

Article

The Ritualizing of the Martial and Benevolent Side of Ravana in Two Annual Rituals at the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya in Pannipitiya, Sri Lanka

Deborah de Koning

Department of Culture Studies, Tilburg School of Humanities and Digital Sciences, Tilburg University, 5037 AB Tilburg, The Netherlands; d.d.c.dekoning@uvt.nl

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Abstract: Within the context of *Ravanisation*—by which I mean the current revitalisation of Ravana among Sinhalese Buddhists in Sri Lanka—multiple conceptualizations of Ravana are constructed. This article concentrates on two different Ravana conceptualizations: Ravana as a warrior king and Ravana as a healer. At the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya, a recently constructed Buddhist complex in Colombo, Ravana has become the object of devotion. In addition to erecting a Ravana statue in a shrine of his own, two annual rituals for Ravana are organized by this temple. In these rituals we can clearly discern the two previously mentioned conceptualizations: the Ravana *perahera* (procession) mainly concentrates on Ravana’s martial side by exalting Ravana as warrior king, and in the *maha Ravana nanumura mangalyaya*, a ritual which focusses on healing, his benevolent side as a healer is stressed. These conceptualizations from the broader Ravana discourse are ritualized in iconography, attributes, and sacred substances. The focus on ritual invention in this article not only directs our attention to the creativity within the rituals but also to the wider context of these developments: the glorification of an ancient civilization as part of increased nationalistic sentiments and an increased assertiveness among the Sinhalese Buddhist majority in post-war Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Ravana; Sri Lanka; Sinhalese Buddhist Majority; ritualizing; procession; healing; ritual creativity

1. Introduction

Every Sunday evening a group of around twenty five people gather together at the *Sri Lankesvara maha Ravana raja mandiraya* for the weekly Ravana *puja*. In Sri Lankan Buddhism, the *puja* has to be considered as ‘the formal act of worship carried out before a god or a Buddha image’ (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, p. xvi). The Ravana *mandiraya* (palace)—where this particular *puja* for Ravana is conducted—is located at the premises of the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya, a recently constructed massive Buddhist temple complex in one of the suburbs of Colombo (Pannipitiya). After the inauguration of the *mandiraya* in 2013, the head monk of the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya (Kolonnave Siri Sumangala Thero, hereinafter referred to as Sumangala Thero), has appointed a lay-custodian to take care of the Ravana *mandiraya*.

The weekly Ravana *puja* is one of the public rituals performed for Ravana under the responsibility of this lay-custodian. Although—compared to the annual rituals for Ravana organized by the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya—the number of attendants is relatively small, the ritual itself is rather extensive: it has to be conducted exactly in the way it has been prescribed by Sumangala Thero, even if there is no public at all. Thus, every Sunday around five o’clock a group of volunteers starts with the preparation of different types of semi-fluid herbal substances (which are stored in between

nine up to eleven different cups)¹, and prepares two plates with pieces of nine different types of fruits and nine different types of traditional Sri Lankan sweets. The herbal substances prepared on Sunday evenings for the Ravana *puja* are used by the main lay-custodian or his assistants to anoint (two of) the statues of Ravana in the inner sanctuary of the *mandiraya*. This part of the ritual is called the *nanumura*: the anointing or bathing of the statue (the verb *nanava* means to bathe). The *nanumura* is regarded as the most important part of the ritual: according to the lay-custodian the weekly ritual for Ravana would be incomplete without the performance of the *nanumura* (Lay-Custodian Ravana *Mandiraya* 2017c).

After the statues have been anointed and dressed behind a closed door, the plates with oil lamps containing three different types of oil (mustard oil, sesame oil, and ghee), the plates with fruits and sweets, a bowl with *murethen* (sweetened rice), and baskets with flowers are brought in a small procession from the kitchen to the entrance of the *mandiraya*. The offerings are handed over by the volunteers (and by the sponsor of the *puja*) at the entrance of the *mandiraya* to the lay-custodian and/or his assistants, who place the offerings inside the inner sanctuary. The people outside the *mandiraya* join the next element of the ritual: the chanting of some well-known Buddhist *gathas* (a *gatha* is a stanza, to be recited or sung) followed by special songs and invocations for Ravana. After the chanting session the plates with fruits and sweets, three bowls filled with different types of substances and the bowl with *murethen*, are taken out of the *mandiraya*. The fruits, sweets, substances, and *murethen* are served to the attendants of the *puja* after they have bowed in reverence to the freshly anointed and newly dressed statue(s) of Ravana.

The liturgy for the Ravana *puja* includes 12 different elements such as poems, songs, and mantras. These poems, songs, and mantras for Ravana are composed by Sumangala Thero. Without discussing the layered imagery in detail, I would like to present here four out of the nine stanzas of the following invocation for Ravana: *Maha Ravana pujave di gayana kavi*:

දඩු මොනරෙන් වඩිනා දෙවියෝ
මහා ඇතුපිට වඩිනා දෙවියෝ
සිවු රඟ සේනා ඇති දෙවියෝ
වඩිනු මැනවි රාවණ දෙවියෝ

1 The god who arrives on the *dandu monara*
The god who arrives on the great tusker
The god who owns the fourfold armies
May god Ravana arrive

හිස් දහයක් ඇති මහ දෙවියෝ
අත් විස්සක් ඇති මහ දෙවියෝ
දස බලයක් ඇති මහ දෙවියෝ
වඩිනු මැනවි රාවණ දෙවියෝ

2 The great god with ten heads
The great god with twenty arms
The great god with ten powers
May god Ravana arrive

¹ The number of substances used to anoint the statues on Sunday evenings seemed to vary between nine and eleven. I assisted several times in the kitchen to prepare the necessities for the Ravana *puja* and I often counted nine big cups filled with porridges made out of herbal substances (such as turmeric and sandalwood) and two small ones filled with milk and king coconut. That for the latter two no 'preparation' is needed might explain the difference in the number of substances mentioned to me. The number and ingredients used for different rituals for Ravana are also prescribed by Sumangala Thero in for instance his book *Sri Lankesvara Maha Ravana* (Sumangala Thero 2014, pp. 45–47).

වෙද පුරු මහ රජ මහ දෙවියෝ
කෙන් වතු සරු කළ මහ දෙවියෝ
හිරු එළියෙන් වෙඩිගත් දෙවියෝ
වඩිනු මැනිවි රාවණ දෙවියෝ

3 The great god who's a doctor and a great king
The great god who brought prosperity to paddy fields
The great god who received favors from the light of the sun
May god Ravana arrive

මුළු ලොව ජයගත් මහ දෙවියෝ
හෙළියට පණ දුන් මහ දෙවියෝ
තුන් ලොව පූජිත මහ දෙවියෝ
වඩිනු මැනිවි රාවණ දෙවියෝ

6 The great god who won the whole world
The great god who gave life to the land of *Hela*
The great god worshipped by the threefold worlds
May god Ravana arrive

The invocation for Ravana unveils some of the multi-layered conceptualizations directed at the figure of Ravana within the current Ravana discourse in Sri Lanka: its imagery and ideas can be traced back to the *Hela* movement, to rural lore, and to Hindu mythology.² The *Hela* concept—which is mentioned in the sixth stanza—became extensively employed in the early-twentieth century *Havula* or *Hela* movement in Sri Lanka, a movement focused on the re-establishing of an indigenous language (*Hela*). Cumaratunga, the leading representative of this linguistic movement, considered the *Hela diva* (country) *Hela daya* (nation) and *Hela basa* (language) as the three constitutive elements of the nation (Cumaratunga 1941, p. 394).³ The *Hela* concept is in the current Ravana discourse primarily employed to denote the earliest inhabitants of Lanka who are divided in four different *Hela* tribes (*siv Hela*).⁴ Among these tribes the *yaksha* and *naga* tribes stand out. To underscore the presence of these tribes in ancient Lanka references are made to the sixth century chronicle the *Mahavamsa*.⁵ These references to the *Mahavamsa*, which became the foundational myth for the Sinhalese in the twentieth century (Wickramasinghe 2014, p. 94), unveil the attempt to suture the current Ravana myth into well-known Sri Lankan myths and chronicles.

In the first and second stanzas ideas which have been present in the ancient Hindu epic the *Ramayana* are touched upon. Ravana is introduced as arriving on the *dandu monara*, which can be loosely translated as ‘peacock made out of wooden bars’. In the *Ramayana* a flying machine (the *puspaka*) used by Ravana is also mentioned (Dutt 1894, p. 1604). The idea of aircraft technology as mastered by Ravana is one of the main focus points in the current Ravana discourse.

When it comes to his physical appearance, Ravana as believed to have ten heads and twenty arms (second stanza) is also known already from the *Ramayana*. In the seventh book of Valmiki's

² The reference to Ravana in the third stanza as the one who brings prosperity to paddy fields also occurs in popular publications in the Ravana discourse, for instance in one of the publications from the most famous writer in the Ravana discourse Mirando Obeyesekere. Obeyesekere has elaborated upon an irrigation system which allegedly was extant in Ravana's time in the surroundings of Lakegala (Obeyesekere 2016, p. 79). According to him people in that area believe that this irrigation system dates back to Ravana's time. The interactions between Ravana imaginations from rural lore (and Lakegala in particular) and imaginations from the Ravana discourse will be discussed in detail in my upcoming dissertation.

³ The role of one particular *Hela* representative for the current Ravana discourse with a special focus on the iconographic representation of Ravana within the Ravana discourse will be discussed in more detail in the third section of this article.

⁴ The *Hela* concept also appears in Sinhalese perception prior to the *Hela* movement (Dharmadasa 1995, pp. 20–21).

⁵ The first parts of the *Mahavamsa* have been written in the sixth century and after that it was updated three times: in the twelfth century, the fourteenth century, and the eighteenth century (Dharmadasa 1995, p. 4).

Ramayana (considered to be a latter addition) Ravana is referred to as born with '[...] having ten necks, furnished with large teeth, and resembling a heap of collyrium, with coppery lips, twenty arms, huge faces, and flaming hair' (Dutt 1894, p. 1583). Ravana with ten heads and twenty arms became a popular iconographic representation in temple iconography and is also employed in Hindu temples in Sri Lanka.⁶

The terrifying representation of Ravana with ten heads and twenty arms is—as also becomes evident in the poem—in the current Ravana discourse interpreted in a symbolic way: the ten heads symbolize the ten powers or capabilities which Ravana allegedly mastered. Examples of these skills are aircraft technology and medicine. In general, in the current Ravana myth under construction (story), fragments and ideas from different sources are integrated as far as they contribute to the glorification of Lanka's ancient and indigenous civilization or can be re-interpreted as such. The current Ravana myth under construction is drifting away from the well-known Rama Sita Ravana myth. In its focus to exalt Ravana and Lanka and by suturing Ravana and the ancient tribes into well-known Sri Lankan chronicles and myths, the current Ravana myth from the Ravana discourse cannot even be considered as an anti-*Ramayana*.⁷ As I will show in this article by discussing fieldwork observations and conversations,⁸ the display of positive Ravana conceptualizations in the two rituals helps to construct this myth of Sinhalese-Buddhist national pride.

Most of the rituals, statues, and objects related to Ravana in the Sinhalese-Buddhist context are recently invented and tend to promote positive Ravana ideas. To underscore the recent development of these rituals I use Grimes' concept of ritualizing: 'the act of cultivating or inventing rites' (Grimes 2014, p. 193). As I will discuss, in the two annual rituals two positive Ravana conceptualizations are ritualized. The conceptualizations of Ravana as a warrior king and as a healer become visible and tangible in objects, attributes, and sacred substances used in those rituals.

After a brief introduction of the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya in the next section, I will concentrate in the third section on the iconographic elements of the sword and the scripture. The discussion of the sword and the scripture, as part of the main statue of Ravana at the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya, serves as a starting point to further discuss the ritualizing of Ravana's martial side (as warrior king) and benevolent side (as healer) in the two rituals.

In the fourth and fifth sections I will analyze how the conceptualizations of Ravana as warrior king and as healer are displayed in the two annual rituals: the *maha Ravana perahera* (*perahera* means procession) and the *maha Ravana nanumura mangalyaya* (*mangalyaya* means festival—together with *nanumura* it can be translated as 'festival of anointing'). By the use of certain attributes, objects, and herbal substances conceptualizations of Ravana are constructed in these rituals. In the final section I will evaluate how these rituals have to be understood in the current process of *Ravanisation* in Sri Lanka's post-war context.

2. The Sri Devram Maha Viharaya

The Sri Devram Maha Viharaya is a Buddhist complex located in Pannipitiya, one of the suburbs of Colombo. The first part of the complex's name (*devram*) refers to a monastery mentioned in for

⁶ Examples of Hindu temples in Sri Lanka where this particular iconographic representation of Ravana is employed are the temples of Munnesvaram (visited 4 May 2016), Konesvaram (visited 23 March 2016), and the Nagapoosani Amman Kovil located on the island Nagadipa (visited 2 February 2016).

⁷ As discussed by Velcheru Narayana Rao the common core in the anti-*Ramayana* discourse in India is its anti-Brahmanism. The criticizing of pro-Brahmanic biases in Valmiki's *Ramayana* appears for instance in retellings or rewritings of the *Ramayana* in Telugu and Tamil (Rao 1991, p. 162). As pointed out by Paula Richman for instance E.V. Ramasami, who is sometimes referred to as the founder of the Dravidian Movement, was more occupied with criticizing North Indians and the *Ramayana* than by defining a South Indian identity (Richman 1991, p. 197). In contrast to this anti-*Ramayana* discourse in the Indian context the Ravana myth under construction in Sri Lanka is not a retelling or rewriting of the *Ramayana* and the main focus within the current Ravana discourse is to construct a myth of Sinhalese-Buddhist national pride.

⁸ I have participated in the annual and weekly rituals for Ravana from 2016 onwards and conducted extensive fieldwork research at this Buddhist temple complex in 2017 and 2018.

instance the seventeenth century *Rajavaliya*. According to the *Rajavaliya*, the Buddha is believed to have returned to the monastery of Devram (*devuram vehera*) after his second visit to Lanka (Suraweera 2014, p. 168). *Vihara* is used in Sinhala to denote a temple, or the complex of monastic buildings (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, p. vx).

Sumangala Thero is the monk who initiated the construction of the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya. He is well-known in Sri Lanka, especially because he was involved in politics. In 2004 he was one of the three leading election candidates of the JHU (Jathika Hela Urumaya, National Sinhala Heritage Party). The JHU—the first political party in Sri Lanka which was exclusively ran by monks—won nine out of 225 seats in the parliament (Rahula 1974, 2011, pp. 380–82; Deegalle 2004, 2011, pp. 383–94).⁹ Despite the success of the JHU, Sumangala Thero had already resigned from the party in the very first year (Sumangala Thero 2017b).

Sumangala Thero is highly venerated by most of the people who visit the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya. Because he is believed to possess special powers, people come to the temple to ask Sumangala Thero to bless and heal them and their relatives. Also, because of his experience in meditation he is believed to have developed special mind reading skills. Therefore, he is also wanted for advice in family and business related issues. These days it is, however, increasingly hard to get an appointment with Sumangala Thero, since he is believed to have withdrawn himself from worldly matters.

The Sri Devram Maha Viharaya only came into existence around twenty years ago. With new buildings regularly constructed and older ones restored, enlarged, or replaced by newer ones, the complex is continuously in a process of transformation. On *poya* days (the full moon days) and festival days the complex is visited by people coming from far and wide. They walk around at the extensive site, pay a visit to the different shrines, the stupa, and Buddha statues for offering lotus flowers and incense, do a *baraya* (place an intention) by tying a coin with a piece of cloth to the branch of a tree or a fence (*panduru*), walk around the Bodhi tree, visit one of the informative buildings pertaining to the temple, the role of Thai monks in the revival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, and the ‘hell’ (these educational buildings are called museums) located on the site, wait to participate in a special *puja* and to receive the blessing of the monk, participate in the chanting, listen to teachings in the *dhamma* hall, watch the spectacles and rituals, enjoy the natural surroundings and luxurious decorations, read the texts on the hundreds of stone slabs (including the hundreds of black marble stone slabs on which the *Tripitaka* is inscribed), and enjoy the food which is on most *poya* days offered for free.

In addition to a Bodhi tree, stupa, and shrines and statues constructed for devotional activities for Buddha, there is also a section with shrines for the gods at the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya. Shrines for gods—for instance for Visnu, who is considered to be one of the four guardian gods in Sri

⁹ In the manifesto of the JHU—which contains twelve points for constructing a righteous state—it is formulated that it is regarded as the duty of the government to protect Buddhism. Also, it states that the “[...] national heritage of a country belongs to the ethnic group who made the country into a habitable civilization” (Deegalle 2004, 2011, p. 391). Around the time of the opening of the Ravana *mandiraya* at the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya in 2013, also twelve goals of the temple complex were formulated by Sumangala Thero. These goals are put on display at one of the offices located at the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya. Roughly translated these goals are: (1) the protection/maintaining of the Sinhalese race/nation (to) protect/maintain the rights of other races/nations, (2) to make the ancient history/pedigree known to the young generation, (3) to give new life to agriculture, (4) to get the population used to the everyday living of *Hela* people, (5) to upkeep Ayurveda, (6) to take care of language, (7) to take care of music, dance, and rituals, (8) to give aid to/support new developments, (9) to create a young generation of *bodhisattas* (he who is going to become a Buddha), (10) to give aid/help to good intelligent children for education, (11) to take care of the older generation who gave power to our race/nation and, (12) to give to the youth a sense of ‘ourness’. Social activities organized by the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya such as housebuilding projects for poor people and the organization of blood donation campaigns, bear witness to the social engagement of Sumangala Thero and this temple complex.

Lankan Buddhism (Holt 2008, p. 145)—are present at most Buddhist temple complexes in Sri Lanka.¹⁰ These shrines for gods are taken care of by lay-custodians.¹¹

On weekdays there is almost no ritual activity taking place around the shrines at the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya. All the doors of the inner sanctuaries of the shrines are closed and no lay-custodians—probably since most of the lay-custodians responsible for different shrines have regular jobs—are around on weekdays. In the weekends there is, however, a lot of ritual activity at the compound where the shrines are located. On Saturday evenings an extensive *puja* for Mahamaya (the mother of Gautama Buddha) is conducted. This *puja* of around 1.5 h takes place in the *mandiraya* for Mahamaya, the largest building at this part of the site which has been constructed in 2010. Sunday evenings are reserved for the Ravana *puja*. As I was told by the secretary of Sumangala Thero, unlike other Buddhist temples where the central place—after Buddha—is given to one god, at the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya prominence is given to both Mahamaya and Ravana (Secretary Sumangala Thero 2018a).

The Ravana *mandiraya* constructed at the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya (see Figure 1) is the second largest building at this section. According to the stone slab which is immured in the front wall, it has been formally inaugurated on the 19 September 2013 by Mahinda Rajapaksa, the president of the previous government of Sri Lanka (2005–2015).



Figure 1. The Sri Lankesvara maha Ravana raja mandiraya (left side). This building is located at the premises of the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya. On the right side: one of the chariots for Ravana. This chariot is taken around in the annual *perahera* organized by this Buddhist temple. Picture taken by author, 6 June 2017.

In contrast to most of the paintings of Ravana in Hindu temples in Sri Lanka (such as the Sita Amman temple in Nuwara Eliya) in which the Ravana depictions are presented in the context of the *Ramayana*, the paintings in the *mandiraya* concentrate on the extraordinary character of Ravana and his

¹⁰ In addition to shrines for gods located on the premises of a Buddhist temple complex there are also shrines in Sri Lanka not located on Buddhist sites (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, p. xvi).

¹¹ Gombrich and Obeyesekere refer to the officiant at a Sinhala shrine as a *kapuva* or *kapurala* (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, p. xvi). At the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya the lay-custodian who is responsible for the Ravana *mandiraya* considered himself not a *kapurala* or *kapuva* but a care-taker. That the words *kapurala* or *kapuva* are less used at the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya is probably because the job is not inherited and it is not the custodians' full-time occupation.

advanced civilization: multiple paintings show for instance the ten capabilities of Ravana and one side of the *mandiraya* contains a painting in which the Ravana civilization is equated with the Maya and Inca civilizations (see Figure 2). In addition to that, the ability of space travelling and the development of aircraft technology is a topic on its own in the wall paintings. Only two depictions of the war-scene (including Rama and his monkey army) show similarities with Hindu-temple paintings. Paintings of the well-known couple Sita and Rama or devotional depictions of Hanuman (the famous monkey devotee of Rama) as known from Hindu temple iconography are absent in the *mandiraya*.

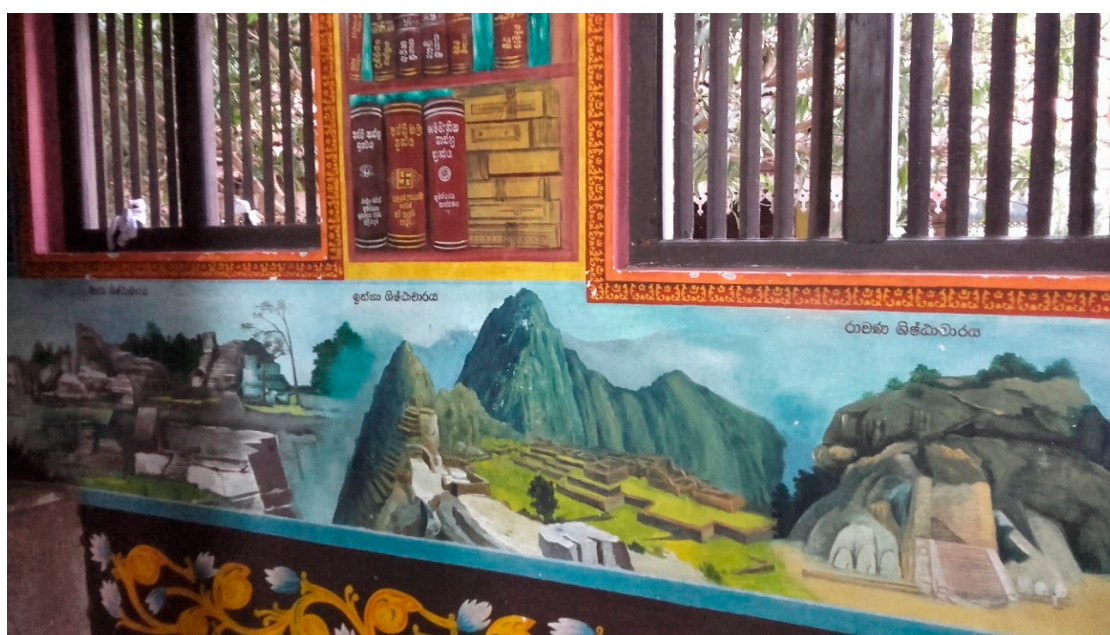


Figure 2. Wall painting in the Ravana *mandiraya*. This painting shows (from left to right) depictions of the Maya, Inca, and Ravana civilization. The latter is represented by a depiction of the famous Sigirya rock. The painting between the two windows depicts books on medicine. Picture taken by author, 6 June 2017.

This shrine for Ravana constructed at the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya is the most extensive shrine for Ravana that I have encountered in Sri Lanka.¹² Also, regular ritual activities for Ravana take place at the shrine and these ritual activities attract people with an interest in Ravana from all over the country. It is also the only shrine for Ravana in Colombo. The construction of the Ravana shrine and the ritual activities for Ravana are not the only striking element at the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya: the devotional activities for Mahamaya and the outstanding role of the specially gifted monk are noteworthy as well. Although the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya is exclusive in the veneration for Mahamaya and Ravana, the autonomous positions of (political engaged) monks and idiosyncratic developments at urban Buddhist temple sites in post-war Sri Lanka are not limited to this particular temple.¹³

During my fieldwork research I have encountered several Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka who show an interest in Ravana. They consider him to be an outstanding king of ancient Lanka and some of them

¹² Other shrines for Ravana at Buddhist temple sites are for instance constructed at Boltumbe Saman *devalaya* (visited May 6, 2016) and Rambadagalla Viharaya in Kurunegalla (visited 2 March 2016). Also in Katuwana, there is a Ravana image enshrined in a cave and this is the only site where annually a small *perahera* for Ravana is organized. This *perahera* concentrates on the performances of *Angampora* and there are no elephants or chariots included. The statue taken around in the *perahera* is the Ravana statue from the shrine (*Angampora Teacher 2018*).

¹³ See for some recent examples of politically engaged Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka and the exceptional status of impunity they enjoy—even if they use violence—*Gunatilleke 2018*, pp. 77–82.

openly talk and publish about Ravana.¹⁴ The imagination of Ravana as believed to be the inventor of medicine—whether Ayurveda or ‘traditional Sinhalese medicine’—is also widespread in the current Ravana discourse: his knowledge of medicine is believed to be one of his ten outstanding capabilities.

The imaginations of Ravana as king of Lanka and Ravana as believed to have healing powers are present in the broader Ravana discourse—and beyond. In general, positive Ravana imaginations and ideas of an ancient and advanced civilization in Sri Lanka are primarily mediated through (social) media. Newspaper articles, especially the ones written by Mirando Obeyesekere, are of central importance.¹⁵ Also, in the past ten years, plenty of popular books on Ravana have been published and several private research groups started to promote their Ravana ideas on Facebook and other webpages. In addition to that, songs are written in praise for Ravana and special radio and TV-programs dealing with Ravana occur.¹⁶

Sumangala Thero has written some popular books on Ravana as well. But it is the construction of a shrine for Ravana and the inventing of Ravana rituals that makes the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya outstanding in the way positive Ravana imaginations are actively promoted. The *mandiraya* is believed to contain four Ravana statues ([Lay-Custodian Ravana Mandiraya 2017b](#)).¹⁷ Only two out of the four statues are the object of ritual activities: the main black statue standing in front of the inner sanctuary and a small black one behind it (hidden from public view). When the door of the inner sanctuary is open, also a statue of Ravana seated on a platform at the back of the sanctuary can be witnessed (see Figure 3). Since the black statue in front of the *mandiraya* is the object of the weekly and annual ritual activities and (instead of the small one) can be witnessed by the audience, I will discuss this statue in detail in the next section.

¹⁴ Examples are a monk from Vidurupola (Nuwara Eliya district) who delivered a speech on the day a movie about Rama and Ravana was released in Sri Lanka (around 2014) and a monk from Galgamuwa area who is publishing about the ancient *yaksha* language. Both monks consider Ravana the ancient king of Lanka. They did not conduct devotional activities for him. The latter monk explicated that Ravana has not be considered a god ([Monk Vidurupola 2016](#); [Monk Galgamuwa 2017](#)).

¹⁵ In several informal conversations with visitors of the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya conducted in 2018 I asked them how and when their interest in Ravana started. They frequently answered that they learned about Ravana through newspaper articles, especially the ones written by Mirando Obeyesekere.

¹⁶ In addition to interviews with so called Ravana experts in TV- and radio programs, it is archaeological sites, caves and mountains which are discussed in length. These geographical spots allegedly proof the presence of Ravana and Lanka’s highly advanced civilization. Although there is some overlap with sites developed for *Ramayana* tourism in post-war Sri Lanka, in documentaries produced within the Ravana discourse mainly sites which are not storied within the *Ramayana* are discussed. See for some details of the development of *Ramayana* tourism [Spencer \(2014\)](#).

¹⁷ At one of the upper levels of the ‘sanctuary tower’ there is allegedly another Ravana statue kept.



Figure 3. Statue of Ravana in the *Sri Lankesvara maha Ravana raja mandiraya*. The statue is richly decorated after the annual *maha Ravana nanumura mangalyaya*. Picture taken by author, 25 March 2018.

3. The Sword and Scripture of Ravana

The black stone statue of Ravana in the *mandiraya* differs from the popular iconographic representation of Ravana with ten heads and twenty arms.¹⁸ The statue depicts Ravana with one head and two hands, holding two attributes: the sword and the scripture (see Figure 3). A similar depiction of Ravana was designed in Sri Lanka in the eighties according to the ideas of the famous writer and scholar Arisen Ahubudu.¹⁹ At the start of his career Ahubudu (1920–2011) joined the *Hela* movement. As Coperahewa suggests, there was also a nationalistic motivation within this linguistic movement to construct an

¹⁸ Also in Sri Lanka some of the recently erected statues for Ravana at Buddhist complexes, for example the statue at Boltumbe Saman *devalaya*, depict Ravana with ten heads and twenty arms. This particular iconographic representation of Ravana is called *dasis* Ravana in Sinhalese, a contraction of *dasa* (ten) and *hisa* (head).

¹⁹ This information was gained through Ahubudu's daughter (Ahubudu 2018).

indigenous (*Hela*) identity (Coperahewa 2012, pp. 860, 879). In this context, Ravana was exalted as king of an ancient indigenous civilization (Dharmadasa 1995, p. 264).

In the current context of *Ravanisation* some of the later publications of the *Hela* representative Arisen Ahubudu are translated and reprinted to promote the story of Ravana.²⁰ Also, the text of a song in praise of Ravana originally written by Ahubudu in the eighties for the theatre play *Sakwithi Ravana* (loosely translated as *Ravana as world ruler*) is now for instance duplicated in a popular song for Ravana (*Sakwithi Ravana*) by the *Ravana Soruyo* (*Ravana Brothers*), an association conducting research on the history of Sri Lanka with a focus on Ravana.²¹

At the time of the theatre performance (1987), Ahubudu also wanted to create a proper depiction of Ravana (Ahubudu 2018). According to the president of one of the popular research groups on Ravana (the *Ravana Shakti*) who discussed the particular depiction of Ravana with Ahubudu when he was still alive, Ahubudu had appointed a young man who transferred his ideas into an actual depiction of Ravana on a banner and also molded a Ravana statue (President of *Ravana Shakti* 2018). Ravana in this depiction (see Figure 4) has only one head and two hands and holds two attributes in his hands: a sword and a book.²² The banner is now duplicated in a moderate size on plastic by the popular research group the *Ravana Shakti*. This research group gives the banners for free to people who have a special interest in Ravana (President of *Ravana Shakti* 2018).

The statue of Ravana that has the most prominent position in the *Ravana mandiraya* at the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya also holds these two attributes: the sword and the *ola* leaf book. According to Sumangala Thero, the design of the black stone statue of Ravana was based on a statue of a *bodhisatta* he has noticed at a place in Sri Lanka called Maligavila. This statue is by some people considered to be the *bodhisatta* Avalokitesvara (Sumangala Thero 2018). Although the Ravana statue shows similarities with this particular statue at Maligavila—especially the standing position and the adornments around waist, hips, and neck—the two attributes of the sword and book are not part of the statue at Maligavila.²³ That is why I asked Sumangala Thero explicitly about these particular objects.

[...] It is the *ola* leaf book and the sword. The sword signifies his power and bravery and that there is nothing he cannot do. The *ola* leaf book signifies his wisdom or intelligence. [...] In the present day why we have given the statue a sword is because there is a lot of injustice, crime and lack of peace around the world. We believe that these problems should be solved and that king Ravana has the power to solve them. [The book symbolizes] knowledge about peace, justice and ruling, as well as universal knowledge about war and medication. Since the brain cannot be given to the hand, we have signified his great wisdom using this book (Sumangala Thero 2018).

Most of the visitors of the *Ravana mandiraya* did not notice these two attributes and I only got answers with regard to the meaning of these attributes by showing them pictures of the statue. Like the monk, they gave different interpretations—or had no idea. With regard to the book, people frequently mentioned Ravana's knowledge on medicine or medical spells when I asked them to specify what

²⁰ An example of this is his book *Hela Derana Vaga* which has been translated into English and published in 2012 under the title *The Story of the land of the Sinhalese* (Helese).

²¹ <http://ravanabrothers.com/open/> (accessed on 6 August 2018).

²² This is also the way the Ravana statue is molded in one of the earliest shrines for Ravana at the famous site of Kataragama. This shrine at Kataragama has been constructed under president Premadasa in 1987 (Lay-Custodian *Ravana Shrine Kataragama* 2018). At that time Ahubudu was appointed as consultant for president Premadasa (Coperahewa 2018).

²³ I have not seen this statue at Maligavila myself and my observations of the statue are based on pictures published on the internet. Interestingly, a few more people from the Ravana discourse I talked with considered Ravana to be the same as Avalokitesvara. The particular objects (sword and scripture) are in Mahayana Buddhist iconography associated with another *bodhisatta*: Manjusri. With Manjusri both objects are connected to wisdom: the sword symbolizes the awareness of this *bodhisatta* which cuts through all delusion and the text indicates his mastery of all knowledge (Beer 2003, pp. 123–24; Robinson and Johnson 1997, pp. 106–7). In my fieldwork research (conducted in Sri Lanka which is primarily but not exclusively a Theravada Buddhist country) this *bodhisatta* was never referred to.

knowledge the book represented.²⁴ The sword is also open to multiple interpretations like justice, power, bravery, fighting, and kingship.²⁵ Though these objects are multi-interpretable they direct our attention to two sides of Ravana: his martial side as warrior king and his benevolent side as healer.

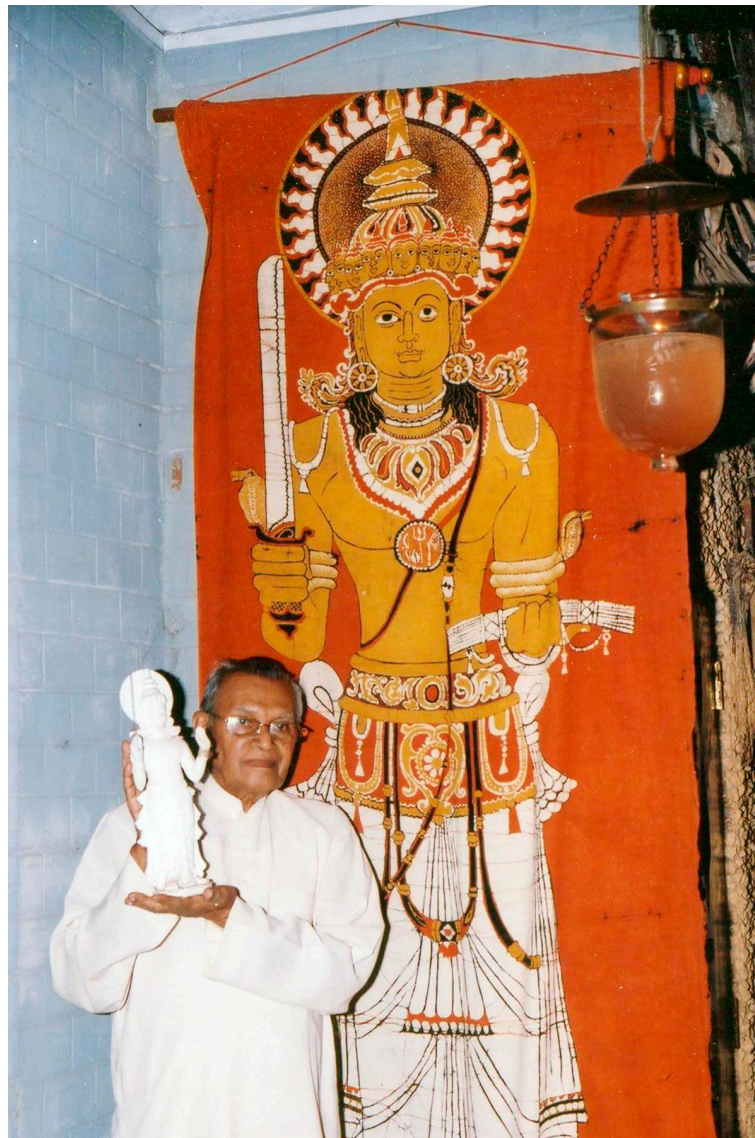


Figure 4. Picture originally taken in the eighties of Arisen Ahubudu with the Ravana banner and statue. This picture has been retrieved from the Official website of A. Ahubudu (n.d.).

4. The Ritualizing of Ravana as a Warrior King in the Annual *Maha Ravana Perahera*

The Sri Devram Maha Viharaya organizes two major festival ‘weeks’ each year: one in September and one in March. September is regarded a special month at the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya because the head monk was born on the 24 September 1969, and the foundation stone of the complex was laid on his 30th birthday (Most Ven. Kolonnawe Sri Sumanagala Thero n.d.; The History n.d.). It was

²⁴ The word *vedakama* was used by the monk to denote this medicinal knowledge (Sumangala Thero 2018).

²⁵ These interpretations are examples of answers given by people who were closely involved in the rituals performed for Ravana at the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya. Their answers show that a variety of interpretations even exists among the people who are closely involved in the rituals for Ravana.

also in September that the Ravana *mandiraya* has been inaugurated and in that particular year (2013) the first *perahera* for Ravana took place in the month of September (Secretary Sumangala Thero 2017; Lay-Custodian Ravana *Mandiraya* 2017a). From 2014 onwards, the Ravana *perahera* was organized together with the Suddhodana Mahamaya *perahera*, a *perahera* devoted to the parents of Buddha, which in previous years had already been organized in March (Lay-Custodian Ravana *Mandiraya* 2017a).²⁶

The *Medin maha perahera* consists of three parts: the first part is the *theruwan puja maha perahera*. This procession is held in reverence to the triple gem: the Buddha, the *dhamma* (teachings), and the *sangha* (the monastic order).²⁷ The Suddhodana Mahamaya *perahera* is dedicated to Buddha's parents. With between 60 and 70 different elements, the Ravana *perahera* constitutes the biggest part of the *Medin maha perahera*. According to the website of the temple it is organized to '[...] felicitate Father of the nation King shree Lankeshwara Rawana' (Madin Maha *Perahera* (Procession)). In the *Budumaga* (the monthly magazine published by the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya), an explanation for organizing the Ravana *perahera* is given as well:

[The Ravana *perahera*] is dedicated towards all the kings of ancient Sri Lanka who sacrificed not just their time, but also their lives towards protecting and bringing prosperity to the nation and its people. The statue of king Ravana is taken as a representation of all the kings of the country due to the great wisdom and holiness with which king Ravana ruled not just Sri Lanka but the entire universe. He is considered the greatest among the kings in the country [...] (N.A. 2018, vol. 4, pp. 18–19).

In one of the interviews with Sumangala Thero he explained that the Ravana *perahera* is organized out of respect for the great talents Ravana had (Sumangala Thero 2017b). As mentioned before, the talents or skills of Ravana are in the current Ravana discourse frequently connected to the iconographic representation of Ravana with ten heads and twenty arms. The ten skills as formulated by Sumangala Thero in one of his popular books on Ravana can roughly be translated as: (1) languages, (2) law, (3) philosophy, (4) ruling, (5) technical wisdom/physical sciences, (6) spiritual wisdom, (7) astrology, (8) medicinal science, (9) war skills, and (10) aesthetics (Sumangala Thero 2013, pp. 15–16).²⁸

When it comes to the display of Ravana's talents in the *perahera*, a prominent position is given to war skills and fighting. This talent seamlessly fits the conceptualization of Ravana as warrior king. In the remaining part of this section I will discuss how the imagination of Ravana as warrior king is ritualized in this *perahera* by paying attention to some of the main objects in this particular *perahera*.

In addition to groups of drummers/dancers in one of the three Sri Lankan traditional dance styles, the Ravana *perahera* includes some remarkable instruments: two enormous shields (*maha pali*) placed on red-color decorated hand carts. These shields are used as gongs—creating a heavy noise which carries across the streets. Also remarkable are the giant drums. These *rana bera* and *yuda bera* (war drums) are believed to have been used to announce important happenings, especially in a war context. As was explained by a volunteer of the Ravana *perahera*:

It [the *rana bera*] was used in fight and battle and it symbolized strength. When going to war, the *rana bera* announced the arrival of the armies. It is also used as music in *Angampora* [martial arts]. (Volunteers *Perahera* 2018).

²⁶ The month March has been selected because the wedding of Buddha's parents allegedly took place in that particular month (Madin Maha *Perahera* Meritorious Activity n.d.).

²⁷ The first approximately 45 elements of the *perahera* are part of the *theruwan puja maha perahera*. This part shows similarities with the Kandy Esala *perahera*, the most famous *perahera* of Sri Lanka annually held in Kandy in honor of the sacred tooth relic of the Buddha. The tooth relic of the Buddha in Kandy is believed to be connected with rainfall (Wickremeratne 2006, p. 108). The tooth relic at the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya also allegedly belongs to Buddha. During the *Medin maha perahera* the relic is kept inside because taking it out is believed to cause extreme rainfall (Secretary Sumangala Thero 2018b).

²⁸ An alternative symbolic interpretation of the ten heads is that Ravana is believed to have ruled ten countries. This interpretation is in the contemporary Ravana discourse less widespread than the opinion that his heads symbolizes skills.

The poundings of the drums and the shields—together with the exclamations of performers in the *perahera*—creates a powerful soundscape resembling the sound of impending doom and war. In addition to creating a particular soundscape these instruments—known as ‘war instruments’—also contribute to the war-like scene by their visual outlook: the shield is generally known as a tool for self-defense in a fighting context. Moreover, the massive size of these instruments—they have to be taken around on hand carts because they are too heavy to carry—add to the impressive scenery of the Ravana *perahera*.

In addition to this, in 2018, a sound system was taken around in one of the chariots. This sound system continuously played songs in praise for Ravana, composed by the *Ravana Brothers*. Their music compositions includes up-beating drum rhythms and their songs include loud exclamations. The chorus of one of the songs repeats over and over again *vira* Ravana which means brave or powerful Ravana (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cp_EhLcHSzc).

The most omnipresent objects in the Ravana *perahera* are weapons. Weaponry is displayed in a variety of ways. In addition to an active use of weaponry in performances, there is also the display of multiple types of weapons, and the weaponry as part of the royal ornaments.

The Ravana *perahera* includes performances which are not directly related to Ravana such as fire ball dancers and performances related to specific village (exorcism or healing) rituals. The performances exclusively related to Ravana are the *Angampora* performances. In the broader Ravana discourse *Angampora* is believed to be one of the ten skills of Ravana (Sumangala Thero had used war skills in his book instead) and some people say it has been invented by Ravana ([Volunteer Perahera 2018](#)). *Angampora* is increasing in popularity in post-war Sri Lanka as the ‘traditional martial art of Sri Lanka’, and has been promoted by the government of Sri Lanka as such as well. Although there are different types of *Angampora* ([Angampora Teacher 2018](#))—also a type of self-defense in which no tools are used—the *Angampora* performances in the Ravana *perahera* mainly display the type of *Angampora* in which weapons or tools are used. One of these *Angampora* groups closely related to the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya consists of young men led by a charismatic leader who perform *Angampora* in the *perahera* with different types of weapons. He and his students are all dressed in a red skirt and carry with a bare torso weapons and/or shields around (see Figure 5).

The display of weaponry is closely related but not limited to *Angampora* performances in the Ravana *perahera*. In 2017, another group of *Angampora* performers brought an enormous variety of ‘tools’ to the Ravana *mandiraya*, including swords, sticks, a walking stick, a knife which is used to cut the paddy, and mace. These *Angampora* students just carried around these tools in the *perahera*.

Weaponry is also of central importance at one of the two chariots for Ravana which are taken around in the Ravana *perahera*. In addition to a replica of the *dandu monara*, a bird shaped chariot made out of wood resembling Ravana’s flying machine (an example of his talent of physical science and technology), there is a rather tall chariot taken around. This chariot closely resembles a Hindu procession chariot used for taking around the statue of a god.²⁹ The objects taken around on this chariot are referred to as *abarana*, which translates as ornaments or jewelry. These *abarana* include Ravana’s royal ornaments but also symbols of the ten weapons that Ravana allegedly used. Some of these weapons are believed to be from Ravana’s time and some of them are believed to be replicas ([Secretary Sumangala Thero 2018a](#)). This combination of royal ornaments including jewelry and swords contributes to the construction of the conceptualization of Ravana, not just as king, but as warrior king.

²⁹ I encountered a similar chariot with a depiction of the ten-headed Ravana on the front panel (knelt on one leg) and with similar hand gestures in the Munnesvaram (Hindu) Kovil (visited 4 May 2016). The chariot used in the Ravana *perahera* bears on the front panel also a wood carved image of the ten-headed Ravana who poses with various hand gestures and holds various objects in his numerous hands (of which some are broken).



Figure 5. A group of Angampora students and their master performing in the *Medin maha Perahera* organized by the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya in Pannipitiya on 24 March 2018. The picture was published on the [Facebook Webpage Sri Devram Maha Viharaya \(2018a\)](#).

The culmination of the Ravana *perahera* is the tenth and final elephant who carries on his back a Ravana *piliruva* (image or statue), as it was called by one of the monks involved in the organization of the *Medin maha perahera*. As he explained in the live broadcasting of the *perahera* on ITN TV in 2017, all kings in the past had royal elephants—and consequently Ravana's statue has to be placed on an elephant as well (see Figure 6). The audience also rose to its feet to pay respect to this statue of Ravana at the time it passed by. This 'responding to representations as if they embody the things they represent' is according to Ronald Grimes one of the clearest signs of ritualization (Grimes 2014, p. 92). This representation of Ravana who is dressed as a king, adorned with royal ornaments and a crown on his head, seated on the back of the elephant is an outstanding example of the ritualization of the imagination of Ravana as king: the statue is treated with respect as if king Ravana himself passes by.

The cloths used to dress the statue and also the decoration of the elephant on which the Ravana statue is seated are red colored (see Figure 6). Most of the people in the Ravana *perahera* are dressed in red as well (see Figure 5). Also, red is the dominant color for the decorations in this *perahera*. The dominance of the red color for the Ravana *perahera* is related to power, blood, and war. In the broadcasting of the *Medin maha perahera* in 2017 the monk involved in the organization of the *perahera* elaborated in the commentary upon the use of red colors. According to him the red color is a color of pride, symbolizing strength. It represents the strength, pride, and power of the nation, the power of the Sinhalese (ITN Live Broadcasting of Perahera 2017).

In an informal conversation with the same monk he further explained that the red color used in the *perahera* functions as a spiritual invitation for Ravana. It symbolizes Ravana's braveness as a warrior (Organizing Monk Medin Maha Perahera 2017). Like the objects in the *perahera* such as the swords and the war instruments, the use of red contributes to the display of Ravana as a powerful (warrior) king. It reinforces the war-like scenery of the *perahera* while the connection with blood—a life-giving substance—connects the past to the present: red symbolizes the power of the Sinhalese both back in Ravana's days and in the present and it symbolizes the descendancy—or bloodline—of the Sinhalese from Ravana.

In 2018, even the crowning statue of Ravana was dressed in red fabric. High above the masses, and wearing a crown and jewelry, the Ravana statue was richly adorned. Sumangala Thero explained on the *perahera* day in 2017 that Ravana should better be dressed in a subtle and refined manner in the *perahera*, to underscore his extremely peaceful character, instead of wearing all kinds of ornaments (Sumangala Thero 2017a). The benevolent side of Ravana becomes increasingly prominent at the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya or at least for the head monk. It is exactly this benevolent side of Ravana which dominates the ritual that follows in the night after the *perahera*: the *maha Ravana nanumura mangalyaya*.



Figure 6. The statue of Ravana taken around in the *Medin maha Perahera* organized by the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya in Pannipitiya on 24 March 2018. The picture was published on the [Facebook Webpage Sri Devram Maha Viharaya \(2018b\)](#).

5. The Ritualizing of Ravana as Healer in the Annual *Maha Ravana Nanumura Mangalyaya*

In the night following the *Medin maha perahera*, preparations are made for a second annual ritual for Ravana: the *maha Ravana nanumura mangalyaya*. Compared to the weekly *nanumura* on Sunday evenings not only a larger number of substances is used to anoint the statues; the substances are also handed over to the audience in a different way. As I will discuss in this section these substances play a major role in the ritualizing of the conceptualization of Ravana as healer in this ritual.

According to Sumangala Thero, there are multiple reasons for him to organize the annual *maha Ravana nanumura mangalyaya*. As explained by him, similar to the *maha Ravana perahera*, it is a kind of ‘counter ritual’ to oppose the negativity allegedly brought upon Ravana by the ritual of *dasara*. Ravana is regarded as the ultimate representation of evil in the festival of *dasara* which is celebrated among Hindus in India. The summit of *dasara* is the burning of massive effigies of the ten headed Ravana.³⁰ In the *maha Ravana nanumura mangalyaya*, the negativity as allegedly brought upon Ravana

³⁰ The annual ritual of *dasara* is according to Anita Shukla one of the most popular symbols of the victory of good over evil in Indian culture (Shukla 2011, p. 175). However, as she also points to, the persona of Ravana is open to multiple interpretations. Also in India Ravana was seen as a good person from time to time. In for instance the nineteenth-century poem *Meghanadavadha kavya* (the slaying of Meghanada) composed by the Bengali poet Michael

through the ritual of *dasara* is literally washed away by using different substances to anoint the statue(s). As Sumangala Thero explained, the rituals for Ravana at the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya are performed to counterbalance the annual ritual of *dasara*:

This is done to pay tribute to all the talents and skills Ravana had. When 100 million people consider Ravana a villain and curse and burn his image every year, it is our responsibility to show the world his actual image and communicate the truth about him. We respect Ravana greatly because he is not a person destroying the world, Ravana keeps the world alive, Ravana is a person the world needs. If Ravana is allowed to come back to this world and work among the people he will be able to find solutions for the problems that prevail in the world. Ravana should be respected and loved more than this [...] (Sumangala Thero 2017b).

The *nanumura mangalyaya* is rarely described in literature except by for instance Richard Gombrich who defines this ritual as the ‘ceremony of bathing and anointing a Buddha image’ (Gombrich 2009, p. 400).³¹ As I observed in Narangamuwa (one of the rural villages in Sri Lanka, visited 17 May 2017) the *nanumura mangalyaya* is not limited to the anointing of (Buddha) images. In this *nanumura mangalyaya*—as part of the annual village ritual (*yakkama*)—attributes allegedly belonging to different gods (mainly weapons and a shield for Kanda *deviyo* in this particular village) were the objects taken out of the village shrine to be anointed (Fieldwork Visit Narangamuwa Village 2017).

The *nanumura mangalyaya* is also annually performed at famous religious sites in Sri Lanka such as Kataragama, the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy and Bellanvila Raja Maha Viharaya in Colombo.³² In addition to an annual *nanumura mangalyaya* in Kandy a weekly *nanumura mangalyaya* is performed for the tooth relic on Wednesday mornings by monks and by the lay-custodian. After they finish the ritual in the inner sanctuary a custodian takes out one massive bowl which contains a warm red coloured substance. When I was there observing the ritual (28 March 2018), the people who were waiting in the queue for more than one hour were served this substance in the small cups or bottles that they brought for this occasion. They applied the substance to their heads because they believe that it will bring healing and protect them from illnesses.

The application of the substance to the head for the sake of healing after it has been used to bathe a sacred object or statue is exactly what happens during the annual *maha Ravana nanumura mangalyaya*. But as a newly invented ritual for Ravana this ritual also has its own specific characteristics. In the remaining part of this section I will therefore primarily focus on how the imagination of Ravana as healer is ritualized in the *maha Ravana nanumura mangalyaya*.

On regular Sunday evenings approximately eleven substances are used to bathe two of the Ravana statues. For the annual *maha Ravana nanumura mangalyaya*, more than twenty types of substances are

Madhusudan Datta both the characters Rama and Ravana are subject to transformation (Dutt 2005, p. 3). Ravana becomes in this poem the hero and his son Meghanada the symbol of the oppressed Hindus under the British rule (Doniger 2010, p. 667). Also, in the context of early twentieth century Dravidian nationalism (mainly 1930–1950) in India, E.V. Ramasami praised Ravana in his work as the true hero of the *Ramayana* and as a monarch of the ancient Dravidians (Richman 1991, pp. 175–201). A positive appropriation of Ravana can also be found among Tamils in Sri Lanka for instance in the temple literature of the famous Konesvaram temple (Henry 2017, p. 172). As Henry points to, influenced by the presence of Tamils in Sri Lanka, Ravana became accepted as a historical ruler in Sinhalese literature from the 14th century onwards, for instance in *Kadayim* (boundary books) and the *Rajavaliya* (Henry 2017, pp. 60–61, 148).

³¹ As he described in the ritual which he observed no laymen were allowed to witness the ritual and an exception was made for him as a researcher. As I also encountered, the information of the ritual is often not shared with outsiders. At several shrines for gods at Kataragama (visited 17 April 2018) and Kandy (visited 27–29 March 2018) I tried to gather information on the *nanumura mangalyaya*, but most of the lay-custodians were reluctant to give out information on this particular ritual. The ones who did, stressed that they normally do not share the details of the ritual with outsiders.

³² At Bellanvila Raja Maha Viharaya they perform a *nanumura mangalyaya* for all the statues of the gods in the shrines thrice a year: in January, around the time they have the annual *perahera* and with Sinhala New Year. (Lay-Custodian of One of the Shrines of Bellanvila Raja Maha Viharaya 2018).

used to bathe the statues.³³ Also, a larger amount of each of the substances is prepared: instead of the regular bowls used on Sundays, for this annual ritual, tubs in the size of rain barrels are used. For this special occasion the lay-custodian is assisted by the main secretary of Sumangala Thero.

In the context of the *maha Ravana nanumura mangalyaya* some of the volunteers used the term *Abhishekha* to refer to the ritual: a ritual of anointing as part of the crowning ceremony for Indian kings in the past. *Abhishekha* is also used to denote the ritual anointing of images in Hindu temples, for instance the Shiva lingam. One of the volunteers explained why this *maha Ravana nanumura mangalyaya* is special to her:

It is held just once a year [*it is special*] because it is the *Abhishekha*, like a crowning ceremony. That makes it very special (Volunteer Sri Devram Maha Viharaya 2018).

Although the imagination of Ravana as king is touched upon in the *maha Ravana nanumura mangalyaya*, it mainly ritualizes Ravana as healer. This becomes primarily evident in the substances used within the ritual and the way the people interpret and employ these substances. The substances are believed to get blessed during the ritual because the *nanumura mangalyaya* is done to show respect to Ravana. This general explanation was, for instance, given by an attendant of the *maha Ravana nanumura mangalyaya*:

[...] after the *nanumura mangalyaya* is completed, we believe that the gods are pleased and that they are present. Bathing with the water and substances that were used will also do some good for us because of this reason (Attendant A of the *Nanumura Mangalyaya* 2018).

In addition to a general reason the secretary of Sumangala mentioned another reason:

Firstly, Ravana is believed to be the founder of medicine. Therefore, when the statue is washed it would evoke powers of healing; and generally when we show respect to any god he will send blessings to the people (Secretary Sumangala Thero and Caretaker of Temple Site 2018).

The first reason is related to the *persona* of Ravana in particular. As explained earlier, in the current Ravana discourse Ravana is praised for his knowledge of medicine, whether Ayurveda or 'traditional Sinhalese medicine'. In this ritual the imagination of Ravana as someone who mastered extensive knowledge of medicine in the past, is made vivid in the present. According to Sumangala Thero, Ravana does not even want people to die in our contemporary world. In one of his lectures preceding the *Medin maha perahera* in 2017 Sumangala Thero has set out his ideas on Ravana:

Have people found cures for certain diseases? Why do we let people die of sicknesses? Ravana has constantly kept saying, "people in this world cannot die because of sickness, they need to be cured." Reasons behind why people get sick has to be looked into. Though Ravana challenges the world: if a person is terribly sick in bed and drawing their last breathes, we cannot let them die like that, that patient has to recover and then die. We are a pride nation born of Ravana's blood (Sumangala Thero 2017c).

The *mandiraya* for Ravana at the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya is built with a special drainage system: at the backside of the 'tower' of the *mandiraya* in which the sanctuary is located, there is a small space where the 'waste' of the substances used for the bathing of the statues is collected during the annual ritual (see Figure 7). Because a large amount of substances is used in this annual ritual some people

³³ On a list I received from one of the main caretakers of the site in 2017, after the *maha Ravana nanumura mangalyaya*, 23 ingredients were mentioned: sesame oil, rice flour, turmeric powder, raw turmeric, *vada* turmeric, *sandanam*, cows' milk/buffalo milk, king coconut water, fruit sap, herbal leaves sap, lime juice, river water, lake water, sea water, rain water, *vibuthi*, *kunkuma*, red sandalwood, white sandalwood, scented water (rose water), jasmine water, pure water, and honey.

anoint their heads with the substances instead of drinking just a small sip like the people do on a regular Sunday evening. On a regular Sunday evening the substances also drain to this small space, but it is only during the annual ritual that people collect the substances from the back side.



Figure 7. People queuing up at the back side of the Ravana *mandiraya* to ‘bathe’ themselves with the substances used for the annual *maha Ravana nanumura mangalyaya*. Picture taken by author, 26 March 2017.

One of the reasons why these substances are believed to contain healing powers is related to the imagination of Ravana as an expert in medicines. As one of the attendants of the ritual explained, all of the medicines in the world have been founded by Ravana. Although people referred to medicines as one of the ten skills of *dasis* Ravana that he invented and/or mastered approximately 6000 years ago, this imagination becomes tangible in the present through the substances used in this particular ritual:

Ravana was the first king in Sri Lanka and he had skills including medicine and dance [. . .]. When you look at his personality and power even the substances connected to him should have some power ([Attendant B of the Nanumura Mangalyaya 2018](#)).

The ritual anointing performed with the substances in the inner sanctuary of the Ravana *mandiraya* is believed to transfer the healing power (of Ravana) into the substances. The statue of Ravana (most often only ‘one’ statue was mentioned by people, although two statues are actually anointed) plays a significant role in transferring the healing power into the substances. That the substances have touched the Ravana statue make these substances believed to contain healing powers. As one of the assistants of the lay-custodian explained:

The substances are believed to contain healing powers because they are used to bathe the Ravana statues. After these substances are used for the ritual, the substances are no longer ordinary: they gather some sort of power ([Assistant of Lay-Custodian Ravana Mandiraya 2018](#)).

And as one of the attendants of the *nanumura mangalyaya* explained:

After they bathe the statue, the water and the substances collect a power that heals us when we bathe with it. The statue is first bathed. The power the statue gives, is used to heal us (*Attendant B of the Nanumura Mangalyaya* 2018).

The stories and the beliefs of the around one hundred fifty people who queue up once a year in the early morning to collect the substances enforce the ritualizing of the conceptualization of Ravana as healer. Most of the people who come for the *maha Ravana nanumura mangalyaya* actually suffer from a 'disease': from cancer to childlessness. They come with the belief that Ravana will cure them. Others attend the ritual to be protected from illnesses and/or were cured in one of the previous years.

Compared to the *Maha Ravana perahera* which took place only half a day before, another side of Ravana is stressed in the annual *nanumura mangalyaya*: instead of his martial side as a warrior king, this ritual shows Ravana's benevolent side: a god who cares about his devotees and provides them with healing.

The *Maha Ravana perahera* attracts a larger audience than the *nanumura mangalyaya*. A reason for this is that the *Maha Ravana perahera* goes across the streets and the *nanumura mangalyaya* takes place at the temple site itself. Also, the *nanumura mangalyaya* aims at a specific audience—those who suffer from illnesses—whereas the *perahera*—like the famous Kandy *Esala perahera*—can be considered as a pageant which celebrates the national identity.³⁴

Also, the imagination of Ravana as king of Lanka is commonly accepted in the Ravana discourse and beyond and can be found in recently published books on history and children's books as well. Although the imagination of Ravana as inventor of medicines—as one of his ten different skills—is broadly agreed upon within the Ravana discourse too, Ravana is in the *nanumura mangalyaya* (a lesser known ritual) treated like a god. The deification of Ravana is less widespread and considered by some people as an excess.

6. Reflection

The Ravana imaginations constructed in the current Ravana discourse can be traced back to various sources. From the fourteenth century onwards, an acceptance of Ravana as historical ruler of Sri Lanka in Sinhalese literature can be noticed. These references, influenced by the positive rendering of Ravana by the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka, are for instance present in *Kadayim* (boundary books) and the Sinhalese chronicle the *Rajavaliya* (Henry 2017, p. 157).³⁵ Although the South Indian version of the *Ramayana* was known in early Sri Lanka it is not referred to in the earliest Sri Lankan chronicles such as the *Dipavamsa* and *Mahavamsa* (Henry 2017, pp. 145–46). It is these chronicles which are well-known in contemporary Sri Lanka.

In the early twentieth century, the imagination of Ravana as famous king of Lanka became part of the nationalistic agenda of the *Hela* movement. This imagination of Ravana as the famous king of Lanka did not find support among a wider public: the linguistic movement—with a focus on language purification—never appealed to a broader audience. Also, as Nira Wickramasinghe points to 'the Rama Sita Ravana myth which saw the king of Lanka ultimately defeated by Rama did not give Ravana a persona Sinhala people could easily identify with' (Wickramasinghe 2014, pp. 96–97).

In addition to references of Ravana as historical ruler of Lanka in literature and in the *Hela* movement, traces of the *Ramayana* story can be found in Sinhala folklore. The references to a Rama and Sita story in, for instance, the folk ritual of the *Kohomba yakkama* are however unknown to a wider

³⁴ The role of kings and the legitimization of political power in the history of the Kandy *Esala perahera* is discussed in detail by Paul Younger. As he points to the Kandy *Esala perahera* aims to express loyalty to kingship and celebrates national identity (Younger 2002, pp. 69–79).

³⁵ In the seventeenth century *Rajavaliya* it is said that there were 1844 years between the end of Ravana's war and the enlightenment of Buddha (Suraweera 2014, p. 16).

public.³⁶ References to Rama, Ravana, and Sita in literature and folk rituals in the past were rather marginal, integrated as a side note within elaborated cosmological ideas, or special rituals, and their story never became a fully-fledged myth: there is, for instance, no Sinhala *Ramayana*.

The large scale appropriation of Ravana as ancient king of Lanka among the Sinhalese-Buddhist majority in Sri Lanka is quite recent. In post-war Sri Lanka, we see a process which I have coined as *Ravanisation*: the current revitalization of Ravana among Sinhalese Buddhists in Sri Lanka. One of the core conceptualizations of Ravana within the current Ravana discourse is that he is believed to be the most famous king, not just of Lanka, but of an ancient and indigenous (*Hela*) civilization. The Ravana discourse aims at the exaltation of Ravana and Lanka's ancient and indigenous civilization. The imagination of a glorious past and, more specifically, the revitalization of Ravana finds its expression in multiple ways among Sinhalese Buddhists such as the publication of popular books and articles, the production of TV and radio programs, songs and Ravana statues, and the promotion of *Angampora*.

The newly invented rituals for Ravana at the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya are another creative expression of Ravana imaginations and the imagination of an ancient highly advanced civilization. In addition to Ravana ideas as expressed in (social) media, these rituals appeal multiple senses: in the annual *maha Ravana nanumura mangalyaya*—a small size ritual conducted at the temple site itself—the substances used to anoint the statue(s) become visible and tangible expressions of Ravana's benevolent side as healer. The display of weaponry in the *maha Ravana perahera*, the use of the red color, and the position of the Ravana statue on the back of the elephant help to construct the conceptualization of Ravana as a warrior king.

As described in this article existing formats of rituals are used at the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya, though they are completely adapted to Ravana. The *perahera* is a famous ritual in Sri Lanka and the *nanumura mangalyaya*—although not studied in detail—is also conducted at famous religious sites in Sri Lanka and as part of rural rituals.

I have employed the concept of ritualizing as it is defined by Grimes to denote this phenomenon: 'the act of cultivating or inventing rites'. As he further explains:

The “-izing” ending is a deliberate attempt to suggest a process, a quality of nascence or emergence. Ritualizing is not often socially supported. Rather, it happens in the margins, on the thresholds; therefore it is alternately stigmatized and eulogized (Grimes 2014, p. 193).

Though both rituals (still) happen in the margins as an experiment by the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya (a recently constructed Buddhist temple site) these rituals unveil key characteristics and processes which are present in the broader context of *Ravanisation* in Sri Lanka.

First of all, the production of shrines and statues, and the performances of rituals for Ravana, show that Ravana is appealing to a broader audience. As I have pointed to, Sumangala Thero is not the only monk with an interest in Ravana, and people from different layers of the society show an interest in Ravana. The latter becomes for instance evident in the fact that the *perahera* organized by the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya attracts thousands of people. The ritualizing of Ravana also shows that in the current Ravana discourse, Ravana is not an idea which only exists in the minds of the people: it is a myth complex with multiple material expressions such as statues, shrines, and rituals.

Secondly, as these rituals show, multiple conceptualizations of Ravana are constructed in the Ravana discourse. In addition to the imagination of Ravana as king of Lanka—which is also known from earlier sources—plenty of efforts are undertaken to construct positive Ravana imaginations.

³⁶ A village ritual from the Kandyan district, the *Kohomba yakama*, contains a different and complex story of Rama, Sita and Ravana from a Sinhalese perspective. This story is embedded into a particular Kuveni-Vijaya myth and, according to Godakumbura, known by a limited number of people only (Godakumbura 1993, p. xcvi). Although, it was through state intervention by the end of the twentieth century turned into a kind of a heritage ritual (Reed 2010) it was never referred to by people in my fieldwork conversations.

With reference to the iconographic representation of Ravana with ten heads and twenty arms, Ravana is believed to have exceeded in ten different skills. One of them, as discussed in more length in this article, is the conceptualization of Ravana as healer which is related to his allegedly outstanding knowledge of medicine.

Thirdly, although not discussed in detail in this article either, in addition to the multiple positive Ravana imaginations, the construction of an extensive myth of an ancient, indigenous, and highly advanced civilization is also of central importance in the context of *Ravanisation*. Ravana is in the Ravana discourse disassociated from the *Ramayana* context and embedded within the Sri Lankan chronicle tradition. An example of this are for instance the extensive references in the Ravana discourse to the *yakshas* and *nagas*—mythical beings which are, with reference to the famous chronicle the *Mahavamsa*, turned into highly advanced tribes. With reference to the *Mahavamsa*, it is also frequently stressed in the Ravana discourse that these tribes were present in Sri Lanka long before the arrival of the Indian prince Vijaya. It thus unveils an anti-India sentiment by stressing that these tribes are indigenous tribes.

That the Ravana myth should not be considered a version of the *Ramayana* becomes for instance clear in the wall paintings of the Ravana *mandiraya*: These wall paintings concentrate on Ravana's skills and the ancient Ravana civilization (also referred to as *Hela* civilization in the broader Ravana discourse). References to the *Ramayana* are also absent in the rituals for Ravana. Instead of a defeated Ravana as known from the *Ramayana*, the pride of the nation and the national identity (of the Sinhalese Buddhists)—which allegedly can be traced back to Ravana—is celebrated in the *maha Ravana perahera*.

This glorification of Ravana—who is turned into a legendary national hero of the Sinhalese-Buddhist majority—and his ancient civilization has to be understood in the context of increased assertiveness and nationalistic sentiments among the Sinhalese Buddhist majority in post-war Sri Lanka. Although not studied in detail, in the aftermath of the civil war (2009 onwards) a tendency similar to the post-independence period can be noticed among the Sinhalese-Buddhist majority: fostered by feelings of triumphalism there is an increase of feelings of majoritarianism, instead of the inclusion of minorities.³⁷

The glorification of an (imagined) ancient indigenous civilization in Sri Lanka is a way to express feelings of triumphalism and superiority over minorities. Lanka belongs to the *Hela* and the *Hela* are considered the ancestors of the Sinhalese. The recently invented rituals performed for Ravana at the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya and the broader efforts undertaken in the Ravana discourse have to be understood in this context: to help create an image of a glorious past. As also pointed to in this article, in the rituals a connection with the present is made. In the contexts of both rituals, references are made to power—not just of Ravana—but also of the nation (of the *Hela* or Sinhalese). In speeches and comments the audience is addressed to as born from Ravana's blood. Both the rituals and the speeches are thus stimulating the audience to awaken a sense of the strong (imagined) heritage of Sri Lanka and a pride of being Sinhalese.

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³⁷ As formulated in a policy rapport on *Dynamics of Sinhala Buddhist Ethno-Nationalism in Post-War Sri Lanka* (Zuhair 2016) the government under Rajapaksa nurtured a majoritarian mind-set among the Sinhalese majority which comprises between 70% and 75% of Sri Lanka's population. Also, as pointed out by Gunatilleke, although Sirisena—who won the elections in 2015—expressed in his election manifesto a commitment to end ethno-religious violence, this promise has not been fulfilled (Gunatilleke 2018, pp. 1, 11; Zuhair 2016). Communal violence is for instance still commonplace in Sri Lanka.

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