

The Tank and its Magic

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Water, in folk belief, is charged with magic and thus the tank, which stores a huge body of water, is enveloped in magic and mystery. For the village folk, there is no magic which defies his vision here; magic is just another way of expressing their view of reality.

The god who presides over the tanks is called *Aiya-na:yaka* in Sinhala and *Aiyanar* in Tamil. He is thus a god shared by both the Sinhalese and the Tamils. Parker notes that he is called '*Keiyanar*' in South India, denoting 'the one who has been born from the hand', (24.148), for the Hindus believe that *Aiyanar* was born from the right hand of God *Vishnu*.

"According to a Sinhalese tradition *Ayiyanar* came to Ceylon from Madura. His name seems to show that his place of origin was in a Dravidian country. The honorific title *Nayanar*, 'the *Nayar*' appears to indicate that he was originally a deity of the *Nayars*. If so, he was an early South Indian god and his high position as the special Forest Deity of Ceylon may be due to his introduction by the early Nagas. If he was not original it is unlikely that he would be thought so important in the forests of Ceylon. The story of his wonderful birth must be a later invention in order to bring him into the Hindu pantheon" (24.149)



It was also noted earlier that *Mafia Sen Deiyo* or *Mi-nne:ri Deito*, an incarnation of King Mahasena, the builder of tanks, was invoked to protect the tanks.

In certain other regions of the dry zone, the god who protects agricultural settlements is known as *Pulleyar*, a name that suggests Tamil origins. Some maintain that *Pulleyar* is another name for *Aiyanar*.

However, in addressing gods, lay-priests recite certain verses known as *koamura*. In the *ko:lmura*, the birth of these gods and their powers are narrated in detail. A *ho:lmora* verse in honour of *Aiyanar* runs thus:

*Nalla karapu me:vara vata hendu kaduva gena suratata golla maedata vadina kalata valli
aeta eyilu langata bella vatata gaja mini baenda aetu pita sellam gamanata nalla ruvata bala
paeye ayyana surindun melovata*

Taking in his right hand the goad-sword, beautifully ornamented,
He comes amidst the people - the tusker-elephant comes to him,
With jingling bells around its neck, the elephant is ready for a joy-ride,
The beautiful god Aiyanar showed his powers to this world

Pulleyar is addressed thus:

*Ganga:ve jala yata kimidenne oluva naetuva ek
saenen upanne aet mu:nak evelema
maevenne pulleya:re devi yahana vadinne*
Diving under the waters of the river
Was born in a moment, without a head,
An elephant's head, in its place, was created May god Pulleyar come to the flower-altar!



In every tank-village, there was a sacred spot, usually under a large, spreading nuga (banyan: *ficus indica*) tree, where the villagers made their offerings to these gods. In folk idiom, this spot was called the *sanhinda*. At twilight, a lamp will be lit in honour of these gods, requesting them to protect the tank and the village.

The lay-priest who officiated at the rites and rituals performed for these gods was called the *anumiti-raaa*. Before he takes part in these rituals, he cleans himself by bathing.

One of the rites is performed when there is too much rain and the tank is liable to breach. This rite is called the offering (*pu;ja*) of the *pu;ja vedilla*, which levers has described thus:

"When a tank fills and is about to spill the elders of the village, chiefly *gamaraaas* proceed to the tank, and at the *mutti - namana* tree, a salute is 'offered' to the god by the firing of two guns. The chief *gamarala* then steps forward and sends up a *yaaika* or an address, in which he announces to the god that the tank is being filled, and that cultivation will be begun, and that after the harvest is gathered the *mul-mangalle* will be performed. At the same time a few copper coins one or two panems in value

- are wrapped up in a piece of rag daubed in saffron. The piece of rag with coppers is then tied to a branch of the tree, closing the ceremony by commending the tank, village, its residents, and its cattle to the protection of the deity. This last ceremony is called *panduru bandinava*" (25.262)

It is also said that when this *puja vedilla* is fired the powder is mixed with certain medicinal ingredients. As the gun is fired, people believe that the water recedes from the bund and thrusts towards the opposite direction.

A more spectacular ceremony is that known as the *mutti-mangalle* (or *mul-mangalle* as levers called it) literally, the ceremony of the cooking-pot, *mutti*. This is performed after the harvest is gathered, as a token of gratitude to the gods, for providing rains and protecting the tanks.

It can be described as :

"The villagers assemble and appoint a day for the performance of the *mutts* ceremony. The nearest *anumaetiraaa* (the mouth-piece or (?) oracle -of a god, is invited; the tom-tom beaters and the dhobies are noticed. The appointed day arrives, and the chief *gamara:la* directs that every shareholder of the village should contribute towards the mutti-feast. Rice, coconut oil, cakes and sweet plantains, and betel and arecanut are collected. At evening, the assembled people are served with rice and curry, milk rice, cakes and plantains. The meal being over, the *anumaetiraala* accompanied by the whole village, proceeds in procession, with two new earthen pots to where the tree stands on the bund. A raised platform, over-hung with cloth and built under the shade of the tree at an early hour of the evening, receives the betel offering. The pots, incensed and daubed with saffron, are now placed on the platform, or *yahana*. The *anumaetiraala* sends up a *yaatikaava* or an address, to the god, and then begins to dance. Dancing and tom-tom beating continues till dawn. At break of day the pots are carried up to the tree and laid on the stumps of two branches".



"The god, through his *anumatiraala*, makes known that the offerings are accepted, and that the tank, the village, with its inhabitants, both man and beast, are taken under his protection for a certain period - one, two or three years, according to the pleasure of his divine majesty. The people return to the village, and the *anumatiraala* with them. The latter dances, and the tom-tom beaters beat until the mid-day meal is ready. At noon this is eaten and the people disperse".

It was noted that the *anumaetiraala* becomes 'possessed' by the god and Parker thinks that this is the reason why he is called *anumaetiraala*, the word *anumaeti* denotes 'sanction' or 'command'. Thus he is the person who acts under the god's command, that is, because he is compelled by the God to do it. It is supposed to be involuntary on his part".



When tanks run dry, people in tank-villages in the Deduru Oya region used to perform certain rites to cause rain. In one of these rites, males gathered in the tank-bed (*vaev-pitiya*) and danced naked, outstretching their arms towards the sky and hooting. Another rite was called *van-gedi aendaviema*, in which *van-gedi* (mortars) were made to make sounds like that of thunder. The villagers assemble at the tank-bed carrying with them a *van-gedi* (mortar) a *tal-atta* (leaf of a talipot palm) and a *pan gaha* (reed). They pierce a hole in the centre of the palm leaf and pass the reed through it and tie a stick at one end of the leaf. The stick is tied so tightly as to prevent it from getting pulled when pulled from the other side. The palm leaf is then placed on the mortar. A man gets on to the mortar and pressing the leaf with his feet, pulls the reed many times, making it produce sounds that resemble thunder. By imitating thunder, which is a symbol of rain, the villagers hope that they would be able to bring down rain to fill their tank.