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Buddha and the Seven Gods

THE DUAL ORGANIZATION OF A TEMPLE IN CENTRAL CEYLON

HANS-DIETER EVERS

Theravāda Buddhism has during the past century been an annoyance to scholars who tried to find a general and crossculturally valid definition of religion. Durkheim refuted Frazer's minimal definition of religion being "the belief in Spiritual Beings" solely on the grounds of the notable exception of Theravāda Buddhism. He based his argument that "the idea of gods is absent, or at least, . . . plays only a secondary and minor role"¹ mainly on the now classic work of Oldenberg, "Buddha, his Life, his Doctrine, his Community," published originally in 1881. The same book was also used extensively by Max Weber who asked himself whether a system of "ethics without God" and "with absolute indifference towards the question whether gods do exist or not and how they exist" could be called a "religion."²

Taking Buddhism as a philosophical or religious system of thought alone, this view might perhaps be entertained.³ Generations of indologists have perpetuated it due to their emphasis on selected aspects of the canonical scriptures and other written documents. As Paul Mus puts it in the introduction to Sarkisyanz' excellent study on the Buddhist backgrounds of the Burmese revolution (Sarkisyanz 1965: XI), "emphasis has been placed mainly on doctrinal tenets and attendant controversies, insufficient attention being usually paid to the positive background, historical, sociological, etc., in a word to the semantic compass of the corresponding civilization, pre-Buddhistic as well as Buddhistic."⁴

Looking at the religion of Theravāda Buddhists as a whole in its cultural context, it becomes evident that canonical Buddhism is only *one* aspect of the religious system of Theravāda Buddhist societies. In all these countries there exist two religious systems side by side, which are kept clearly apart in theory and served by different religious specialists, but are used by the laity simultaneously and are viewed by them as complementary and interdependent. The Burmese pay homage to the Buddha and worship the *nats*, the Thai have their *phi* and their *Lak Muang* temples, the Lao also worship *phi* and the Cambodians the *neak ta* in addition to the Buddha. "Hence, even if Theravāda Buddhism were absolutely atheistic, it cannot be

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¹ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, New York: Collier, 1961, p. 451.

² Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, Vol. 2, Tuebingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1963, 220.

³ The Tripitaka of course abounds with references to gods, demons and ghosts. Connections with the present religious system in Theravāda countries could easily be established.

⁴ E. Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965, p. XI.

denied that Theravāda Buddhists adhere to another belief system which is theistic to its core.⁵ This type of religious system is most fully developed among the Sinhalese of Ceylon who are nevertheless ardent Buddhists as the turbulent recent political history of Ceylon proves. In this paper I shall analyze an important institution of Sinhalese religion, the temple (*vihāraya* and *dēvālaya*), to show the close interrelation of the two aspects of the religious system in Theravāda Buddhist Ceylon, and to dispel the doubts of those who were reluctant to include a passage on superhuman or spiritual beings in their definition of religion on account of the apparent "exception" of Theravāda Buddhism.

As the social organization of Sinhalese religion in general has been described elsewhere,⁶ I shall here concentrate on a most striking example: the social organization of Laṅkātilaka Temple in Central Ceylon.

Laṅkātilaka Temple (*Laṅkātilaka Raja Māha Vihāraya*, the "Great Royal Temple of Laṅkātilaka") is situated in the village of Hiyarapitiya in the division of Udunuwara, Kandy District, about 12 miles from the former Sinhalese capital of Kandy. According to a rock-inscription on the temple compound, it was built during the reign of King Bhuvanaikabāhu IV of Gampola in 1344 A.D. The same inscription also tells us that the original temple, towering on top of a hill, consisted of four stories, the lowermost, which is the only one still used nowadays, was "complete with images of Buddha and gods."⁷ A copperplate of the same date recording grants of land, buildings, and slaves to the temple expressively mentions the construction of five shrines for gods in addition to "Its Lordship the Principal Image (of the Buddha) . . . seated on the Diamond Throne with back to Its Lordship the Illustrious Great Bodhi-tree."⁸

The following deities were installed in the five shrines (*dēvāla*): "Their Lordships Kihirāli-Upulvan, who has assumed (the task of) the protection of Laṅkā (Ceylon), Sumaṇa, Vibhīṣaṇa, Gaṇapati, Khandhakumāra and others, together with

⁵ Melford E. Spiro, "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation," in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, M. Banton, ed., A.S.A. Monographs Vol. 3, London: Travistock, 1966, 94. For the case of Burma see E. Michael Mendelson, "Observations on a Tour in the Region of Mount Popa, Central Burma," *France-Asie*, No. 179 (1963) 780-807; Manning Nash, *The Golden Road to Modernity*, New York: John Wiley, 1965, Chapters 4 and 5; for Thailand see H. G. Quaritch Wales, *Siamese State Ceremonies*, London: Bernard Quaritch, 1931; for Cambodia Adhemard Leclère, *Le Bouddhisme au Cambodge*, Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1899; for Laos Frank M. LeBar and Adrienne Suddard (eds.), *Laos, Its People, Its Society, Its Culture*, New Haven: HRAF Press, 1960, pp. 44-46.

⁶ Michael M. Ames, "Magical Animism and Buddhism: A Structural Analysis of the Sinhalese Religious System," *Journal of Asian Studies*, XXIII (1964), 21-51; Heinz Bechert, *Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft in den Ländern des Theravāda-Buddhismus*, Vol. 1, Frankfurt a.M.: Alfred Metzner Verlag, 1966; Hans-Dieter Evers, "Die soziale Organisation der singhalesischen Religion," *Koelner Zeitschrift fuer Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 16 (1964), 314-26; Hans-Dieter Evers, "Sinhalese Religious Organization in Central Ceylon," Paper read at the *International Conference on Ceylon*, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1967 (Mimeographed); Gananath Obeyesekere, "The Buddhist Pantheon in Ceylon and Its Extensions," in *Anthropological Studies in Theravāda Buddhism*, Manning Nash et. al., New Haven: Yale Southeast Asia Studies, Cultural Report Series No. 13, 1966, pp. 1-26.

⁷ Translation of the inscriptions and land grant-copperplates according to S. Paranavitana, "Laṅkātilaka Inscriptions," *University of Ceylon Review*, 18 (1960), 1-45. For further historical details see A. M. Hocart, "The Kandy Laṅkātilaka," *Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of Ceylon*, Vol. 2, Colombo: Government Printer, 1926, 18-21 and S. Paranavitana's paragraph on Laṅkātilaka in H. C. Ray (ed.), *History of Ceylon*, Vol. I, Part II, Colombo: Ceylon University Press, 1960, 782-784.

⁸ Copperplate Br, Sinhalese rock inscription of Bhuvanaikabāhu, IV, line 4.

images of their divine consorts.⁹ These rock inscriptions and copperplates show that right from the beginning Laṅkātilaka Vihāra was planned and built to serve the dual system of Sinhalese religion.

If today one climbs up the steep flight of steps hewn into the bare rock, one sees first the main entrance on the eastern side of the temple. (Figure 1) It leads into the *vihāra* which contains a huge image of a seated Buddha. The rituals are performed on a table in front of this image. The *vihāra*, extending into the building and occupying its centre is separated by thick walls from the temple of the gods, whose shrines are built into the wall itself. The shrines (*dēvālaya*) are still occupied by the same Gods as in the fourteenth century though in some cases other names are used and new Gods have been added. Kihirāli-Upulvan is now identified with Viṣṇu, who was mentioned separately in the rock inscription.¹⁰

LAṅKĀTILAKA DĒVĀLAYA

Gods in 14th Century	Gods in 1966
1. Kihirāli-Upulvan	Viṣṇu
2. Sumaṇa	Sāman
3. Vibhīṣaṇa	Vibhīṣaṇa
4. Gaṇapati	Gaṇa
5. Khandhakumāra	Kataragama
6. —	Kumāra Bandāra
7. —	(Dāḍimunda)

The corridor with the six shrines cannot be entered from the *vihāra* but only through another main entrance facing the west. Dāḍimunda Dēvatā is only a godling and is housed in a separate building.

The architectural arrangement in Laṅkātilaka Temple, housing under *one* roof the shrine for the Buddha and the shrines for the Gods, is already strikingly symbolic of the dual structure of Sinhalese religion. In a similar fashion images of Gods are found in most *vihāras* throughout Ceylon, either in separate shrines or even in the shrine room of the Buddha itself. Usually these small *dēvālas* inside the *vihāras* are, in contrast to Laṅkātilaka, of minor importance and are worshipped only irregularly, whereas the important *dēvālas* are separate and sometimes impressive temples, which have, however, always a small *vihāra*, a Botree, or a stupa on their compounds.

The close integration and the complementary character of the two components of Sinhalese religion, symbolized by the common roof, is further exemplified by the social organization of Laṅkātilaka Temple.

The two footpaths ending at the two main entrances, the *vihāra* gate on the eastern and the *dēvāla* gate on the western side of the temple, lead to the residences of the respective religious specialists, the *bhikkhu* (Buddhist monk), and the *ḥapurāla*

⁹ Copperplate B 4-5.

¹⁰ S. Paranavitana discusses the religious history of god Upulvan in his *The Shrine of Upulvan at Devundara*, Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of Ceylon, Vol. VI, Colombo: Ceylon Government, 1953.

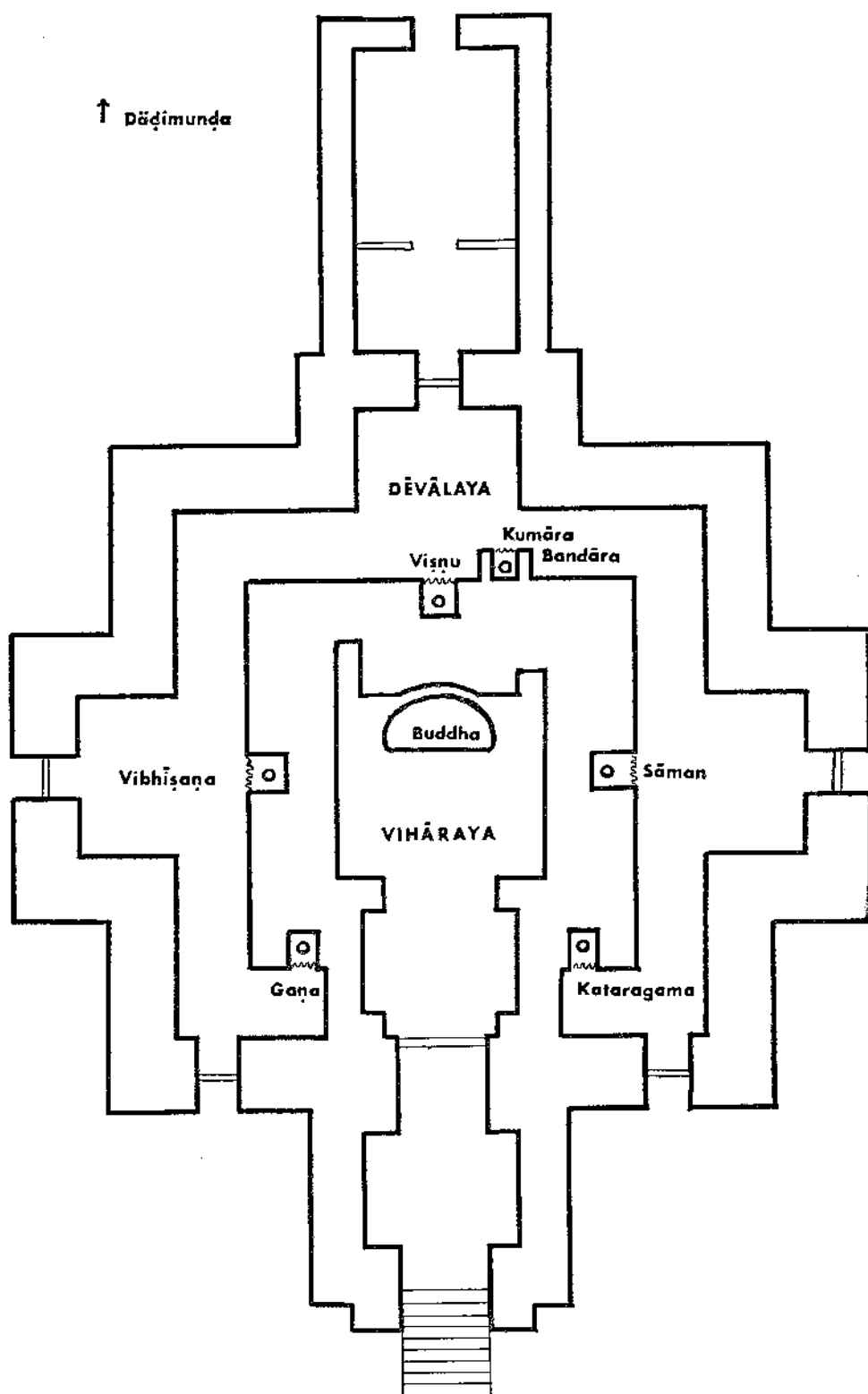


Figure 1 *Laṅkātilaka Temple*

The *vihāraya* with the principal Buddha image is surrounded on three sides by the *dēvālaya* with the images of the gods.

(priest of the Gods). The *bhikkhu* lives in the monastery (*pansala*) at the foot of the temple hill; the *Kapurālas*, who take yearly turns in officiating at the *dēvāla*, live in the nearby village of Hiddaulla. Both are the most important figures in the day-to-day activities of the temple. The highest authority in temple affairs, however, is vested in the chief monk (*vihārādhipatī*) of the monastery and the *dēvāla* chief (*basnāyaka nilamē*). They are officially appointed by the Public Trustee in Colombo; the chief monk, however, holds his office of *vihārādhipatī* according to a customary rule of succession,¹¹ whereas the *Basnāyaka* is elected by a special electorate. Neither the chief monk nor the *dēvāla* chief lives in one of the temple villages but in nearby towns. Each administers his section of the temple individually, but both have to cooperate during the common temple festivals. Their main function is the administration of the respective temple lands (*vihāragam* and *dēvālagam*).

Already in the rock inscription referred to above, grants of land to maintain "without cessation the offerings of cooked rice, flowers and lamps to the Buddha and the gods"¹² were mentioned. Even today the land owned by the *vihāra* and by the *dēvāla* is considerable, despite the "secularization" of temple land after 1856.¹³ In addition to scattered plots of land in different villages throughout Kandyan Central Ceylon, there are three distinct temple villages, where most of the land is either *vihāragam* (land belonging to the Buddhist section) in the two villages of Rabbe-gamuva and Arawwawala or *dēvālagam* (land belonging to the *dēvāla* section)—in the village of Hiddaulla. (Figure 2) The somewhat complicated land tenure system of Lañkātilaka Temple cannot be discussed here. For our present argument it is enough, however, to note that part of both the *vihāra* land and the *dēvāla* land is held subject to temple service (*rājakāriya*). Most of the *rājakāriya* land is today owned by the peasants themselves, who can transmit the land to their descendants or sell it. In any case, the particular services attached to each share of temple land (*panguva*) have to be performed, and peasants can be sued in a court of law by the *vihārādhipatī* or the *basnāyaka nilamē* for non-performance of *rājakāriya*.

The organizational structure is very much the same for the *vihāra* and the *dēvāla* (Table 1)

There are three organizational levels:

1. The temple landlord and his staff
2. The inner services (*pangukāriya*)
3. The outer services (*niḷakāriya*)

The offices on the upper two levels can only be occupied by members of the highest caste (*goyigama*). Those who perform the "outer services," that means

¹¹ Legal aspects are discussed in G. W. Woodhouse, "Sissiyānu Sissia Paramparāwa' and other laws relating to Buddhist Priests in Ceylon," *Ceylon Antiquary and Literary Register*, 3 (1917-18), pp. 174-86, 281-90, and in Bechert, *op. cit.*, Chapter 25. For a sociological analysis of the system based on field research see Hans-Dieter Evers, "Kinship and Property Rights in a Buddhist Monastery in Central Ceylon," *American Anthropologist*,—69 (Dec. 1967); Hans-Dieter Evers, "Some Comparative Notes on the Organization of the Sangha in Ceylon and Siam," *Social Science Review*, Bangkok, 4, Special issue (1966), 95-99; and Hans-Dieter Evers, "The Buddhist Sangha in Ceylon and Thailand—A Comparative Study of Large-Scale Organizations in Two Non-industrial Societies," *Sociologus*, Berlin, 18 (1968).

¹² Sinhalese rock inscription of Bhuvanāikabāhu IV, line 20.

¹³ Bechert *op. cit.*, p. 232, Hans-Dieter Evers, "Buddhism and British Colonial Policy, in Ceylon, 1815-1875," *Asian Studies*, Quezon City, 2 (1964) 321-333.

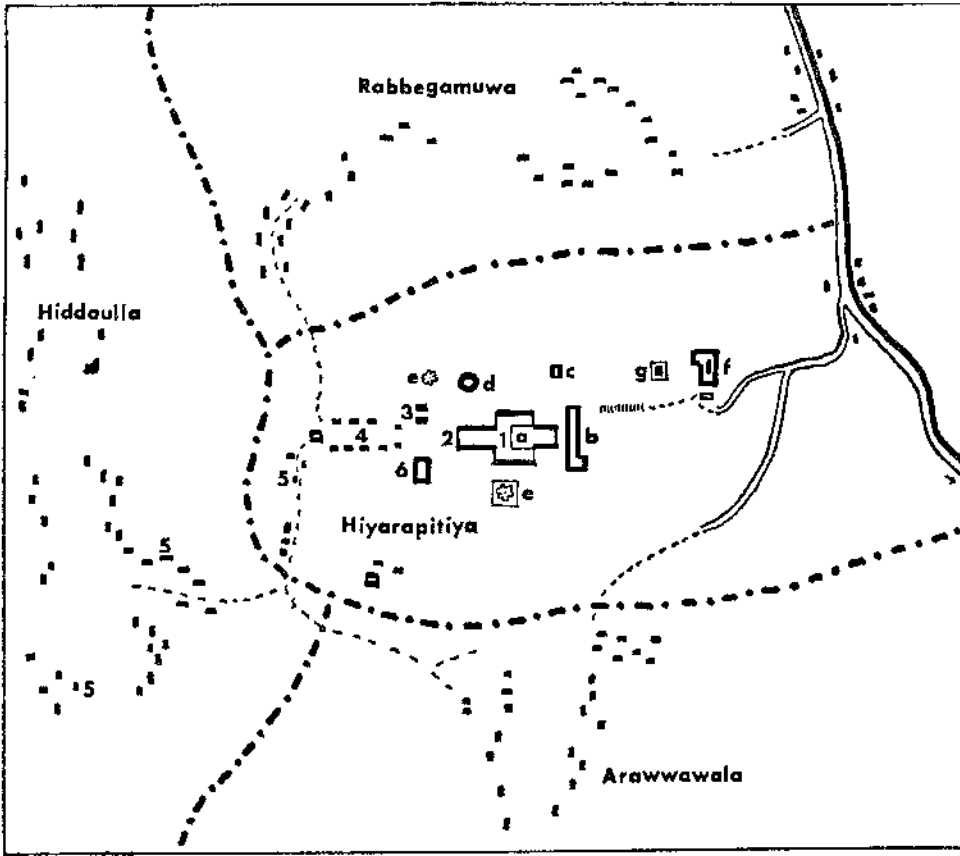


Figure 2 *Lanḱātilaka and its Temple Villages*
(generalized, not drawn to scale)

- a *vihāraya*, shrine of the Buddha
- b storehouse, hall of drummers and kitchen
- c preaching house
- d *dagoba*
- e Bo-trees
- f monastery
- g *poyagē* and *simāva* (sacred boundary)
- 1 *dēvālaya*, shrines for the gods
- 2 hall of drummers
- 3 kitchen and house of chief temple official
- 4 procession street
- 5 houses of priests
- 6 *dēvālaya* of Dādimuṇḍa Dēvatā Bandāra

Arawwawala and Rabbegamuwa: temple villages of *vihāra*
Hiddaulla: temple village of *dēvāla*

TABLE I. ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF LANĀKĀTILAKA TEMPLE

	VIHĀRAYA	DĒVĀLAYA	MAIN FUNCTION
I	<i>Vihārādhipati</i>	<i>Basnāyaka Nilamē</i>	Trustee, landlord
	<i>Vidāna</i>	<i>Vidāna</i>	Temple headman
	<i>Pannikālē</i>	<i>Vaṇṇakurāla</i>	Overseer over III
II	<i>Bhikkhu</i>	<i>Kapurāla</i>	"Priest"
	<i>Multānrāla</i>	<i>Multānrāla</i>	Cook of offerings
	<i>Vatarāla</i>	<i>Vatarāla</i>	Attendant at rituals
III	<i>Nilākāraya</i>	<i>Nilākāraya</i>	Temple servants
(a)	Attendants at daily offerings	(a) Attendants at bi-weekly offerings	e.g. dancers (<i>dāvāla</i> only), musicians (<i>vihāra</i> and <i>dāvāla</i>)
(b)	Supplier of food, flowers, etc., for offerings	(b) Supplier of food, etc., for offerings	
(c)	Attendants at festivals	(c) Attendants at festivals	
(d)	Workers of rice fields, repairs, cleaning, etc.	(d) Workers of rice fields, repairs, cleaning, etc.	

services outside the temple, are members of various lower castes and the services are usually connected with the traditional caste occupations.¹⁴

The dual organization has, however, only a very limited effect on the structure of the laity. There are no sects worshipping only the Buddha or one particular god. The only lay organization is a temporary committee formed to collect money to repair the enclosure of a Bo-tree on the temple compound. An association of lay donors (*dāyaka sabhā*) is not to be found at LanĀkātīlaka because the extensive landholdings support the monks with all they need. But even the existence of *dāyaka sabhās* does not result in a dual organizational structure of the laity because those belonging explicitly to such a group would worship the gods nevertheless.

It is, therefore, apparent that from the point of view of the ordinary members of the society, Sinhalese religion is an integrated whole. The Buddhist system is supplemented by the system of the gods, and one cannot be understood without the other one if we look at social reality and not only at the respective religious teachings.¹⁵

It is customary that villagers visiting the temples first pay their respect to the Buddha and take part in the Buddhist ritual, then walk around to the other side,

¹⁴ The rājakāriya and land tenure system in the Kandyan period of Ceylonese history is discussed in Ralph Pieris, *Sinhalese Social Organisation*, Colombo: Ceylon University Press Board, 1956.

¹⁵ Religious beliefs can lead to the formation of groups in some areas. This is, however, not due to differences between Buddhism and its complimentary religion. See Nur Yalman, "Dual Organization in Central Ceylon," in: *Anthropological Studies in Theravāda Buddhism*, op. cit., pp. 197-223. The impact of Western education and Buddhist modernism has tended to transform Sinhalese society into a "dual society" with different religious cultures. The political events have tended to bridge the split, at least temporarily. This point is further discussed in H. N. Weiler, Hans-Dieter Evers, Th. Hanf, D. Bernstorff, *Erziehungswesen im sozialen Wandel*, Freiburg: Verlag Rombach, 1962.

enter the section of the temple devoted to the gods (*dēvālaya*) and worship under the guidance of the priest (*ḥapurāla*).

The Buddhist rituals are performed with greater regularity and are slightly more elaborate than the rituals of the *dēvāla*, which are supposed to take place only on Wednesdays and Saturdays.¹⁶ But sometimes several weeks elapse before any rituals are held because the priest, the temple officials and servants make ample use of the provision that for the sake of ritual purity the *dēvāla* must not be opened if somebody has died in one of the temple villages. Every morning, however, villagers are alerted by the playing of drums and flutes just before sunrise (*aliyandurēya*) that the first Buddhist ritual at the *vihāra* is to start soon and that the Buddhist monk and the temple servants have to get up and climb the steep temple hill. There are three Buddha *pūjāva* every day; *hildānaya* at about 6:30 a.m., *āhara pūjāva* at 11:00 a.m. and *gilanpasa pūjāva* at about 7:00 p.m. On Wednesdays and Saturdays, the two days especially holy to Vishnu, *Buddha pūjā* is followed by a *dēva pūjāva* in the *devāla*.

The structure of both rituals is basically the same, and they are both performed by the same categories of people (II, III (a) and (b) according to Table 1). That means that each religious specialist and temple servant in the *vihāra* ritual has his counterpart in the *dēvāla* ritual. A short description of the noon-ritual in the *vihāra* and *dēvāla* might suffice to show the dual organization of ritual.

At about 10:30 a.m. the following people have assembled in a building (*digge*) in front of the main entrance to the temple: the cook of offerings (*multānrāla*) and the attendant (*vatarāla*), both are members of the highest caste. Only they (and the monk) are allowed to enter the temple kitchen, where they are at present busy cooking rice on an open fire. In an open veranda-like hall of the building, three drummers and one flute player of the tom-tom beater's caste (*berava*) and a washerman (*hēna* caste) are waiting. As soon as the *bhikkhu* has left the monastery in the valley, the music starts. The monk in a yellow robe climbs the temple hill, walks straight towards the temple gate without paying much attention to the musicians and enters the *vihāra*.

The attendant has already taken a basket of flowers and a vessel of water into the temple, lighted a few candles and arranged for burning the incense. One of the drummers walks across to the temple gate and blows a conch shell to indicate that everything is set and the ritual can begin. The drummers change to a faster rhythm while the *bhikkhu* performs the ritual inside the temple. After a while the *multānrāla* brings a tray with the offerings, sheltered by a baldachin which is carried by the washerman and a second person whose help he has enlisted for this purpose. Only the cook, however, enters the temple and returns later with the empty tray. The end of the whole ceremony is announced by a long deep sound from the conch shell, the music stops abruptly and two of the drummers walk over to the

¹⁶ Sinhalese rituals have been analyzed recently by Michael Ames, "Ritual Prestations and the Structure of the Sinhalese Pantheon," in *Anthropological Studies in Theravāda Buddhism*, op. cit., pp. 27-50; Richard Gombrich, "The Consecration of a Buddhist Image," *Journal of Asian Studies*, XXVI (1966), pp. 23-36; G. Obeyesekere, "The Structure of a Sinhalese Ritual," *Ceylon Journal of Historical and Social Studies*, 1 (1958), H. L. Seneviratne, "The Āsala Perahāra in Kandy," *Ceylon Journal of Historical and Social Studies*, 6 (1963), 169-80; Nur Yalman, "The Structure of Sinhalese Healing Rituals," *Journal of Asian Studies*, XXIII (1964), 115-50.

other side of the temple where in the meantime the cook of the *dēvāla* has prepared rice and vegetable curry for the offerings to the Gods.

Here before the Eastern entrance to the temple a similar spectacle with different actors, however, can be observed. The music starts, but the tunes are different. The priest enters the *dēvāla*. He is dressed in an ordinary white sarong and shirt and his head is not bald as the monk's, but his long black hair is covered with a loosely wound colorful turban. The ritual is again announced by a sound from a conch shell, the offerings are brought by the cook, also a member of the highest caste, in two cloth covered pots, hanging from a pole which he carries over his shoulder. Sometimes two dancers perform in front of the temple door while the ritual is going on inside.

Not only the activities on the temple compound but also in the temple itself before the images of the Buddha and the Gods are strikingly similar. (See Table 2)

TABLE 2. RITUAL IN LANĀTILAKA TEMPLE

VIHĀRA <i>Budda Pūjāva</i>	DĒVĀLA <i>Deva Pūjāva</i>	MAJOR ACTIVITY
<i>tēvāva</i>	<i>tēvāva</i>	ritual washing and fanning of images
<i>dāna</i>	<i>multān bāma</i>	offering of food
<i>mal pūjāva</i>	—	offering of flowers
<i>nanumura</i> (Wednesdays only)	<i>nanumura</i> (Saturdays only)	ritual purification of images

Although the language used for the incantation is different, Pali during Buddha *pūjāva* and Sinhalese or on very few occasions Sanskrit during *dēva pūjāva*, and the Buddhist ritual is carried out more diligently and exactly, one ritual is by and large the mirror image of the other. It is perhaps needless to point out that neither the ritual washing nor the ritual purification of the Buddha image is prescribed in the Tripitaka. Especially the latter during which the *bhikkhu* holds a mirror and cleans the reflection of the Buddha statue with lime juice, a powerful agency used also on other occasions to remove ritual pollution, has no justification in Buddhist teachings. A further explanation of the structure of the rituals would make it necessary to extend the discussion beyond the scope of this paper. The data presented so far are perhaps sufficient to indicate that also in the realm of ritual the dual organization of the temple is maintained, in the same way as the historical development, the architectural arrangements and the social organization of the temple reflect the same structural principle.

It has been demonstrated that Theravāda Buddhism does not exist by itself but has its counterpart in the form of other theistic systems of belief. In this sense Buddhism is an "incomplete religion,"¹⁸ which presupposes a complementary religion.

¹⁷ A Buddha pūjāva at the Dālada Māligāva is described by A.M. Hocart, *Temple of the Tooth in Kandy*, London: Lusac, 1931, pp. 18-31.

¹⁸ This term was suggested to me by Wolfram Eberhard.

Further comparative material might have to be provided for a satisfactory explanation of the dual organization of religion in Buddhist countries. I have concentrated my efforts on the exemplification of this fact by showing that the dual organization of Sinhalese religion is well institutionalized and that the worship of Gods and the veneration of the Buddha are intimately connected.¹⁹

¹⁹ A sophisticated discussion of this point with emphasis on symbols and myths is found in E. R. Leach, "Pulleyar and the Lord Buddha: An Aspect of Religious Syncretism in Ceylon," *Psychoanalysis and Psychoanalytic Review*, 49 (1962) 80-102. See also Michael M. Ames, "Buddha and the Dancing Goblins: A Theory of Magic and Religion," *American Anthropologist*, 66 (1963), 75-82.