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The contribution of religious rituals to link Sinhala and Tamil communities: The case of Panama in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka

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According to Victor Turner, the liminal condition created by rituals derived from their anxieties concerning security, safety and well-being create a space for collaboration among diverse ethno-religious groups. Little attention is paid to how conflicting ethno-religious groups in Sri Lanka actually unite in everyday interactions. This paper based on an ethnographic research conducted in Pānama discusses how this is possible in a background where stigmatized ethno-religious identities continue despite anxiety between communities. Further, how religious rituals construct a space for conflicting groups to develop relationships with special reference to Victor Turner's idea of *communitas*, i.e. unstructured groups of equal standing, will be discussed. Reference will be made to two annual religious performances, namely, PādaYātra, the pilgrimage to the shrine of the Hindu god Murugan (or Kataragama), and Ankeliya, a ritual to worship the Hindu goddess Pattini and god Kōvalan. The religious festival season in this part of the country in general and Pānama in particular begins in the month of July with PādaYātra, The Ankeliya ('horn pulling') ritual to respect Goddess Pattini and God Kovalan is usually performed in the following month. Both Sinhala and Tamil devotees of Pānama join the PādaYātra with the other pilgrims (Sāmis) at Pānama. They engage in a three-to-six-day walk of around 105 km to the Murugan Shrine in Kataragama through the harsh conditions of the Yāla National Park. During the Ankeliya ritual the entire village is divided into two groups; *udupila* ('upper side') and *yatipila* ('lower side') generationally. Irrespective of caste, class, gender, age, ethnic or other divisions of everyday life the villagers are united to pay their respect to Goddess Pattini and God Kovalan in line with the traditional beliefs. The findings suggest that *communitas* in the local context are formed through their rituals that mix Hindu and popular Buddhist religious traditions. These festivals bring security, prosperity and well-being in general to conflicting communities, Sinhalese and Tamils. This indicates that members of rival ethno-religious groups are inclined to disregard their differences in the context of rituals.

Keywords: *Communitas*, ethnic conflict, ethnic border crossing, pilgrimages, Pattini worship