . . . it is also the most commonplace" [1977:300]

In summarizing the significance of Girard's thesis regarding ritual sacrifice, Burtan Mack puts the conclusion this way:

"All systems that give structure to human society have been generated by it: taboos, codes of etiquette, patterns of exchange, rites and civil institutions. Thus a theory of sacrifice has produced a comprehensive account of human social formation, religion and culture."¹⁶

While many have found Girard's thesis compelling, especially within the context of an analysis of Judeo-Christian derivative societies and cultures, it is but one etiological view of the origins of ritual. There is no argument here that the Girard/Freud/Lorenz thesis regarding ritual as a substitutive means for coping with violence is invalid. It is, however, directed at only one direction of the relationship between ritual and violence: how violence generates ritual.

In the descriptive second part of this essay, I have endeavoured to convey how the climate of fear and social anomie created by unprecedented and extended campaigns of political violence led, *not* to the generation of ritual, but to its temporary paralysis, and with its temporary paralysis, a suspension of ritual expressions articulating the normative world view. Caught in a vice-like grip between two opposing perpetrators of violence, most Kandyan villagers simply retreated to an anti-social *modus vivendi* eschewing virtually all participation in public rites, those which might ultimately be linked to the genre of sacrifice and those (contra Girard) which cannot. Therefore, at least within the context of recent Sinhala experience, violence cannot be identified solely as the ultimate originator of ritual, but it must also be recognized as that mode of human behaviour that radically inhibits ritual articulations in general, particularly those which ostensibly mitigate against violence *per se*, e.g. *pirit*, the *perahara*, etc. While under normal conditions, ritual may serve as a social "braking mechanism" for violence, under others violence is so paralytic that it leads to ritual's suspension.

There is, however, a plausible and relevant dimension of Girard's theoretical musings. It is to this aspect of his theory that I now turn to in conclusion.

¹⁶ Mack, *op. cit.*, p.7.

IV

Girard has argued that when a society fails to address the problem of rivalry by means of effective ritual devices, violence is inevitable. But once violence, inherent destructive behaviour, is unleashed, it is often "generative" in its consequences. He has argued that the origins of religion and culture are precisely the consequence of society learning to cope with violence. For Girard, religion and culture are the products of creative confusion (the necessary redirection of aggressions and the consequent displacement of guilt). It is here that his psychology of victimization seems quite relevant to the recent Sinhala experience, particularly to the "victimization" of Rohana Wijeweera.

As a charismatic champion of the rural underprivileged, Wijeweera symbolized a righteous struggle to some and the threat to order by others. That is, in Wijeweera was a figure who at once represented the frustrations and hopes of those cut off from access to material prosperity and upward social mobility on the one hand, and a violent threat to the structures of civilized existence on the other. Wijeweera lived a life of violence and died at the hands of violence. His death, however, marked a pivotal moment in the recent Sinhala experience, a moment followed by a gradual return to the normative *status quo* (evidenced in ritual, I argue, by the massive pilgrimages to Sri Pada and Kandy) in society. It produced, as Girard and Lorenz would argue, a cathartic effect. In this context, it would seem that the death of Rohana Wijeweera, at least functionally, had effects parallel to those normally attributed to ritual sacrifice. Certainly to his followers, Wijeweera's death was understood as a great sacrifice. To his opponents, it was understood largely as a matter of karmic retribution.¹⁷ But what is interesting is that for both sides, Wijeweera's death signalled the beginning of a new phase. On the JVP side, it meant reorganization in the face of confusion and a new agenda of tactical retreats. In a sense, the JVP had been "out-violenced" by the government. To the government, Wijeweera's killing meant victory and vindication. Whatever it meant to these two enemies, to the common people held hostage amidst the carnage, it seemed to mean catharsis, the release of tension, and a good deal of what Girard calls "generative scapegoating"¹⁸ A suitable "victim" had been found who at once could either be mythologized as a martyr, or could be branded with blame.

¹⁷ It was not uncommon during the worst days of violence to hear Sinhalese rationalize killings as the inevitable consequence of actions performed by the victims in previous lives.

¹⁸ A detailed discussion of these terms is found in Rene Girard, "Generative Scapegoating", *Violent Origins*, pp. 73 - 145.

Following Wijeweera's death, as fear of violence began to gradually abate in Sinhala upcountry regions, public ritual acts affirming the traditional world view seemed to be participated in with a pent up vigour. Here it is interesting to note that the two valorized symbols which became the object of mass religious devotion following this liminal period of uncertainty and fear were the Footprint and the Tooth Relic of the Buddha, symbols which represent the normative expressions of *lokottara* (ultimate) and *laukika* (this-worldly) aspirations in Sinhala culture.¹⁹ Reading these ritual signs, these indices of Sinhala social health, it appeared that at least a sense of order, or a confidence in its restoration, was being established in the minds of many people.

Lack of prosperity and blocked accesses to power are the probable causes of violence in the first place, and remain critical issues in Sri Lanka. If these basic conditions are not assuaged, a return to uncertainties in the normative world view, repeatedly shocked by recurrent violence, is certainly not out of the question.

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¹⁹ See my *Buddha in the Crown: Avalokitesvara in the Buddhist Traditions of Sri Lanka*, New York: Oxford University Press (1991), pp. 19-26, for a further discussion of the significance of these categorically definitive terms in traditional Sinhala culture.