

Collective Ritual as a Way of Transcending Ethno-religious Differences: In Case of Pāda Yātra in Sri Lanka

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For anyone who heard about the brutal ethnic war continued for last three decades, it is difficult to envisage that disagreeing ethnic groups in Sri Lanka essentially unite in everyday interactions in different spheres and situations. During this presentation I will explain why and how this happens in a background where essentialisation of ethno-religious labels prevail and relations between groups are still tense following years of conflict. My participation in pilgrimage on foot or *Pāda Yātra* to Kataragama during PhD fieldwork in the rural village of Pānama shows that people belonging three different ethnic groups; Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim, tend to overcome their differences in the context of rituals that blend Hindu and Popular Buddhist traditions. I will focus how members of diverse ethno-religious groups take part in pilgrimage wherein religious rituals provide a situation for conflicting groups to unite building through which their aspirations for well-being on the whole will be fulfilled based on Victor Turner's idea of liminality and *communitas* (1969) as recently linked to the lived religion of pilgrimages (Hermkens, Willy Jansen, and Notermans 2009). In the Sri Lankan context, communities are established through the power of rituals which unite people according to their concerns: prosperity, security and safety. Multi-religious people around the country make an annual pilgrimage to worship mainly Hindu (and now Buddhist) god Kataragama or Murugan in the sacred city Kataragama. People in the north and east make a special ritual namely pilgrimage on foot or *Pāda Yātra* to Kataragama. Those devotees start their walk on foot from the Nallur temple in Jaffna and come via eastern coast passing Muslim, Tamil and Sinhala areas. This paper will be based on my personal experience as a researcher by walking to Kataragama through Yāla forest for about 105 kilometers for about six days in the month of July 2011. Paper will explain how the liminal conditions and devotional worshiping culture of the god Kataragama (or Murugan) provide equal or basically unquestionably fair condition to achieve their well-being in general.

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