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The Carpenter-Prēta: An Eighteenth-Century Sinhala-Buddhist Folktale about Jesus

Abstract

A Sri Lankan folktale presenting Jesus as a delusory emanation of Māra is discussed here for its significance in understanding how Christianity was seen by the early-modern Sinhalese. By depicting Jesus as demonic and his teachings as inimical to Buddhism, Sri Lankans situated Christianity in the context of the cosmic rivalry between the Dhamma and the disordering forces of Māra. The Hindu background of certain motifs in the folktale is considered, as are its probable origins in the religiopolitical milieu of the eighteenth-century Kandyan kingdom and its relevance to later Buddhist revivalists. This study also questions empiricist approaches to Sri Lankan historiography, and proposes that folklore provides scholars with an invaluable supplement to Western documentary materials and the island's official chronicles when attempting to reconstruct the indigenous perception of European Christianity.

Key words: Buddhism and Christianity — *Jātaka* — Jesus — Māra — Milinda — *Rājāvaliya*

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UNTIL recently scholars have shown little interest in how the Sinhalese people perceived Christianity as that religion spread throughout their land following the first colonial intrusions of the early sixteenth century. Europeans, after all, whether hidalgos, merchants, or missionaries, figure only infrequently and ambiguously in the chronicles of an island otherwise endowed with a literature of immense historical value.[1] Mention of them is found in Sinhalese war-poems dating from the era of the early incursions, but these poems, composed in an idiom redolent of martial valor, tend to eulogize the heroic exploits of the island's warriors at the expense of historic credibility.[2]

Contemporary social scientists have contributed to this indifference by discussing the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Buddhist revival largely in terms of sociopolitical and economic theory; given their heavy emphasis on issues like intercaste competition and the formation of the Sinhalese petite bourgeoisie, it is hardly surprising that indigenous perceptions of Christianity have gone largely unstudied. Another obstacle was the supposed lack of material on the subject, which seemed to restrict discussion to the realm of mere conjecture.

Since the mid-1980s, however, a few scholars have been investigating the available materials, so that debate on the topic finally seems under way (e.g., ROBERTS 1989, 1991a, 1991b, 1991c). The present article discusses the implications of the *Tale of the Carpenter-Prēta*, an eighteenth-century folktale that represents Jesus and his teachings as the creations of Māra (the Buddhist deity of delusion and desire), thus providing interesting insights into the indigenous Sri Lankan perception of the Christian religion. Let us begin with a brief look at the historical background and a review of Roberts's analysis of the *Rājāvaliya*, a Sinhalese text that predates the *Tale of the Carpenter-Prēta* by approximately two centuries.

The Aggravation of Conscience

Emmanuel Morais, a Portuguese Jesuit writing from Colombo in 1552, expressed dismay at his inability to engage in discussion the Buddhist monks he often came across while traveling through the Sri Lankan countryside:

> None of these priests wants to meet me. When they go by the road, they get out of the road, if they can, till I have passed. I have already spoken with two of them, because they were not able to avoid me; but they did not want to tell me anything about their beliefs, nor answer any question. (Perniola 1989, 324; cf. 334)

Although there is little evidence of sustained interaction between the saṃgha and the Catholic missionaries in Sri Lanka at the time that Morais wrote (only several decades after the Portuguese missionaries first arrived), it should not be inferred that a collective impression of Christianity was not in the process of formation. It may have been that Morais was so assiduously avoided because of his purpose for being on the island: to convert the new king of Kōṭṭe, Dharmapāla (1551–97; baptized in 1557), whose territory had been targeted by Portugal for incorporation into its expanding overseas empire.

The convolutions of subsequent Sri Lankan history are too intricate to consider here in full, but since eighteenth-century developments in the relationship between Buddhism and Christianity gave rise to the sociopolitical and religious milieu that produced the *Tale of the Carpenter-Prēta*, let us review at least the main events of that period.

In the mid-eighteenth century, when the *Tale of the Carpenter-Prēta* was first recorded, a South Indian Nāyakkar king named Kīrti Śrī Rājasiṃha (r. 1747–82) reigned over Kandy in the central highlands. Dravidian influence was pervasive and Buddhism was at the nadir of its decline. One of Kīrti Śrī's predecessors, Narendra Siṃha (1707–39), tended to favor Catholicism and admired Jacome Gonçalves (1676–1742), a Goanese Oratorian of formidable linguistic prowess who was to play a large role in the subsequent tensions between Buddhism and Christianity. Gonçalves's evangelical activities on the southwest littoral included frequent debates with bhikkhus and the composition of Thomistic refutations of Buddhist theories of causality. In tract upon tract in mellifluous Sinhalese he drew distinctions between spirit, soul, and anima, thereby justifying meat consumption. Among these tracts were the *Ajñāna Aushadhaya* [Medicine for the ignorant, 1715], which Narendra Siṃha reportedly read at court (Perniola 1989, 258, 345), and

the *Mātara Pratyakṣaya* [The exposition at Mātara, 1733], based on a formal debate held in a Buddhist stronghold. His opponents were said in contemporary Catholic documents to have been so outraged by the *Ajñāna Aushadhaya* that they "determined to do away with the book and the author" (PERNIOLA 1989, 345).

The Catholic allegation seems not to have been overstated in view of the treatment that Gonçalves ultimately received: in 1742 he was interrogated and exiled by Narendra Siṃha's successor, Vijaya Rājasiṃha (1739–47), who succumbed to pressure from the Kandyan aristocracy and saṃgha.[3] Playing a crucial role in this upsurge of anti-Catholic sentiment was a monk to whom is also traced the first stirrings of the Buddhist revival that continued well into the latter half of the nineteenth century. This was Välivita Saranaṃkara (1698–1788), who led reform-minded *goyigama* monks in convening the Assembly of the Pious (*Silvat Samāgama*) during the reign of Narendra Siṃha and who succeeded in reforming the institution of ordination in 1753. Among the motivations for Välivita's various activities was the presence of Gonçalves in the Kandyan kingdom (MALALGODA 1976, 61); contemporary Catholic sources — although in this matter they cannot be entirely relied upon — paint a most unflattering picture of Välivita's role in the persecution of this priest (PERNIOLA 1983, 433, 494, 496).

One point about Välivita on which both Catholic and indigenous sources agree is that his activities included pressuring King Vijaya Rājasiṃha to enforce the Buddhist prohibition against the consumption of wine and meat. The Catholics in Kandy saw this as aimed in large part against themselves:

> [Välivita] called upon [Vijaya Rājasiṃha] to issue an edict . . . that in order to extirpate the vices and encourage the virtues taught by Budu [sic], no person should distill wine much less drink it; that all pigs and hens should be set free and that there should be no breeding of animals for food. This hypocritical *sangatar* is always an opponent of the Christian community, against which he plotted several times without success. (*Annual Report*, Ceylon Oratorian Mission, 1733–40, in PERNIOLA 1983, 311–12)

Whether Välivita's moral reforms were implemented in Vijaya Rājasiṃha's lifetime remains uncertain, but they certainly were when Kīrti Śrī Rājasiṃha ascended to the throne. No other monarch is considered to have been as avid as he in promoting abstinence, vegetarianism, and the protection of animals (MIRANDO 1985, 66–67). It must therefore

have been a blow to Välivita when Kīrti Śrī offered in 1760 to welcome the Oratorians back to Kandy, even if only to play the Catholics off against the Dutch, with whom he was then in open warfare (MALALGODA 1976, 35). It was in this context of turmoil that folktales such as the *Tale of the Carpenter-Prēta* arose. Articulated in an obliging Indian idiom, these stories provided graphic depictions of the abhorrent heresies and practices of the Christian party with whom the King was considering an alliance.

Meanwhile Gonçalves's memory continued to evoke quite a hue and cry long into the next century. Revivalists circulated rejoinders to his writings on *ola* (palm) leaves in the 1840s before they possessed their own printing presses; once they started publishing in the 1860s they filled their publications with serialized rebuttals of them. In 1883, when Mōhoṭṭivattē Guṇānanda (1823–1890), a revivalist stalwart and one of the new publishing moguls, was under investigation for his alleged role in fomenting a violent Buddhist-Catholic riot in the vicinity of his Colombo temple, his possible reasons for wanting to vent his rage against Catholicism were discussed by Hikkaduvē Sumaṃgala (1826–1911), another revivalist monk and the founder of today's Vidyodaya University. At the top of Sumaṃgala's list was lingering resentment toward Gonçalves and his anti-Buddhist writings (SOMARATNA 1991, 251). At least one Christian ghost was still very much alive in the Sinhalese Buddhist imagination of that era.[4]

THE "EATERS OF STONE, DRINKERS OF BLOOD" CONTROVERSY

In a series of conference papers and publications, anthropologist Michael ROBERTS has put forth a thesis — disingenuous to some — concerning a well-known passage in the *Rājāvaliya*, a sixteenth-century Sinhalese chronicle (1989, 1991a, 1991b, 1991c). Relying on the tools of philology and anthropology, Roberts claims to have derived from the text an indigenous Sri Lankan perspective on the Portuguese and their Catholic faith. These, he asserts, are characterized in the chronicle as demonically "disordering" forces that have been unleashed against the Dhamma (Buddhist law or teachings) by Māra, the Buddha's cosmic adversary. The *Rājāvaliya* uses associational logic and allegorical devices to unmask these forces in order that they might be controlled, claims Roberts, since in Sinhalese cosmology demonic powers are "dangerous" but "ultimately controllable" when understood for what they really are (1989, *passim*). The passage in question runs as follows:

> There is in our harbour in Colombo a race of people fair of skin and

> comely withal. They don jackets of iron and hats of iron; they rest not a minute in one place; they walk here and there; they eat hunks of stone and drink blood; they give two or three pieces of gold and silver for one fish or one lime; the report of their cannon is louder than thunder when it bursts upon the rock Yugandhara. Their cannon balls fly many a *gawwa* and shatter fortresses of granite. (GUNASEKARA 1954, 63)

Central to Roberts's analysis of the text are the "stones" and "blood" that the Portuguese "devour." The use of *devour* is important: the same verbal form (*sapākanava*), rendered as "eat" in Gunasekara's accepted translation, is used throughout the *Rājāvaliya* to refer only to the abhorrent masticatory habits of animals such as dogs, hyenas, lizards, and certain reptiles that swallow their prey whole. What the Portuguese (referred to in the *Rājāvaliya* by a pronoun used for mice, frogs, and Tamils) devoured so repugnantly was blood and *kudugal* (lit., "crumbled stone," a synonym for "meat" in archaic Sinhalese). In the Sinhalese imagination a craving for flesh and blood characterized demons or wandering ghosts (*prēta*); Roberts suggests that this particular flesh and blood may have referred to the sacramental bread and wine taken by the Portuguese Catholics during the Eucharistic rite.

Roberts's creative hermeneutical analysis is too elaborate to pursue in detail here, and the simplified outline above hardly does justice to its depth. The subsequent discussion, conducted in print primarily by one of Sri Lanka's most eminent historians, K. M. DE SILVA (1989, 1990a, 1990b, 1991), has nevertheless largely ignored its pivotal contention that the expressions "eaters of stone" and "drinkers of blood" are coded references to the abhorrent practices of Portuguese Catholic communicants. Instead, De Silva has targeted Roberts's comments on limes, one of the commodities for which the Portuguese were said to have paid outrageous prices, along with fish (consumed by Catholics in Ceylon, as elsewhere, on Fridays).

According to Roberts, limes symbolize vipers and demons in the Sinhalese imagination, as the odor of limes is disturbingly evocative of that associated with these diabolic creatures (limes are also used as an antidote against sorcery because of their homological properties). DE SILVA dismissed this symbolic interpretation as one of "surpassing whimsicality," claiming that the "common-sense view" of limes as a "prophylactic against scurvy" is sufficient to explain why the Portuguese bought them in such large quantities that local merchants gouged them for all they were worth (1990a). This elicited from Roberts several rejoin-

ders in defense of "sociological imagination," with Roberts claiming that a rigidly "empiricist historiography" cannot penetrate the Sinhalese consciousness of past eras (1991b).[5]

Now that the debate over the *Rājāvaliya* has sputtered to a stalemate, I would like to suggest, by drawing attention to one of the most intriguing Sinhalese texts to surface in modern times, that Roberts was moving in basically the right direction. I call this text the *Carpenter-Heretic-Grave-Prēta*, following the lead of the late Hugh Nevill, who early this century was among the first to recognize the significance of the tale (hereafter referred to more simply as the *Tale of the Carpenter-Prēta*). The value of this text — especially in view of the flap aroused by the ambiguities of the *Rājāvaliya* — is that little is left to the imagination, sociologically or otherwise, so that few can dispute the insights it provides on how Christianity was perceived in the southwest littoral and central highlands.

What follows constitutes only a preliminary report on the *Tale of the Carpenter-Prēta* and its discovery, transmission, story line, and probable function in the specific context of the encounter between Catholicism and Buddhism in eighteenth-century Sri Lanka. Since the arcane and archaic linguistic features of the tale have yet to be fully deciphered, its philological depth and related associational devices are still not completely known to us.[6]

Collected Tales of the Bäminiti Famine

The *Tale of the Carpenter-Prēta* is actually the last and most curious component in a string of three untitled tales that comprise a single disjointed but continuous palm-leaf manuscript of seventy-four folios. All three tales are loosely coordinated around the theme of *damana*, that is, the suppression of various detractors of the Buddha. The tales' existence was first mentioned by James D'Alwis (later spelled de Alwis; 1863, 120–23), a Protestant Christian of low-country *goyigama* extraction, revered today as a pioneer of the modern study of Sinhalese literature. By his own admission, D'Alwis was an avid collector of tales and fables.

Precisely how the *Tale of the Carpenter-Prēta* fell into D'Alwis's hands is unknown. It is reasonable to assume, however, that he chanced upon it in the private collection of an associate, the British Methodist missionary-scholar Daniel Gogerly (1798–1862), the first European to obtain palm-leaf copies of the entire Pali Tripitaka (in Matara during the 1830s). Robert Spence Hardy (1803–1868), Gogerly's colleague in mission and an outstanding Sinhalese scholar in his own right, states in his correspondence that upon Gogerly's death D'Alwis was granted access to

his collection of manuscripts, in safekeeping at the Wesleyan Mission House, Colombo. This was a rare privilege, considering that Gogerly's *ola*s were kept in a safe out of an almost paranoid anxiety that envious Buddhist revivalists were conniving to plunder its riches.

Gogerly was an inveterate polemicist, whose often-reprinted *Kristiyāni Prajñapti* [Christian institutes; first ed. 1848] was at the time of his death just beginning to arouse Buddhist ire in a new round of confrontation between the two religions. There is no doubt that Gogerly had in his possession as early as 1848 a fragment of the *Tale of the Carpenter-Prēta* as told by Bentara Atthadassī (?–1862), a monk of the Siyam Nikāya and a keen adversary of Gogerly. This fragment is contained in Bentara's *Bauddha Prajñapti*, a formidable response to the *Kristiyāni Prajñapti* written the same year as the latter work (and to which the post-1848 editions of Gogerly's *Kristiyāni Prajñapti* refer). We will return to the *Bauddha Prajñapti* below, but it is worth emphasizing here that the *Tale of the Carpenter-Prēta* first resurfaced in the context of a revivalist upsurge in Buddhist hostility towards Christianity. The Baddegama Debate of 1864, for instance, the first of five massive public forums in which representatives of the two traditions disputed doctrine with each other, was just then being organized.

Unfortunately, it cannot be ascertained whether D'Alwis had in his possession the entire matrix of *damana* tales for which the *Tale of the Carpenter-Prēta* forms a puzzling climax. This "little work," as he called it, describes how "Māra . . . sent our blessed Lord Jesus Christ into the world to set aside Buddhism, which was at that time captivating the minds and winning the affections of thousands in the East" (D'ALWIS 1863, 120). D'Alwis's extensive summary of the tale corresponds in exact detail to the contents of the sole surviving manuscript in the British Library, discussed below. But it adds the fact — especially significant because the extant manuscript is defective on this very point — that the colophon is dated 1762. This is what allows us to place the composition of the tale, or more likely its recording, in the reign of the above-mentioned Kīrti Śrī Rājasiṃha. Interestingly, the colophon also mentions that in Sinhalese the protagonist of the tale is known as the Heretic-Prēta (*Tirtthaka prētayā*), in Tamil as the Nazarene (*Naśaraniya*), and in "polished speech" (*gaura kathāven*) as Kṛṣṇa (*Kriśnāya*), the avatar of Viṣṇu.

Although D'Alwis announced his intention of translating the *Tale of the Carpenter-Prēta* into English for the benefit of the Colombo Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, I was unable to turn anything up in a search of its archives in 1991. Fortunately, sometime in the late nineteenth century a nearly identical manuscript — if not indeed the very one of

D'Alwis himself — came into the hands of a member of the Ceylon civil service. This civil servant was Hugh Nevill, an avid collector whose Sinhalese *ola*s now comprise the bulk of the British Library's collection. We are indebted to Nevill and his unnamed pundit for a thorough summary of the *Tale of the Carpenter-Prēta* and its two companion pieces. These Nevill characterized as "rather eclectic than heretical," their common goal being "to show how by the power of the Buddha, his religion has survived other philosophies and religions, invented fresh from the fertile mind of Maraya, the deceiver" (HN notes).

Despite Nevill's comment about the tales being more eclectic than heretical, he did in fact dwell at length on various deviations from Buddhist orthodoxy found within them. These suggested to him the possible influence of such traditions as Manichaeism, Jewish Cabalism, or South Indian Hinduism. Nevill even wondered whether the manuscript might be the revenant of an apocryphal Gospel.

It would be rash to dismiss Nevill's seemingly farfetched suggestions — Sri Lanka was located at the crossroads of the seafaring mercantile and religious traffic between the Levant and Asia, and was certainly subject to a variety of influences.[7] Of these, the Indian connection should be regarded as particularly likely; indeed, the colophon attributes the circulation of the three tales to a pair of Sinhalese monks who heard them recited in the northwest Indian city of Sāgala, then brought them to Sri Lanka in the wake of Sāgala's devastation during the legendary "brahmin-woman" famine (the *Bäminitisāya*).

Māra and Other Unholy Spirits

The two *Bäminitisāya* tales that precede the *Tale of the Carpenter-Prēta* are so obscure in plot as to defy coherent summarization, but let us introduce a few of their basic events and characters (some familiar in Buddhist literature, others decidedly new).

Consisting of several interwoven but loosely connected episodes, the initial tale begins in the world of the Brahmās, called the Ābhassara world. This in certain canonical sutras (e.g., the *Brahmajāla* and *Aggañña*) is where the heresy of an everlasting, all-powerful creator-deity is said to arise. Opening the episode is a panoramic vista of world creation (*lōkasaṃsthānaya*) following a full revolution of the aeons that is at once as biblical as it is Buddhist (or Hindu). As soon as the firmament is separated from the waters in a Genesis-like moment of cosmic coagulation, a being — identified as a Brahmā — bursts into existence upon the uninhabited earth. This being, reborn from the Ābhassara world, announces himself first as Īśvara (whose function in Hinduism is often

creation, or more precisely, presiding over the creative process) and later as Ispītu (from the Latin *spiritus*), the paramount deity who made the world and whom the world must therefore worship.

Ispītu's egotistical pretensions are rebuffed by the minor deities (*deva*) that successively populate "his" world. The *deva*s aver that because Ispītu is bewilderingly multiform, sometimes cavorting naked, intoxicated, smeared with ashes, or clad in a tiger's skin, sometimes dancing lasciviously, and sometimes riding a bull (all familiar guises and postures of the Hindu god Śiva), they cannot in good faith worship him as their creator. They appeal to one of the Great Brahmās (*Mahabambubōsat*), who responds to their pleas by kicking Ispītu on the shin, stamping on his right foot, and finally defeating him in a terrifying battle accompanied by thunder and lightning.

Conspicuous here by its absence is any attempt to explain why Ispītu came to regard himself as the creator-deity in the first place. This heresy is generally traced in the sutras to an inability to remember more than a certain number of one's previous existences, a failing which in turn leads to the arrogant assumption that one preexisted other beings and is thus supreme over them. The deluded Brahmā is prominently compared with Jehovah in virtually all Sri Lankan Buddhist critiques of Christianity up through the final phases of confrontation in the 1880s.[8] Although the Ispītu narrative omits such canonical technicalities, it nonetheless succeeds in what must have been its primary goal: the vilification of the Indianized Judeo-Christian God Ispītu as a vexatious and ominous being worthy only of ridicule and contempt. This the tale has done primarily by associating him with Śiva, a more familiar but no less baffling god from the Buddhist perspective.

Following an awkward transition in the text at this juncture, we meet the Buddha in a previous incarnation as the bodhisattva Atideva (a development that may qualify this portion of the tale as an apocryphal *jātaka*).[9] Here, as elsewhere in these tales, the introductory literary device is a dream. The dreamer is King Brahmadatta of Benares, who sees portents that his son, Prince Atideva, will become a great spiritual "conqueror" called Jaina-mahārsi. The prince later establishes himself in a hermitage on the bank of the Nerañjarā River, and, having attained sagehood, is belligerently approached by Mārakanda (alternately Mārkandeya), an emanation (*svapna-avatāraya*) of Māra, the Great Deluder. Failing in his attempt to undermine Jaina-mahārsi's insights into the nature of reality, Mārakanda turns to Īśvara-Ispītu of the previous episode, instructing him to gain the advantage by kicking over a golden goblet in which Sarasvatī, the goddess of learning, is concealed and from

which she whispers advice to Jaina-mahārsi (a motif of Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist provenance found in tales of debates and conversions [GRANOFF 1985, 466]). This is done, and Jaina-mahārsi, now bereft of Sarasvatī's supernatural aid, flees to a new hermitage on the Aciravatī River. The emboldened Mārakanda then plunders the sage's library and dupes unwitting victims into believing that eating flesh and drinking intoxicants will not hinder their salvation. Whether Mārakanda is finally vanquished is left oddly uncertain, although his defeat may be inferred. The last we hear, Jaina-mahārsi has come under the protection of the same Great Brahmā who in the previous episode triumphed so resoundingly over Īśvara-Ispītu.

Any remaining doubt as to the ability of the Buddha and his ally Mahā Brahmā to quell their adversaries is removed in the concluding episode, which relates the story of the suppression of Baka Brahmā (*Bagabambu*). This episode also revolves around the heresy of a self-deceived being of the Ābhassara world who is spurred by the tempter Māra into a humiliating confrontation with the Buddha. I will not recount the story here, as it follows such canonical and extra-canonical models as the *Brahmanimantika Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* and the "Brahmādamana" [Suppression of the Brahmās] chapter of the thirteenth-century Sinhalese poet Gurulugōmī's *Amāvatura*. A curious innovation, however, is that Baka declares himself to be "Issantu" (from Latin *sanctus*), just as Īśvara announced himself as Ispītu. We are thus left with a cast of unholy characters that bifurcates the Holy Spirit, possibly because of a misunderstanding of the benedictory formula, recited — in Sri Lanka as everywhere in Catholic mission fields — in Latin.

The two tales above are least intelligible where they attribute to Īśvara-Ispītu-Issantu a religion (*bhāvaya*; lit., "condition") that propagates the doctrine of a "pure god" (*śuddha devi* [God the Father?]). This and other heresies are explicitly attributed to the conniving Māra, who is said to take advantage of the decline in the Dhamma that occurs between the appearances of the Buddhas to dispatch into the world delusory emanations (the *Vasavarttimārayas*) that lead the hapless astray. All, then, that is lacking to complete this Trinity of the Great Deceiver is the Son of God, Jesus. To his tale we now turn.

THE ADAMANTINE GRAVE

The *Tale of the Carpenter-Prēta* can in many ways be regarded as an apocryphal counterpart to the *Milinda-pañha* [The questions of King Milinda; *Mihingu-targaya* in Sinhalese], a well-known noncanonical

Buddhist text from the second century in which Milinda, a Bactrian Greek king, questions the learned monk Nāgasena about important points in the Buddhist teaching. Milinda appears in the *Tale of the Carpenter-Prēta* as the Herod of the Gospels recast in the role of an insistent interrogator and poser of puzzles (*praśna*). Even Nāgasena, Milinda's wily respondent, makes an appearance.[10]

The preamble of the *Tale of the Carpenter-Prēta* is set in the *deva*-world, where both Milinda and Nāgasena are living at the time. Milinda is approached by an emanation of Māra, who plies him with riddles. The emanation has underestimated his opponent's skill, however, and loses to him all the worlds over which he had presided. Swollen with pride, Milinda in turn forfeits his hard-won booty to Nāgasena, who answers all the conundrums the former king concocts in a desperate effort to stump him.

Thus is kindled an enmity between the two that will have an impact upon Buddhism in its homeland of Jambudvīpa (India). Milinda vows to seek rebirth among the *yona* (i.e., *yavana*, from "Ionia," alluding to Milinda's Bactrian-Greek ethnicity). This is a people the text explicitly declares to be devoid of religious sensibilities. In this future existence Milinda attempts to rid the earth of Nāgasena's hateful religion. Milinda summons from sixty-three non-*yona* religions certain *ilambavaru* (a curious term of unknown origin; Nevill suggests "illuminati"). These *ilambavaru* easily succumb to his riddles and are imprisoned in hell, the gates of which are bolted by the king himself. Milinda's victory is Pyrrhic, however: the *ilambavaru* are in fact not Buddhists at all but rather the sixty-three emanations of Māra that had theretofore kept the world in the thrall of illusion. This he comes to realize only gradually, as a plot hatched against him by an outraged Māra unfolds. In short, while the dominant theme is the sustained and mutual antipathy between Milinda and Māra, the two are in fact united in a common contempt for Buddhism.

Although with such powerful enemies the Dhamma would seem doomed, it is, to the contrary, in a flourishing state, with the spellbinding and delusory doctrines of Māra's sixty-three emanations effectively under Milinda's enforced constraint. Infuriated, Māra resolves to dispatch to Jambudvīpa his *deva*-world emanation — earlier defeated by Milinda in the riddle contest — for a last-ditch attempt to counter the progress of the Dhamma. This emanation is to become the Carpenter-Prēta.

Māra's emanation is conceived in the womb of an outcaste carpenter girl (*candāla vadukaruduva*) in Milinda's capital, Sāgal. Thereupon the king and his chief minister have ominous visions, both dreaming of four

black men dressed in black robes and black demon hats who are carrying a black palanquin in a solemn procession around the city walls. After the procession circumambulates the entire city, the man being carried inside emerges and becomes a crow that flies over the palace. Unable to alight, the sinister bird falls, mortally stricken, onto the city's execution ground.

Skilled though he is in riddles, Milinda is unable to comprehend this dream without the help of the chief minister, who, as a *purohita* brahmin, is steeped in both statecraft and religious lore. The minister in his interpretation tells of Māra's emanation having been conceived in the womb of the outcaste carpenter girl, and forecasts that it will one day attempt, unsuccessfully, to overthrow Milinda.

Reassured but nonetheless disturbed, Milinda takes measures to defend his kingdom, including the massacre of all women who had become pregnant within the previous eight months. While such mothers' bellies were being ripped open and their children torn from their wombs, the outcaste carpenter girl escapes through a drain and tries to take refuge in the workroom of her kinsman, the royal carpenter. Driven off, she has nowhere else to deliver her baby than on a rubbish heap behind the king's stables. The next day, disguised as a grass cutter, she manages to slip out of Sāgal with her son tucked into a bundle on her head. This is the tale's Jesus; his genealogy explains why he is called the Carpenter.

Meanwhile, Nāgasena is also reborn in Sāgal to protect Buddhism from Milinda's machinations. Milinda finally has the saṃgha in his clutches: forty thousand monks, well versed in the Dhamma but not in riddles, have succumbed to his puzzles and are occupied for months attempting to solve them (forty-seven are tediously unraveled). At this time a citizen who has been to Portugal (*Purdukāla*) returns with secret information about a ruffian living in the forests of that country, a reprobate who drinks liquor, eats flesh, and calls himself a god. These violations of Buddhist ethics and orthodoxy by the ruffian — the carpenter girl's son — explain why Jesus is called a heretic.

Breaking off the contest, Milinda summons his vassal, the king of Portugal, to account for the disturbances breaking out in his faraway realm, where the ruffian is propagating the false doctrine that animals have no souls and may therefore be eaten. The petty monarch insists that he knows nothing of the new doctrine, but, when pressed by Nāgasena, admits that as a devout Buddhist [*sic*!] he too is troubled and will soon restore order. The miscreant and twelve of his companions are thereupon chased out of Portugal. Wandering from country to country, they gradually approach Sāgal from the southeast, with the twelve companions proclaiming as they travel the divine nature of their master.

Finally reaching Milinda's realm, the Carpenter-Heretic and his cronies hide themselves in the royal forest. There they make robes of black cloth outfitted with the wings of black fowls. These allow them to fly through the night sky disguised as *rahat*s (*arahant*s; here signifying Buddhist demigods endowed with supernatural powers), terrorizing the villagers and stealing their cattle.

The outraged citizens appeal to Milinda, who places a bounty on the carpenter's head. This proves tempting enough for a disgruntled member of the gang to betray his master, who is then arrested, interrogated, scourged, bedecked with red flowers, and sentenced. Execution is carried out by nailing his hands and feet to a gibbet, as his sobbing mother looks on from the midst of a throng of bystanders.

After hanging there for three days, the mutilated corpse is buried in a grave eight cubits deep. This is filled with heaps of quartz and dirt, packed hard by elephants, covered with an immense slab of rock, and finally topped with yet more stones. These precautions are nonetheless insufficient to deter Māra from plotting further mischief. Arriving at the grave in the dark of night with four of the carpenter's rogues in their black feathered robes, Māra cries out in the Carpenter-Heretic's voice, "It is I who am born from the grave of the dead!" The four false *rahat*s — two standing upon the shoulders of the other two — then fly off into the west through the forest, shrieking, "Here our *deva* was buried, from the dead he has risen, and he is going to the *divyaloka* [heaven] on our backs" [HN notes].

The packing of the Carpenter-Heretic into his grave with adamantine rubble was expressly designed to prevent any possibility of his ever physically rising again. This is why he is called the Grave-Prēta: the only sense in which Jesus can be seen to have survived is in the form of a ghost or goblin (*prēta*) whose decomposing corpse is securely buried underground.

This, then, is essentially a Sinhalese Buddhist ghost-story (*prēta kathā*). The story line involving Milinda is left dangling, although there is no doubt that the Dhamma will prevail despite the king's malice and the deceptions of the Great Deceiver Māra.

The Horripilating, the Ludic, and the Memorable

In view of the fact that the *Tale of the Carpenter-Prēta* is as sectarian in orientation as it is syncretistic, I would disagree with Nevill's rather dismissive characterization of the story as "eclectic" (I set aside altogether the question of whether it should be labeled "heretical"). If by "eclectic" Nevill meant "incoherent" or "lacking in coordinating prin-

ciples," it may have been because he treated the manuscript as a document to be read rather than a folktale (*jana kathā*) to be recited and heard. A performative function would more satisfactorily account for the numerous disjunctions that frustrated his attempt to decipher the text. Such lacunas would have enabled a narrator to improvise by adding individualized embellishments. Moreover, since long stretches of the text are written in a variety of syncopated linguistic gobbledygook,[11] interspersed with an occasional word of Tamil, Portuguese, and even Latin (like Ispītu and Issantu, above), the intended effect appears to have been aural exoticism.

The *Tale of the Carpenter-Prēta* and its companion tales are highly idiosyncratic, if not eclectic in a disparaging sense, but a number of the apparently exotic elements can nevertheless be traced to indigenous sources. The portrayal of the Carpenter-Prēta as a brigand, for instance, might suggest the use of Barabbas as a model; a more likely candidate, however, is an outcaste (*candāla*) bandit named Brāhmanatissa, who in several Pali and Sinhalese accounts of the Bäminiti Famine takes advantage of the chaos to terrorize the population and destroy abandoned Buddhist monasteries (MALALASEKERA 1974 vol. 2, 342). I suggest a similar native origin for the scenario in which Milinda incarcerates Māra's emissaries in hell, Buddhism flourishes, and the Carpenter-Prēta is consequently dispatched to earth. This, I believe, derives from a pan-Indian motif — especially prominent in Tamil mythology — in which heaven becomes overcrowded and hell must be unbolted to restore the cosmic balance (SHULMAN 1980, 20–21). This is not to deny, however, that the *Tale of the Carpenter-Prēta* is in essential accord with the ethical principles of its intended audience, particularly the latter's abhorrence of liquor and respect for vegetarianism.

While drawing upon a common matrix of Hindu-Buddhist mythology and folklore, the *Tale of the Carpenter-Prēta* obviously co-opted certain key elements from Christianity in a process of adversarial syncretism, as if to substantiate a claim that the Gospel accounts of Jesus are false. Although it is not a *damana* tale like the other Bäminiti stories, and although neither the Buddha nor his ally Mahā Brahmā appears in it, the *Tale of the Carpenter-Prēta* is nevertheless held together by a relentless exposure of Māra's chicanery.

If, with this as a basis, we symptomatically reconstruct the indigenous Sri Lankan view of Christianity, we see first that it presents this-worldly evil as emerging from the margins (e.g., from the Ābhassara world or distant Portugal) against the backdrop of a personalized and transcendent malevolence (e.g., Māra versus Milinda, with both in oppo-

sition to the Dhamma). This threat from the outside is, moreover, subject to control through knowledge: the evildoers, however hair-raising their deeds may be, are after all ridiculous once they have been seen for what they really are (e.g., false *rahat*s who can fly only because they are clever enough to strap wings to their arms). And, finally, we can infer that the indigenous view is thoroughly Buddhistic in orientation, disinclined as it is to accept Christianity's supernatural claims. Idiosyncrasies aside, the *Tale of the Carpenter-Prēta* is an affirmation of cool-headed, if not actually empirical, rationality operating within a milieu that nevertheless did not exclude the transrational. The false *rahat*s in black cassocks were, after all, intended to evoke in the audience's imagination the image of Catholic missionaries stalking the island at Māra's behest in search of unwitting converts.

If from a contemporary perspective the *Tale of the Carpenter-Prēta* seems a story of — to borrow de Silva's phrase — surpassing whimsicality, there is evidence that it was still taken seriously in mid-nineteenth-century circles of outstanding Buddhist intellectuals and nationally revered revivalists.

One of these was the above-mentioned Bentara Atthadassī, a *goyigama* monk who in 1855 defied the Kandyan ecclesiastical authorities by granting *upasampadā* (higher ordination) to his fellow low-country *goyigama*. This intrepid and brilliant monk was the pupil of Karatoṭa Dhammārāma (1737–1827), who was chief monk (*saṃgharāja*) of the southwest littoral at Mulgirigala[12] and who had been a newly ordained monk when the Bäminiti-Famine tales were recorded on palm leaves in 1762. As noted above, Bentara's *Bauddha Prajñapti* contained in the midst of its subtle and sophisticated argument a fragment of the *Tale of the Carpenter-Prēta*; this fragment is identical to the section in the outline above from the point of Jesus's burial to the flight of the shrieking *rahat*s on their fake wings.[13]

Another believer may have been the revivalist Mōhoṭṭivattē Guṇānanda, also mentioned above. Guṇānanda, a maverick Amarapura monk (actually defrocked and only a *śrāmaṇera*), was the chief debater at several public forums of the 1860s and 1870s, including the one at Pānadurē where (as the Buddhists see it) Christianity was decisively defeated. Although I can find no evidence that Guṇānanda actually knew of the *Tale of the Carpenter-Prēta*, he was the best informed of all the revivalists about Sinhalese folklore (he practiced Ayurvedic medicine and alchemy as well). To him Jehovah was indeed a *prēta*. As proof he cited, in the first number (1862) of his short-lived pamphlet series *Durlabdhi Vinodaniya*,[14] the burnt offerings mentioned in Leviticus 1: 10–12 —

surely, he wrote, only a *prēta* would enjoy eating the head and suet of a ram or goat. In a subsequent tract of the same series Guṇānanda wildly declared that the sacred name Yahweh in Hebrew was in fact identical to the name of a "Hindoo demon." And finally, in 1873 his press in Kotahena (Colombo) issued a booklet entitled *Vedasaṃgrahāya* [Compendium of the Veda] that claimed the *prēta*-like *yakkha*s — mentioned in one of the island's foundation myths as inhabiting Sri Lanka at the time of Prince Vijaya's landing — were in fact Christians. In an amazingly skewed misunderstanding of basic chronology and geography, the booklet (which may or may not have been written by Guṇānanda himself) declares that the *yakka*s converted after one of their number returned to Sri Lanka from Arabia.[15]

We thus possess evidence that in certain circles of monks an explicit tradition of Carpenter-Prēta tales circulated from at least 1762 until at least 1848, and that in other circles Christians were associated with *prēta*s. Hence Roberts's claim that the perception of Christians in the Sinhalese imagination as "eaters of stone, drinkers of blood" was "sustained in subsequent centuries by the poetical and prose works of the Sinhalese literati as well as oral traditions" (ROBERTS et al. 1989, 71), appears well founded indeed.

NOTES

1. For a brief review of references to Europeans in the early indigenous literature, see ROBERTS 1993, 145–47.

2. The *hatana kāvya* (war-poem) genre has been characterized by C.R. DE SILVA (1983, 16) as "anti-Portuguese" and "anti-Christian." These poems have achieved a certain prominence in post-independence Sri Lanka, where historiographers in the service of nationalistic ideologies have painstakingly ransacked the past for evidence of resistance to foreign hegemony.

3. Narendra Siṃha often staged debates in his court between Hindus and Buddhists. On several occasions (1712, 1714) Gonçalves engaged a French Protestant, Nanclairs de La Nerolle, in a theological controversy on the propriety of images (PERNIOLA 1983, 2–7, 39–41, 336–42).

4. I have in my collection two *ola*s from this period critiquing Gonçalves's *Ajñāna Aushadhaya*, one, dated 1848, by a Buddhist layman from Dondanduwa and the other, dated 1857, by a monk of the Siyam Nikāya at Ahangama. Both places are on the southwest littoral. Mōhoṭṭivattē Guṇānanda published a series of short-lived periodicals, many of which contained attacks on Gonçalves. I have nearly complete runs for *Satya Mārgaya*, which came out in the mid-1860s, and *Rivirāsa*, which came out in the late 1880s, shortly before Guṇānanda's death. *Satya Mārgaya* serialized an attack on Gonçalves that ran for twenty-three consecutive issues, while *Rivirāsa* continued in the same vein even after a bloody Buddhist-Catholic riot in 1883 (see the 18 April 1888 issue). It should be noted, however, that Catholic presses reprinted *Ajñāna Aushadhaya* in 1848 and continue even today to bring out occasional cheap editions. While the confrontational phase of the Buddhist revival is widely presumed to have been precipitated by Protestant missionaries, my

evidence suggests an earlier phase of hostility toward Catholicism and a sustained undercurrent of opposition due to the latter's rapid growth.

5. Roberts's perspective on the *Rājāvaliya* is articulated at length in ROBERTS 1989, 2–21. There the discussion is integrated into his overall concern, the perception of Sri Lankan Burghers in the Sinhalese imagination.

6. A full translation of the *Tale of the Carpenter-Prēta* is nearly complete, the result of a collaborative effort between G.S.B. Senanayaka, Aloysius Pieris, S.J., and myself. I would like to thank G.P.V. Somaratna for his assistance in this research at an earlier stage. The discussion here is based in part on the following: 1) the single manuscript known to exist, Or. 6603(43), in the Hugh Nevill collection at the British Library; 2) the accession entry of K. D. SOMADASA (1987, vol. 2, 62–67), keeper of the Nevill manuscripts; and 3) Hugh Nevill's own handwritten notes (hereafter HN notes) in the unpublished British Library catalogue to his collection.

7. The *Sirasākumārajātaka*, a twelfth- or thirteenth-century apocryphal *jātaka* (a tale of the Buddha's previous lives) of Thai, Cambodian, and Lao provenance, is another example of exotic influences. It tells of an infant bodhisattva who, accompanied by his mother, is driven into exile and eventually lifted up bodily into heaven. These and other features, unprecedented in a *jātaka*, suggest a biblical prototype (the flight into Egypt and the ascension, etc.). Where this influence originated from and the medium of its transmission are, to say the least, highly obscure. The possibility of Manichaean or Nestorian influence cannot be discounted. The possibility of such influences was first introduced at the Reiyūkai Institute of Buddhist Studies (Tokyo) during a presentation in 1993 by Padmanabh S. Jaini. A translation of this *jātaka* by JAINI is available (1986, 122–44).

8. For a detailed discussion on the basis of an *ola* dated 1846, see YOUNG 1984.

9. On the Buddha's former birth as Atideva, see MALALASEKERA 1974, vol. 1, 52.

10. On the *Mihingu-targaya* manuscript tradition in Sinhalese, see SOMADASA 1987, vol. 2, 288–91.

11. For example, the full name of the *Īśvara* of the first Bäminiti-Famine tale, written in a peculiar orthography, rolls off the tongue something like *Go-ankura-pitisi-sinnoru-sarppa-kataka-hara-wenu-tantri-gita-nataka-wata-donta-deti-a-i Īśvara* (HN notes).

12. Noteworthy in this regard is that Karatoṭa's relations with Europeans were highly congenial and that his familiarity with Christianity was considerable. See MALALGODA 1976, 82–85, for details on his service to the Dutch and British, who kept him on stipend as an advisor on Buddhist affairs. For his answers to Dutch inquiries about Buddhist doctrines, see UPHAM 1833, vol. 3, 3–6. As early as 1766, during the governorship of Iman Willem Falck (1765–85), the monks of Mulgirigala, where Karatoṭa resided, were engaged in explicating, at Dutch behest, Buddhist doctrines vis-à-vis those of Christianity (on, among other things, creation and salvation). The Nevill Collection includes a 1770 *ola*, Or. 6603(65), on these subjects, the *Buddhāgama gäna praśna visarjanayak* by a Mulgirigala monk, a contemporary of Karatoṭa. Nevill categorizes this manuscript as controversial (*āgam vādaya*), although its tone is mild and its approach informative rather than overtly polemical (SOMADASA 1987, vol. 2, 96–97). For an English translation, UPHAM (1833, vol. 3, 96–97) is recommended despite inaccuracies.

13. The only copy of the *Bauddha Prajñapti* I know of, after searching libraries in Sri Lanka and abroad, is my own, copied from a manuscript of the *Rāmañña Nikāya* belonging to a temple.

14. Copies of *Durlabdhi Vinodaniya* are exceedingly rare, and some issues no longer exist. Both of my references come from contemporary translations (for which no originals can be found) in documents of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society Archives (School of Oriental and African Studies, London). The first is no. 237, 15 May 1862, John Nicholson, Colpetty (Colombo); and the second is no. 239, 30 July 1862, George Baugh, Colombo. For my copy of *Vedasaṃgrahāya*, published by Guṇānanda's Sarvajña Śāsanābhivriddhidāyaka Press, I am grateful to the Ven. D. Dharmasena, chief monk of

Kumāra Mahā Vihāra, Dodanduwa.

15. Subtitled in English "For Expelling Heresy: Protestant Christian Friend, 'Is Jehovah God?'"

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