



## ADIVASI LANKA'S ECOLOGY OF MIND LIVING TRADITIONS OF ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

PATRICK HARRIGAN

Long before words like 'environment' or 'ecology' came into vogue among Western scientists, the **adivasis** or 'original inhabitants' of ancient Lanka were already keenly aware of the importance of human activities in the maintenance of life on earth. Even today, much of their practical wisdom still survives in the form of agricultural rituals, rites of passage, ritual theatre, and a vast array of songs, poems, legends and lullabies which every villager could experience and remember from childhood.

In recognition of the enormous unsung contribution of the island's indigenous people in preserving the fertility of their tropical habitat over many thousands of years, the Ministry of Environment and Parliamentary Affairs has designated its forthcoming Second National Environmental Exhibition as '**Adivasi Lanka**'. For six days in March, 1994, the grounds of the National Museum in Colombo will host an extraordinary assemblage of indigenous Sri Lankans, from the forest-dwelling Wannial aeto people and traditional Goyigama farmers to the hereditary performers of the

Rodiya, Kinnaraya and gypsy communities. All share a common heritage of love and respect for the earth.

Environmental education in village Lanka is a serious, lifelong undertaking, but this has never prevented indigenous people from devising effective ritual performances that are also highly entertaining to observers and participants alike. Accordingly, **Adivasi Lanka** turns to the island's close-knit traditional societies as the repositories of deep ecological wisdom preserved in the guise of their living, oral and performative traditions.

At **Adivasi Lanka**, visitors will have the chance to rub shoulders with forest-dwelling Wanniyal-qeato, marvel at the aesthetic elegance of the **Komba-Kankariya** ritual dance tradition dating from the prehistoric Ravana Dynasty, and ponder the inner significance of ritual performances that have long been used to maintain the balance of society and the living environment of which human society is a small but central part. The sheer diversity of Adivasi Lanka's

heritage of ritual performance is surely this island's greatest renewable resource, for the more we draw from its wisdom, the richer we become.

In the cultural diversity of Adivasi Lanka are found the keys to the secret of its renewability and sustainability down the ages. Among the selection of ritual performances that will grace the occasion of the Second National Environmental Exhibition, noteworthy representatives include:

**DIYA KORAHA** or **DENA PIDENIYA** is a ritual offering of water (diya) representing the milk of Mother Earth who is here portrayed as Queen Kuveni, the matriarchal spirit of the Yaksha Gotra from whom indigenous people of Sri Lanka claim matrilineal descent. Goyigama villagers of lhalgama still celebrate their common heritage as children sprung from Mother Lanka in this ritual, renewing their ancient pledge to love and protect the living environment that was entrusted to them.

**KIRI KORAHA**, as it is still practised by Sri Lanka's Wanniyaleato (Vedda) communities of Dambana, Henanigala and elsewhere, invokes Mother Kuveni and other great ancestral spirits to partake of the 'milk' (kin) of animal offerings in the form of blood. It reminds forest dwelling hunter-folks that for life to continue, there must also be death so that others may live. While forest-dwellers offer blood as the milk of mother Earth, their cousins who made chena-clearings to grow their food offer water as their lifeblood or Mother's milk. These two rites graphically illustrate the common ancestral heritage of puranagama farmers and forest-dwellers as the indigenous wardens and guardians of island Lanka's interior heartland, the Wannu.

**KADAWARA BALIYA** is a night-long celebration depicting Mahasammata ('consensus') as the ideal king and Rajakariya as the ideal basis for delegating social responsibilities. It fulfils a mediating function between hunting and agriculture through the substitution of plant products in place of a sacrificial pig. In dividing the sacrifice and dividing the work it illustrates the common sense underlying traditional Rajakariya system of sharing resources and sharing responsibilities on an islandwide scale. Villagers of Eliyawa and Danakitawa still practice this symbolic sacrifice to a clay Bali-image of the Kadawara Deviya.

**MAYAM** trance ritual survives even today in many villages like Warawewa in Galgamuwa as an indigenous form of personal crisis management that recognizes 64 separate mayamas or psychological devices which manifest during periods of stress such as adolescence or times of social turmoil. It involves drumming and the recitation of kavi (verses) to and from the devas or spirits involved in any given case through a trance-medium.

**KOHOMBA KANKARIYA**, the archaic ritual dance-drama believed to originate from the Ravana Dynasty, is still preserved by authentic teachers of the Kandyan dance tradition, as at Alauwa. This elaborate, nightlong ritual dance-drama relates the magical encounter of a king and a powerful spirit in the guise of a boar in order to ritually ensure the peace and harmony of both king and kingdom.

Fundamentally, it is a ritual enactment of the story of rice kingdom. Fundamentally, it is a ritual enactment of the story of rice seeds as the staff of life. As such, Kohomba Kankariya is recognized as a rich source of living information on sustainable survival employed by Sri Lanka's indigenous people over the course of many centuries.

**PAL RAKIMA** is another night-time ritual conducted by cultivators who must remain awake and alert as they sit high above the ground in their 'pal' tree-huts guarding their fields against marauding animals of the forest. To do so, they engage in ritual dialogue, reciting verses (Kavi) in the 'twilight language' of multiple meanings with frequent allusions to fertility of the land and its inhabitants. Astute listeners may capture a glimpse into the subtle depths of this time-honoured tradition as it is still practised by villagers of Meewewa.

**KAMATHA**, the circular threshing floor, also serves as the stage for ritual performances. While traditional villagers drive buffalo or cattle around the threshing floor to separate the rice grains from the straw, they also sing or recite verses set in the peculiar language of the Kamatha which, although it is completely from everyday language, nevertheless it is still used and understood by villagers in diverse parts of the island. Thus, even as they go about their work, Puranagama villagers still cultivate their ancestral heritage.

**DEVALE** rituals, although familiar islandwide to this day, nevertheless originate from remote times. In this regard, Kataragama occupies a special position as the sole indigenous deity or spirit common to the Sinhala, Tamil and Vedda communities alike. Puja or congregational worship is often accompanied by bhajana or songs praising the exploits of this powerful guardian spirit of the South. Kavadi is the ancient tradition of ritually offering oneself to serve as the dancing peacock vehicle of the playfully mysterious spirit of Kataragama, as in older days the kavadi procession ritual is performed to the accompaniment of an ambient body of musicians.

**RATNAVALI PUJA** is the unique inheritance of the Rodiya community who are entitled by royal decree to engage in ritual entertainment on a professional basis. Although considered as social outcasts, they still harbour many men and women who are masters of Kavi or ex tempore free verse. In Ratnavali Puja, they display extraordinary skill in spinning brass bowls upon one finger even as they sing verses in chorus.

**AIKUNTAKAYA** community members, or gypsies as they are generally called, still preserve traits and livelihoods dating from antiquity. True itinerants even up to the present day, they are known as consummate snake-charmers, palmists, and astrologers, all ancestral livelihoods which involve the transmission of vocational secrets.

**KINNARAYA** or the traditional community of mat weavers, are known not only as weavers of straw but also as talented weavers of Kavi or verse. Members of the Kinnaraya community still endeavour to preserve their ancestral traditions in remote villages of the Wannu region; hence this is a rare opportunity for the public to witness authentic rituals preserved only by this community.