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ARTICLES

COVID-Curing Kali Syrup and the Stubborn Subaltern: Resisting Elite Restrictions with a Popular Goddess

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When Sri Lanka entered a lockdown at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, a frustrated public was forbidden from engaging in customary pilgrimages and temple visits, with access reserved only for political elites. In the process, the government created a large religious subaltern class in need of divine intervention. In late 2020, this void was filled by a Buddhist priest to the goddess Kali who concocted a miraculous elixir that purportedly prevented and cured COVID-19. Although elites initially supported the indigenous medicine, they denounced it once Kali began speaking through the medium and challenging authority. But the agency of the goddess could not be put back in the bottle. Crowds continuously amassed outside the Kali shrine in a rejection of lockdown orders to seek aid outside the foundering efforts of their government. The goddess thereby became a vehicle for speech by subalterns whom elites scolded for their stubbornness.

Can a goddess beseeched help the subaltern speak? The figure of the "subaltern" as a category of postcolonial critique is meant to carry a certain amount of ambiguity and malleability, indicating a subject's vulnerable position within variable hierarchies rather than something unequivocally intrinsic about a person. As Rosalind Morris summarizes: "Subalternity is less an identity than what we might call a predicament, ...the structured place from which the capacity to access power is radically obstructed" (Morris 2010, 8). The contingency of subalternity is most famously articulated by Gayatri Spivak, who develops her definition from Karl Marx's description of the divisions inherent in economic classes: "Marx's contention here is that the descriptive definition of a class can be a differential one—its cutting off and difference from all other classes" (Spivak 2010, 29). Since there are many ways that classes can be separated from one another, whether by language, gender, race, or religion, subalternity is not necessarily tied to economic disadvantage. David Arnold, for example, describes how a plague epidemic in India laid bare the machinations of colonial power, eventually fomenting resistance against a colonial government that separated families for infection inspection and isolated the sick. In this case, the demarcation of subalternity was not strictly between colonizer and native, or rich and poor, but also between those who championed the mitigation methods of modern science and those who resisted these authoritarian and invasive practices as a cultural affront. The subalterns in this case were those who saw "the body...as sacred territory...as an element integral to a wider community" (Arnold 1988, 396).

This article argues that a similar subaltern class coalesced during the COVID-19 pandemic in Sri Lanka, when citizens were prevented from visiting religious sites and attending to rituals that they felt might mitigate the

illness. In this case, the social divide was not only between modern science and cultural beliefs, but also between political elites and the rest of the population, as a double-standard prevailed where those in political power still made showy pilgrimages to important religious sites, while those locked down at home could only watch on television. Eventually this subaltern class found a champion in the goddess Kali, and violated lockdown orders en masse to seek a divine elixir distributed by a local medium that would save them from a virus that an authoritarian government appeared unable to control. Instead of paternalistic national heroes, they called upon the autonomous powers of a mother goddess—one regularly beseeched in times of great illness. As was sung two centuries earlier in a Sinhala poem titled "*Kāli Nälavilla* (Kali's Lullaby)":

> Mother Kali received the instruction
>
> To rule the regions of the sinful human world
>
> To go and dispel the hidden plague
>
> Lovingly removing epidemics and guarding beings.[1]

As this verse suggests, when flawed rulers cannot be relied upon to protect an ailing world, deities may intervene. This is what can make a goddess a mouthpiece for subaltern speech. When a man from Kegalle reportedly developed a cure for COVID-19 in the form of an apotropaic tonic, some Sinhala politicians initially endorsed it as a miracle of indigenous medicine, but then renounced it when it was unmoored from their machinations through the voice of Kali. Politicians did not anticipate that their promotion of Dhammika Bandara, the mixer of the elixir, would give a platform to an unpredictable deity, too. As Kali has a reputation as a subversive goddess able to operate from the margins, her presence during the pandemic provided a religious outlet for a populace living under enforced isolation, eager for supernatural means to defend against disease after being excluded from sacred sites that were reserved for the orchestrated rites of elites. Overall, Kali's emergence at this time exemplifies how a plurality of agencies operate in any situation, as the forces of economics, epidemics, mass media, mythology, and politics combined to make a divine cure for a virus into a viral phenomenon.

1 Befitting the lifeways of a pandemic, my ethnographic methodology for this article was entirely remote. I was locked down in the United States, and the borders into Sri Lanka were closed, so I used online newspaper articles, footage from news programs on Sri Lankan television posted to YouTube, as well as other social media posts to reconstruct the events surrounding Kali. Left to my home library, the palm-leaf manuscripts like *Kāli Nälavilla* that I use to interpret present events were also accessed remotely. These are part of the Hugh Nevill collection in the British Library, and the catalogue of Somadasa (1987–1995) that provides access to much of their content through transcriptions and descriptions. Another volume of British Library manuscript transcriptions by Tissa Kāriyavasam (1992) provides access into almost all the content. My citations follow Somadasa's format of the British Library call number, followed by folio numbers and a/b sides of the leaf where the verses appear. The verse cited from *Kāli Nälavilla* is Or.6615(520): f.1b, v.4.

A Religious Lockdown

When the globe began its great shutdown in response to the coronavirus pandemic, there was initially skepticism that lockdown measures could be effectively implemented at religious sites in Sri Lanka. Concerning the Sri Pada Mountain, for example, which bears the Buddha's footprint relic, the head monk Ven. Bengamuve Dhammadinna told reporters on March 16, at the height of the worship season, that pilgrimage would continue (Rajapaksa and Perera 2020). He claimed he had no ability to tell pilgrims not to come and cited the common refrain that the journey was traditionally a dangerous one where lives were risked in the past. The idea that the Sri Pada pilgrimage could not be cancelled was even held by British colonial officers, who pioneered the practice of curtailing religious movements to stem epidemics (McKinley 2024, 70). Yet only two days after Ven. Dhammadinna's comments, the Minister of Health announced all pilgrimages and leisure trips were banned. People found travelling in groups were arrested and quarantined (Anonymous 2020a). On March 19, 2020, the entire roadway leading from Hatton to Nallathanniya was closed by police roadblocks at several points, cutting off the route by which most pilgrims come to Sri Pada (Anonymous 2020d). For the first time in history, the pilgrimage was officially cancelled.

Yet the worship season went on at a distance, as resident monks and staff of the Sri Pada summit continued rituals for the Buddha's footprint and the god Saman. When the season ended in May, the Sinhala newspaper *Divayina* reported on the closing ceremonies, noting that "although lacking the offerings of pilgrims, a number of religious rituals were conducted." Soldiers from the Laxapana army camp then carried the statues of Saman down the mountain and were met at the base by "a special vehicular procession without the participation of devotees" to transport the statues to their temples (N. Ratnāyaka 2020). These ritual actions were sensible according to the logic of Sri Pada, as the Buddha's footprint and Saman are interpreted by many devotees as having healing powers, watching over the country from their lofty heights. The wider Buddhist public, however, may have felt their own omission from the religious proceedings to be detrimental, by cutting off personal access to this healing and preventing participation in the collective generation of merit.

Still, circumstances merited such measures, and other religious sites followed suit. At a presidential secretariat meeting on June 12, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa instructed all annual religious festivals to continue without public participation. The major August Esala processions at the Dalada Maligawa temple in Kandy, which houses the Buddha's tooth relic, were to be broadcast on television instead (Anonymous 2020h). The Hindu and Buddhist shrines at Kataragama thereafter cancelled the "Pada Yatra" pilgrimage for their Esala festival, substituting closed rituals as temple leaders invoked colonial precedent (Waidyasekara 2020). The President's announcement followed restrictions already placed on the June Poson festival. Commemorating the

arrival of Buddhism to Lanka, Poson is usually celebrated by Buddhists spending the day in local temples or undertaking pilgrimages to Anuradhapura and Mihintale. The public was told by the Government and chief monks to instead celebrate in their homes, and the practice of distributing free *dansäla* (food and drink) for merit was banned (Wijesinghe 2020). To enforce this, a two-day curfew was issued across the island during Poson.

The Sri Lankan Government, however, did not follow its own advice. Thousands of police and military personnel were brought to Anuradhapura to secure the area so that political elites could privately conduct "the first-ever State Poson Festival," attended by Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, who "was accompanied by several hundred people including many members of the Caretaker Cabinet, former Members of Parliament from the Anuradhapura district, government officials and heads of Media Institutions" (Ranawana 2020). Photographs of Rajapaksa at Mihintale show him closely surrounded by his retinue. The rituals conducted at Anuradhapura included a *pinkama* (merit-making ceremony) meant to bless all who were engaged in the fight against the pandemic, with a report and photographs of a socially distanced audience around the Ruwanweli stupa published on the website of the Sri Lankan army (Anonymous 2020g). In this way, the Poson pilgrimage continued, but only for high-ranking members of the Buddhist clergy and government.

There are deep precedents for undertaking such religious rituals during times of disease. When ancient kings ruled from Anuradhapura, merit-making ceremonies involving the procession of relics and recitation of *paritta* (protection) texts were used to ward off epidemics. Unlike 2020, however, these ceremonies were not private affairs. The participation of the entire *mahājanaṃ* (populace) was required to generate the requisite *sīla* (moral virtue) that made the ritual efficacious (Geiger 1980, 18–19, 170). This is because karma has a combined social nature, where intertwined effects of actions stretch across rebirths and can save or sink entire populations (Walters 2003). Encouraging the whole populace to participate in a protective ritual is meant to positively utilize this power of collective action.

With modern epidemiological knowledge, however, allowing mass participation in religious rituals against the coronavirus pandemic would have been ill advised. Yet suggesting that the public merely watch those who imposed the restrictions enact the rituals themselves likely felt less than satisfactory for many Buddhists. Moreover, the restrictions fit a pattern of increasing militarized state control of religious sites and rituals in Sri Lanka even before the pandemic, especially under Buddhist nationalist governments led by the Rajapaksa family. As the pandemic allowed the privileges of these elites to become further entrenched, the groundwork was laid for a counter

reaction among a general populace eager to reclaim their own routines, religious and otherwise. Before the year was out, this was sparked by Dhammika Bandara and his cure for COVID-19 from the goddess Kali.

A Syrup's Ascension

Sri Lanka's early lockdowns were effective, preventing a major spread of the coronavirus for several months. By October 2020, however, two new outbreaks were seeded in Colombo suburbs at a garment factory and fish market. With the authorities and public less vigilant at this point in the pandemic, the outbreak grew to the extent where Sri Lanka entered a true first wave. An enviable number of only a dozen COVID-19 deaths from mid-March through mid-October rose to over a hundred before November's end. Mahinda Rajapaksa again requested Buddhist monks around the country conduct distanced *paritta* rituals (Tharaka 2020). Near the end of the month, however, rumors of a new miracle cure activated a swell of public interest that could not keep the masses away.

On November 28 and 29, the media outlets Hiru News and Ada Derana began reporting that a cure had been developed by a man from Kegalle named Dhammika Bandara, made from natural native ingredients, mainly honey and nutmeg. These reports claimed the *päṇiya* (syrup or tonic) was effectively tested at the Wathupitiwala Base Hospital, the only evidence being that ten COVID-19-positive patients who took it eventually tested negative for the virus. The hospital director later denied knowledge of any clinical trial being conducted. Bandara is not an official Ayurvedic physician but claimed to belong to the "Hela" school of Lankan medicine. He quickly won the support of Sisira Jayakody, Minister for Indigenous Medicine, who appeared with Bandara and endorsed his tonic on an *Ada Derana* interview program (Anonymous 2020c). After Jayakody discussed the medicine during a November 30 parliament meeting, Gotabaya Rajapaksa recommended it and other indigenous cures be researched (Anonymous 2020f). Another publicity windfall followed on December 3, when Minister of Health Pavithra Wanniarachchi took a dose of the medicine in front of television cameras, thereafter appointing a special commission "to prepare a set of proposals on the methodology to conduct a scientific examination into the new drug" (Mudugamuwa 2020).

Fully in the media spotlight, Dhammika Bandara announced he would distribute 5,000 bottles of the tonic free to the public on December 8 in a "great *dansäla*." The poster printed for this event was the first direct association between the medicine and Kali, with an image of the goddess across the top, and the tonic named "*Vīra Bhadradhamma Korōnā Nivāraṇa Pratiśaktī Jīva Pānaya*" (Vira Bhadradhamma Corona Prevention Immunity Life Drink). The event was to be hosted at Bandara's place of employ, on the grounds of the *śrī vīra mahā bhadrakāḷi dēvalaya* (Bhadrakali temple) in Hettimulla. The name of the *dēvalaya* (temple), however, was in small print,

and "Bhadrakaḷi" became "Bhadradhamma" in the medicine's name. The illustration was also not a fearsome Kali, but a beatific Durga-like *devi* (goddess) with a lion vehicle, likely meant to broaden the appeal to those Buddhists who frown upon darker depictions of deities. While the poster advised that only one person per household come "to follow the corona health rules," a crowd nearing 12,000 people lined up to receive samples, clustered in violation of virus mitigation restrictions. The police were called in to disperse the crowd, and the Kegalle District Secretary ordered Bandara to cease distribution, although by then all the samples had been handed out. The following day, Sisira Jayakody announced that the Ministry of Indigenous Medicine and the Department of Ayurveda had approved the syrup as a "food supplement" and declared further clinical trials would commence, although licensed physicians from both Western and Ayurvedic schools publicly rejected the medical authenticity of Bandara's tonic and his credentials (Farzan 2020).

Yet the wave of popular interest and official endorsements was large enough for Bandara to take his syrupy tonic on pilgrimage, bringing an entourage wherever he went. On December 15, he traveled to Kandy, where he was allowed to make a formal offering of the tonic to the Buddha's tooth relic at the Dalada Maligawa. He then met with, and obtained the blessings from, head monks of the Asgiri Nikaya monastic fraternity, to whom he also made an offering of his tonic in a crystal decanter. The following day, he journeyed to the Sri Maha Bodhi tree, wanting to pour the syrup as an offering onto the tree's roots, before suddenly encountering the first real roadblock in his meteoric rise. He was not allowed to make his offering in the upper compound of the shrine with direct access to the original tree, but only worship in the lower compound, where the public can always access the surrounding junior bodhi trees.

A monk attending the shrine was the first to stop him. With a crowd around, Bandara explained, "I made this medicine to save all beings of this world. So, I want to make this *puja* (ritual) offering to the Reverend Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi." His voice was meeker than in prior interviews, plaintive but respectful, and he closed his eyes as he finished his sentence. The masked monk replied calmly and casually, "Let's do it like this," swinging the inertia of the conversation onto his own authority by asking a series of questions to which the only answer was "yes." Using the term Vedamahatya, an honorific for a physician, he said Bandara and his group were allowed to process around and offer as much as they could to the nearby trees but could not go above. All respectfully acquiesced in the moment.

Later, Bandara was admitted to meet Ven. Pallegama Sirinivasa, the chief monk of the *aṭamasthānaya* (eight sacred sites of Anuradhapura). Grainy footage of the meeting shot on a cellphone camera was shown on televised news programs and went viral online. The video unfolds like so: The elder

monk looks on with a smile from an office chair. Bandara kneels with one knee on the ground, raising his hand as he speaks, and reiterates that, "To rescue the world and protect everyone in the world, I made a medicine." Then he goes off script. Bandara asks, "Does your reverence know that I am Kali? Why is my medicine being disrespected? Why did they say to toss it to the side? So it is that I am not making the offering on the root at the foot of the Reverend Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi... Why does your reverence not grant me *avasara* (permission)? Your reverence, I...I am Kali! Your reverence's mother!" Bandara's voice rises into a shout and then a full-throated yell: "Why is my medicine not in the upper compound?!!" The camera shakes as its owner steps back in shock. "*Epā epā*" ("No, no") comes a reproach in a plaintive chide from the background. Ven. Sirinivasa maintains his composure throughout, his smile growing at times. He occasionally looks to those standing behind Bandara, as if to make sure everyone is witnessing the same thing. The tension is then diffused and a humbler Bandara says, "*Kartavyen ivat vīmaṭa avasara denna*" (Well if it's not that way, give me permission to depart from this duty). The monk obliges.

The fallout from such a disrespectful display of aggression in front of a senior monk was swift. Medical experts and media pundits who had already been critical of Bandara were sure this incident signaled his undoing. The English language media encouraged this with opinion pieces applying all manner of pejorative labels, including "shaman," "sorcerer," "medicine man," "witch doctor," "potion man," "self-styled holy man," "carpenter-turned-godman," and "mason-turned-miracle-worker." In Sinhala pieces, he was more accurately identified as a *kapuva* or *kapurāla,* (priests to the gods) who work in *dēvalaya* (shrines). Although this profession has long been part of Buddhist religiosity in Sri Lanka, there are also many modernist Buddhists who renounce deity worship as superstition. They, too, heaped criticisms on Bandara. The day after the incident in Anuradhapura, for example, a parliamentarian monk of the Buddhist nationalist JHU party, Ven. Omalpe Sobhita, remarked in a press conference at the National Intellectual Sangha Council that, although Buddhists had a strong belief in the legitimate boon of the country's true indigenous medicines, "We do not, whatever the reason, have any belief at all in a medicine said to be Mother Kali's." He finished the sentence breaking into a grin as chuckling murmurs of assent rippled through the audience. Ven. Sobhita continued: "We don't have any belief in Mother Kali. If Mother Kali was there, if Pattini was there, if Kataragama and all were there, how could there be this much misfortune? I think that no *buddhimat* (intelligent) person in this country has an ability to believe in Mother Kali's

medicine.... So, the business with Mother Kali is finished."[2] Against this prediction, however, large portions of the public did not abandon Bandara. His close connection to Mother Kali was not the deal breaker elites expected.

In the days after the Anuradhapura incident, crowds again flocked to Bandara's home to seek his tonic. Journalists began stumbling over their words, in one sentence claiming that "Bandara was discredited after he threw a tantrum," and in the next forced to acknowledge that "for several days after all those incidents, very long queues could be seen in front of Bandara's house" (Dissanayake 2021). This continued into the following month, even as the police and Bandara himself repeatedly drove people away. Still, Bandara never backed down from his Kali claims. In an interview on December 29, he explained, "Firstly I must give credit to Mother Kali. It was Mother Kali indeed who gave me this medicine." He did not mind if people attacked him personally, but said, "do not disrespect the medicine" (Anonymous 2020e). Bandara was indeed being mocked by many at this point, with comedy sketches and parody songs circulated over the radio and online, and plenty of disrespect toward the medicine, the whole affair branded as "Dhammika Paniya," or "The Dhammika Tonic." In comments on social media, he was excoriated as an embarrassment to the country, a charlatan salesman, and a downright madman. Yet Bandara's sincerity never wavered, and people kept coming to Kegalle.

On January 21, 2021, using funds earned by selling the tonic over the previous month, Bandara organized another free distribution of 5,000 sample bottles, this time with official approval, carried out under police supervision with more orderly queues. At the same time, however, the situation around him was finally beginning to unravel. The previous day, the police announced they were opening an investigation into allegations that Bandara assaulted a doctor from the Peradeniya Hospital who came to acquire the tonic while filming the meeting on a phone (Anonymous 2021c). Bandara acknowledged the truth of these charges two days later, again claiming it was Kali working through him unawares, saying, "If the Mother comes, there is nothing for me to do" (Anonymous 2021a). Meanwhile, five ministers and parliamentarians who had taken his tonic were hospitalized with COVID-19-related illnesses that week, including Health Minister Pavithra Wanniarachchi. Although Bandara claimed she had taken the wrong dosage and his medicine was not responsible, the sheer number of public denunciations made it clear his star had fallen (Anonymous 2021b).

2 My translations of the Sinhala dialogue in the preceding paragraphs are made from the news clips broadcast on Swarnavahini on December 17, 2020 (Anonymous 2020b). While the present article primarily analyzes Buddhist engagements with Kali, it is probable that some seeking out Bandara's tonic were Hindu devotees of the goddess. After the incident in Anuradhapura, however, a least one priest of a Hindu temple to Kali also denounced Bandara as a charlatan who was misappropriating the goddess to do business (Anonymous 2020i). In general, Bandara had very Buddhist ways of talking about Kali and did not deploy the language of heating and cooling often used by Hindus to describe goddesses in relation to disease.

Bandara thereafter disappeared from the news cycle, but not before the pundits took their parting shots against him and the officials who supported his tonic. Some alleged the Rajapaksa regime had conspiratorially used news networks sympathetic to their administration to promote this false curse, covering up their failure to prevent the new COVID-19 outbreak after declaring victory too early in the pandemic (Jayasuriya 2021; Ranawana 2021). Chicanery was also the conclusion of the first academic analysis of the Dhammika Paniya affair, which argues that the Sri Lankan State "attempted to obscure its policy failures," and that Dhammika Bandara was plotting to improve his own political futures after an earlier failed bid for local government office, as "the fame of Dhammika Paniya might well give its namesake an advantage in joining the ranks of the political elite" (West and Godage 2023, 219, 222). While such political criticism is merited, it fails to explain the widespread interest in the tonic beyond implicitly or explicitly casting the interested public as gullible rubes unable to stop their own victimization. I argue that the search by the public for a miraculous COVID-19 cure was more than government manipulation of the populace. It may in fact be the opposite—an attempt by the populace to circumvent the restrictions the State imposed. An explanation that considers Kali as a vehicle for public resistance acknowledges the unrecognized agency of those who sought the tonic and holds that the goddess being part of the syrup's successful branding must be taken seriously to fully understand what transpired. After all, state endorsements of the tonic only focused on the indigenous medicine angle, and most came before Kali was revealed as an actor in the affair.

Kali's Efficacy

Among all the media mocking, only one mainstream writer investigated why Bandara invoked Kali, citing anthropologists who have studied the growing worship of the goddess by Buddhists (Balachandran 2020). Yet even the anthropological literature can sell Kali short. Gananath Obeyesekere's immense research into the Pattini cult mentioned Kali to note how subservient she was to Pattini, denying the existence of Buddhist Kali shrines in the past (Obeyesekere 1984, 260, 447–50). Obeyesekere also cast modern Kali worship as an urban aberration that was popularized to sooth distressed minds with motherhood tropes (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, 133–62). This led other anthropologists to erroneously label modern Kali worship as only "a new movement" (Hewamanage 2018). Obeyesekere's psychoanalytic method may indeed be applicable to Dhammika Bandara, considering his apparent tendency to dissociate into Kali during surges of frustrated anger (Obeyesekere 1981, 150–59). Yet such a diagnosis is beyond my expertise and does not explain the larger popularity of the Kali tonic. Unable in my own lockdown to go interview those interested in the tonic, I instead consulted Sinhala palm-leaf manuscripts about the goddess to seek a history of Buddhist interest in Kali, ultimately finding remarkable resonances between the mythic

profile of the goddess and her appearance during the pandemic. While I do not presume that there has been seamless transmission of these ideas, especially as these manuscripts are sequestered in the British Library, I do argue that the verses reveal an important reservoir of tropes about Kali, her healing powers, and her relation to Buddha relics, which help explain widespread interest in her COVID-19 cure. If these tropes are understood "as reactivations rather than as simple survivals" (Bastin 1996, 80), they demonstrate how "existing myth models into a larger grammar of meaningful action" (Obeyesekere 1981, 102).

The mythic grammar of Kali that made the public actively seek her tonic includes two main components: her ability to challenge domineering political powers, and her ability to stop dangerous diseases. The former function has been somewhat studied by anthropologists interested in cursing rituals. Obeyesekere hypothesizes that sorcery is partly a substitute for seeking justice through official channels among those distrustful of police and other state actors (Obeyesekere 1975, 15–18). Rohan Bastin argues that such rituals have a "regenerative" power for practitioners and devotees to reimagine their relationship within society, focusing on female trance specialists called *māniyō*, or "mothers," who stand independently at social margins to wield their power (Bastin 1996, 2002, 2003). For both authors, rapidly changing economic circumstances accompanying globalization are one reason such Kali-centric rituals have become more visible in recent decades. The political resistance aspect of Kali's mythic profile has also reappeared across time and place in other contexts. David Kopf, for example, notes the prevalence of Kali as a part of anti-colonial discourse in early twentieth century Bengal, as "the goddess most often conjured up as a symbol against the foreign overlord" (Kopf 1989, 119). Likewise, Patricia Lawrence highlights the role that Kali oracles had in speaking on behalf of Tamil citizens tortured or disappeared by the Sri Lankan State in the civil war, "when people could not take their problems to government authorities and so turned toward a different form of agency: local goddesses" (Lawrence 2003, 115). In a description that somewhat resembles the goddess' role in the pandemic, Lawrence writes: "In a historical moment when dissent is impossible, amid fear, displacement, and unnatural death, it has become part of Kāḷi's many tasks to overcome political silencing, to embody memory, and to reconstitute a diminished world" (Lawrence 2003, 119). Yet comparatively little scholarly attention has been directed to the other aspect of Kali mythology important to interpreting the pandemic: the goddess' ability to prevent and heal illnesses. Obeyesekere even dismissed this function as archaic because of a modern society in which "free universal medical treatment, a reasonably good system of hospitals, and compulsory universal inoculation for smallpox have eliminated serious pestilences and have provided people with a technology for coping with them" (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, 159). The coronavirus pandemic, however, has reminded us that modern medical systems may still be caught off guard, and plagues remain afoot.

New relevance is therefore breathed into old myths of Kali, which help make sense of how Bandara's confrontation in Anuradhapura seemingly reinforced his appeal. Of the thousands of Sinhala manuscripts housed in the British Library, only a handful directly concern Kali, yet her mythic grammar is consistent therein. A luxurious early nineteenth century *kapurāla* (priest's) ritual handbook, for example, with Kandyan-style lac-work designs on its wooden cover, contains several texts used in *sūniyama* (sorcery exorcisms), as well as a recipe for a medicinal oil to protect against evil spirits. This *kapurāla* evidently had interest in Kali, as her seven forms are mentioned in the invocations closing some of the poems, and the final prose mantras in his handbook, written in a Sinhala-Tamil hybrid, invoke Kataragama and Bhadrakali to have confidence to appear before judges and other important persons.[3] Throughout this handbook, Kali helps heal afflictions and conjures the confidence needed to stare down authority, which is also how the goddess helped the modern *kapurāla* Bandara act as a charismatic medium for Kali to speak authoritatively from a position of marginality.

Even stronger connections with Bandara's actions can be found in the Kali-centric texts collected around the Anuradhapura region. These manuscripts are also from the nineteenth century, but the verses shared across copies suggest an older date of original composition, at least as far back as the Dutch colonial period. Among the eight Bhairava deities under Kali's control, some spoke languages of "Holland" and "Batavia," again signaling how worldly political authority can be subordinated to the goddess.[4] While Kali herself remains a servant to Pattini in these texts, the poetics reflect the growth of a Buddhist cult focused specifically on Kali, who was settled by Pattini on the outskirts of Anuradhapura.[5] While Bandara's home region of Kegalle holds several important Pattini shrines (Bell 1904, 18–19, 57–58), likely encouraging his link to Kali, his journey to Anuradhapura was by no means outside the territory of these goddesses either. Besides these literal places, Kali also dwells in a figural space extant only in her myths:

> Having come there, she resides in the Velli Eliya rest house (*ambalama*).
>
> She guards those travelers who come and stay, eating and drinking.
>
> To speak of the majestic power there where Kāli lives indeed,
>
> various groups of travelers are there shaking from fear.[6]

3 Or.6615(438).

4 Or.6615(81): f.5a; Or.6615(418): f.3b.

5 The Palayakulam area in particular is mentioned as a site of a Kali shrine. Or.6615(81): f.4b; Or.6615(418): ff.3a, 4a. Kali being subservient to Pattini is a distinctly Buddhist interpretation of the goddess, sometimes shocking Hindu devotees who consider Kali to be all powerful (de Alwis 2018, 160).

6 Or.6615(81): f.2b, v.4.

The *ambalama*, an open-air shelter, was historically a site of refuge for travelers. They were also sites of public discourse, where the politics and practicalities of life were discussed (Godakumbura 1981). Kali protects those conversing there, and, in another version of this verse, "goes to the *ambalama* to nourish those eating and drinking while coming and going from afar."[7] As a fearsome goddess, she is the perfect candidate to mother the dangerous highways and byways of life, including its *vaduru rōga* (plagues)—a term featured in every manuscript, which literally means "perilous illnesses." When these books were written, this mostly referred to endemic smallpox, but the sentiment also applies to new epidemics. Of course, Kali should be the one to distribute a miracle cure for COVID-19 among the public. That has long been her job.

Kali was employed by Pattini, who entrusts her with the human world and tells her: "I give warrant to summon me to come to the *ambalama*."[8] This demonstrates the hierarchy structuring the Buddhist pantheon, with *varam* (warrant) or *avasara* (permission) to help humanity being taken by base deities from more powerful gods and goddesses above, with the Buddha reigning over all (Obeyesekere 1966). Since the Buddha is absent, seeking the power to heal from his relics follows this hierarchical chain of warrants. Before Pattini entrusts powers to Kali, she too visits Anuradhapura relics interred at "Abhaya and Jetavana."[9] Likewise, the retinue of *dēvatā* (godlings) under Kali's command gain power by "guarding the trunk of the Sri Maha Bodhi, taking the Sri Maha Bodhi leaf, and coming."[10] Bandara seeking access to the same tree follows this myth model, as the language he used with Ven. Sirinivasa was strikingly like these texts. Just as Kali "*avasara gattē nara lova rakiṇṭa*" (took permission to guard the human world),[11] Bandara explained his medicine was meant "*lōkē siyalu denāma räka ganna*" (to guard everyone in the world), and so asked "*äyi avasara dunnē nättē*" (why permission was not given). As Kali in that moment, Bandara's question was legitimate, and was also the reason he then asked permission to be relieved of his "duty," as the monk prevented the usual chain of warrants from being executed.

For those watching at home with faith in Kali, Bandara was thus far from discredited by this confrontation. Rather, he had been improperly barred from mediating the healing power of Buddha relics through the goddess and into his medicine. Kali spoke through him to prove his credentials on behalf of the people. For a public that had seen its religious movements dramatically curtailed in previous months, barring Bandara was another example of elitist

7 Or.6615(418): f.2b, v.3

8 Or.6615(81): f.3a, v.3, 3b, v.1; Or.6615(418): f.2a, v.1.

9 Or.6615(81): f.1b, v.2. See also BL Or.6615(329): f.6a.

10 Or.6615(520): f.2b, v.4.

11 Or.6615(202) in Kāriyavasam 1992, 30.

restrictions. The double standard of religious lockdown was reiterated when Gotabaya Rajapaksa took his own pilgrimage to the Dalada Maligawa and Maha Bodhi Tree ten days after Bandara and was allowed to worship in the upper compound while touching the tree. The timing of Rajapaksa's visit, his embrace of the tree, and the photograph that his office sent to the press, were perhaps meant to symbolically denounce Bandara's authority by showing the country's real savior. The people lining up that day outside the Kali shrine in Kegalle, however, begged to differ.

Agency, Divinity, and Subalternity

Scholars who theorize subalternity have long been interested in the agency of deities, in part because these beings occupy a discursive realm removed from the secular rationality which underwrites modern regimes, so that "religion becomes the site of the inexplicable" (Novetzke 2006, 125). Ranajit Guha, for example, explains how the Santhal rebellion against the British was motivated by a god who ordained it and was the ultimate agent carrying out the task, a belief dismissed as mere "fanaticism" by British officials (Guha 1988, 78–83). Dipesh Chakrabarty then turns Guha's critique into a methodology by creating a postcolonial historiography that will "take gods and spirits to be existentially coeval with the human" and seek out "stories about being human that incorporate agency on the part of gods and spirits" (Chakrabarty 2000, 16, 88). The case of Kali in Sri Lanka is such a story, where people would have been unlikely to amass together if not for the draw of the goddess herself, a phenomenon that political elites and media pundits also underestimated as fanaticism.

Yet one must tread carefully when attributing agency. It is a term that Ananda Abeysekara argues is now in danger of being uncritically applied by scholars who attempt to emulate Chakrabarty (Abeysekara 2012). Such loose usage of agency may anachronistically apply a term with a modern neoliberal genealogy to non-modern times and peoples, or, worse, reinscribe the colonial delusion that people under repressive regimes have power over their destinies or find their fates more acceptable due to retaining some modicum of control over their cultural affairs (Abeysekara 2019). So, when I suggest that the goddess Kali helps the subaltern speak, this does not mean that the resultant public resistance represents a unified front against oppression that allows people to claim complete control over their lives. All agencies are not equal. Were that the case, then the speakers would no longer be truly subaltern according to Spivak and others, considering "the close imbrication of subalternity with the *failure* of speech or, as [Spivak] puts it, the 'non-recognition of agency'" (Rajan 2010, 121). Although people came together around Kali during the pandemic, their speech through the goddess still fell on deaf ears among certain elites, especially those steeped in Western medicine, who refused to ever take the syrup cure seriously and criticized it even more vehemently when people persistently clung to it. The very stubbornness of the subaltern, however, shows an attempt at airing grievances through deities precisely

because gods and goddesses inhabit a counter-discourse against the rationalist secularism that dominates modern medicine, politics, and punditry. In this way, the goddess Kali may act as an agent of subaltern expression even if she remains unintelligible, unbelievable, or otherwise unremarkable to those in power. In a time of fear over the communicable, she signaled an attempt at communication.[12]

Ultimately, the case of Kali is an excellent example of the rule of heterogeneity in theories of subalternity. The Sri Lankans who initially sought the miraculous tonic spanned a wide range of economic and political classes. Although Dhammika Bandara soon lost support from avowed secularists and the Buddhist political elite, the crowds outside his home only grew, flouting pandemic laws against public gatherings even as the police ordered Bandara to turn them away day after day. The recalcitrant crowds were seemingly united around Kali, but we can imagine that all these different people also had myriad motivations for seeking her medicine, with some coming for healing, some for protection, some with economic interests, some out of financial desperation, some out of devotion, some out of loneliness, some out of boredom, some out of curiosity, some out of skepticism, and so on. As Spivak explains subalternity via Marx: "There is no such thing as a 'class instinct' at work here... Marx is not working to create an undivided subject where desire and interest coincide. Class consciousness does not operate toward that goal... Marx is obliged to construct models of a divided and dislocated subject whose parts are not continuous or coherent with each other" (Spivak 2010, 29). Likewise, members of an ad hoc pandemic subaltern class cannot be fully simpatico, nor can their critics who disagreed with the movement for all manner of reasons, including it being backward superstition, dangerous quackery, unorthodox theology, a political challenge, a transgression of Buddhist ethics, or simply an affront to social decorum. In turn, these many justifications for silencing Dhammika Bandara and his followers are part of what creates their eclectic subaltern class, as "the claim to subalternity can be staked out across strict lines of definition by virtue of their muting by heterogenous circumstances" (Spivak 2010, 64). In this way, humans are as heterogenous as the goddess herself, who can be aggressive and dangerous or life giving and nurturing, and who has been both beseeched and shunned by political elites at different times for varied ends.

A unique description of Kali's appearance in another palm-leaf manuscript captures her multifaceted nature:

> Seeing remedies, wearing gems and pearls that shake over both shoulders,

12 This does not mean that nonmodern religious speech is the *only* mode of subaltern communication. It is but one of many discursive fields people can enter. As noted by Aparna Sundar (2015), the subaltern may also be secular.

> smeared by strokes with fearsome mud, gold, lime paste, and water,
>
> having put on divine robes with her strong right hand,
>
> carrying both slopes of Meru, Goddess Mother Kali comes.[13]

Bejeweled, berobed, and rubbed with substances ranging from dirty to dazzling, medicinal to purifying, this goddess comes to cure us with both sides of a cosmic mountain in hand. By listening to her speech, we may better understand the heterogeneity of agency that extends beyond the human realm. To pursue plural agencies, through goddesses and much more, is the approach that Dipesh Chakrabarty and Bruno Latour argue is needed in the Anthropocene, where collective human interference with planetary processes has grown out of control, unleashing unforeseen environmental forces and disrupting our worlds built around climatic patterns that now shift in unpredictable motions unbeholden to humanity (Chakrabarty 2009; Latour 2014). The novel coronavirus that emerged in 2019 is an obvious example of one such nonhuman agent that changed the course of history. Although humanity unleashed the virus, whether through laboratory or marketplace, it took on a life of its own and forced unprecedented reactions, including a full-scale pause in the global economy. Into this turmoil, Kali was likewise unleashed by a human medium, but took on a life of her own that even Dhammika Bandara could not control, unable to convince the crowds to stop showing up at his house. Assuming a radical plurality to agency dissolves staid frameworks of animate versus inanimate and subjects versus objects, and instead plunges us into "waves of action, which respect no borders." Latour posits these waves as the "true actors" shaping planetary life, representing "the interaction between a neighbor who is actively manipulating his neighbors and all the others who are manipulating the first one" (Latour 2017, 101). The manipulation that most Sri Lankan pundits claimed occurred in the case of Kali's COVID-19 cure was unidirectional—that of politicians deploying religion to distract the populace from their failure at contagion mitigation. These pundits thereby echoed generations of colonial, nationalist, and leftist historians in South Asia who interpreted prior popular goddess movements as consequences of chicanery, where "religion is seen as a political resource that is 'used' by unscrupulous leaders to manipulate the peasantry for their own selfish ends" (Hardiman 1997, 105). The political angle, however, is only one of many multidirectional manipulations at work in this case, especially when we understand Latour's use of the term "neighbor" to encompass the visible and invisible, the human and nonhuman (for example, Ligo 2019). There is, first and foremost, the continually mutating coronavirus, its manipulation of our cells, and its resultant manipulation of our societies. Meanwhile, a sequestered Sri Lankan public acted in what it considered its own best interest

13 Or.6615(202), in Kāriyavasam 1992, 31. The goddess is called Patra Kali Devi Amma here.

as neighbors mutually defied lockdown orders. These people were perhaps persuaded by politicos promoting panaceas, but they were also moved by the virus, the markets, and one another, as well as manipulated by Kali, a goddess with a transgenerational mythos who proved a bigger draw than any human endorsement.

Jumping to Conclusions

The drama of Kali's tonic cautions against jumping to a conclusion of political coercion by showing how such assumptions underestimate the public. The promotion of Dhammika Bandara may have initially begun as an attempt to manipulate attention away from government failures to control the pandemic by endorsing this magical savior of indigenous medicine, but the movement's sudden Kali connection quickly made it unpalatable to political elites. At that point, people began their own manipulations against government regulations, flouting lockdowns and seeking customary sources of healing under the authority of Kali, using the goddess as a type of counter discourse against state power. This movement was perhaps encouraged by the hypocrisy of political elites who demanded the public stay home but performed their own private pilgrimages. The whole affair also demonstrates their hypocrisy in terms of Kali, matching a pattern noted by anthropologists whereby controversial blood sacrifices for the goddess at her Hindu temple in Munnesvaram are decried and regulated by Buddhist politicians campaigning for their orthodox base, but are also secretly patronized by those same persons who enjoin the goddess for personal political gain (Bastin 2002, 67; Mahadev 2019, 142–44). Not even the demographics of those ostensibly interested in Kali can be taken at face value. Nothing about the goddess can be easily presumed, and others have likewise noted her ambiguity and contradictions in different contexts (for example, Gupta 2003). For this reason, the most sensible leap the present conclusion can make is to dive directly into Kali's ambiguity, for therein lies her subversive potential, showing the limits of conventional authority.

After the downfall of Dhammika Bandara, other religious rituals were performed in the early months of 2021 to combat the pandemic, including elaborate dancing and drumming rituals dedicated to the goddess Pattini. According to Premakumara De Silva, these were organized by "local level government officials, political authority, and media channels," with blessings directed to the entire nation rather than a specific village community as would have happened in the past (De Silva 2021). The most elaborate of these was organized and broadcast across a three-hour time slot by Hiru TV, one of the media outlets that previously promoted Bandara's tonic. Rather than the ad hoc nature of the tonic endorsements, however, the Pattini ritual was carefully planned and slickly executed, even including a studio panel of experts who continually weighed in as though they were commentators at a sporting match (Anonymous 2021d). Despite (or perhaps due to) all these official endorsements, the Pattini rituals did not garner nearly as much public

attention as the magical syrup saga. There were no waves of editorials, no crowds of devotees in the streets waiting to receive cures, nor any ambiguity over who was in control of the situation. Displaying conventional authority in this context, Pattini did not ignite the interest of the public at large.

Although customarily subordinated to Pattini in Sinhala Buddhist myth and ritual, Kali has increasingly carved out her own space in popular consciousness. Those dedicated to Kali include, as Neena Mahadev puts it, "people who are typically in dire social need (e.g., the subaltern)" (Mahadev 2019, 132). A recent collection of Sinhala ritual poetry for this goddess, sold near the more subaltern neighborhoods of Colombo, does mention her receiving warrant from Pattini to enter Sri Lanka, but Kali is otherwise not shown as subservient. Instead, an unfettered champion of her devotees' causes, Kali circumvents conventional hierarchies as a mediator of deific power, with lists of correct offerings and ritual steps detailed to encourage the goddess to grant her warrant directly to the practitioner (S. Ratnāyaka, n.d., 16, 23–25).[14] Under the influence of the goddess, supplications to realign the world more justly are stated plainly in this book, as in the invocatory verses sourced from a *kapurāla* of a Kali shrine in Warakapola, about twenty kilometers west of Kegalle, who calls on Kali to "destroy wicked people (*dudanan*), and lovingly protect good people (*sudanan*)... hear spoken sufferings, powerfully destroy the suffering of illness, and guard destitute people (*asaraṇa daṇan*)... attack the unjust with limitless strength and majesty, and mindfully protect the children of the destitute... and with the whole body beautifully entwined in snakes, heatedly tackle new unjust factions (*alut adamiṭu käla*)" (S. Ratnāyaka, n.d., 18–20). These calls for assistance are made on behalf of the downtrodden, those who are *asaraṇa* (without refuge), particularly vulnerable to the machinations of the unjust. As injustice continually assumes fresh forms, it often manifests in the very institutions meant to dispense justice, thereby driving people to the sorcerous alternatives of Kali (for example, Obeyesekere 1975). While political elites may vacillate between denouncing and dabbling in Kali rituals, the wider public maintains access to another side of the goddess' power, one that stares down unjust authority to try and make its spoken sufferings heard.

In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, the public displayed its dire social need through their devotion to the goddess and her tonic. Its branding as an indigenous medicine was doubtlessly also part of its appeal, but the persistent crowds outside Dhammika Bandara's home and shrine, especially after elite backers abandoned him for his Kali speech, shows the goddess also played a part in the panacea's popularity. Obtaining this divine aid required flouting worldly authorities by ignoring lockdown laws and thereby invoking the

14 I procured this book in 2016 from the M. D. Gunasena bookstore in the Pettah neighborhood of Colombo. Susara Publishers specializes in children's books, but also prints informative manuals about gods, goddesses, and magical spells, most of which are authored by Sudath Rathnayake (that is, Sudat Ratnāyaka in transliterated form, as cited above).

precedence of a higher power. Seeking correctives to the government's seemingly unjust handling of the pandemic, those citizens most in need thus turned to a goddess associated with ambiguous margins to re-center the world and secure themselves.

The story of COVID-19 and Kali also comes with an edifying epilogue. In the wake of the pandemic, Sri Lanka fell into a deep economic crisis and the public fully turned against Gotabaya and the rest of the Rajapaksa family for their woeful mismanagement of the country. As furious citizens stormed the presidential palace, Gotabaya fled the country on July 14, 2022, resigning from the presidency. In his increasing desperation leading up to that point, a priestess to a Kali shrine and the president's personal divine medium, Gnanawathi Jayasooriya of Anuradhapura, better known as "Gnana Akka," allegedly attempted to subdue the large encampment of protesters by distributing cursed water among them. After the story leaked, mobs turned against Gnana Akka, too, looting and burning her home and shrine on May 9, 2022, despite its heavy military guard. A devastated Gnana Akka thereafter gave newspaper interviews denying any political favors from the Rajapaksas and claiming that Kali, a goddess who visits her weekly, always promoted healing over harm (Hettiarachchi 2022). Yet lest we presume that Kali had switched sides to support political elites, causing the public to reject her, some claim Kali actually ushered in the Rajapaksas' defeat. A foe of the Rajapaksa family, Sandya Ekneligoda, wife of the assassinated journalist Prageeth Ekneligoda, having exhausted legal avenues to secure justice for her husband, turned to divine intervention. Aware of the Rajapaksas' belief in Kali and the occult, Sandya Ekneligoda sought to agitate them in their own religious terms. In late January 2022, at the Modara Sri Maha Badra Kali Amman Kovil, Ekneligoda shaved her head in a public show of devotion to the goddess. Using a traditional style of cursing known as *vas kavi*, or "poisonous poetry," Ekneligoda asked Kali "for the Rajapaksa family to be ridiculed and forced out by the people that once supported them. She asked the goddess to keep them in constant fear, to destroy their homes and bring an end to the rule of former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa. 'Show them what justice is,' she asked the fierce goddess" (Anonymous 2022). Before July's end, her wish came true, and yet another silenced subaltern found ways to make herself heard through Kali.

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