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A Child's Eye View From 1979

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Apē Perahera

A Child's Eye View From 1979

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Children's paintings gathering dust.

This book tells the story of some children's paintings that were collected in a small town called Kotapola in Southern Sri Lanka in 1979. The paintings capture different aspects of a festival known as a Perahera. This event takes place annually in the town where the children live. Over several days and nights, the whole town is taken over by the festival . The paintings were made as part of a competition I organised in a local school. In a way that was not entirely thought through at the time, I wanted to get a sense of how children viewed a significant aspect of their own cultural life. For almost forty-five years, the paintings have gathered dust on the top of a wardrobe in my home in Northern England. During a visit by some friends in 2023, a discussion about art and children's creativity, prompted me to get them out to show them. The paintings were just as special as I remembered. My friends were emphatic: 'You must do something with them'. They were right, the 80 or so paintings made by young people between the ages of 7 and 19 are exceptional; they are vibrant, colourful and superbly detailed. By way of a taster of what is to come, I start with two paintings [figures 1 and 2]. One is by G. Somathileke and the other by T.L.G. Nandawathi. Both were 13 years old at the time the painting were made. These individuals are significant, not only for the works they produced back then but also because they were both instrumental in bringing the story of the paintings up to date forty-five years later.

Reflecting on the paintings in 2023, what I realised, and what I could not have appreciated at the time I collected them, was that they capture something important about Sri Lankan culture at a pivotal moment in the Island's history. They are not mere representations of a popular pageant but provide a snapshot of young people's understanding of the world into which they were growing. In the paintings are clues about how they have internalised ideas about cultural identity, political power and economy, and the ways that these intersect with religious and other-worldly powers. The paintings are magical in the sense that they bring into vision things that were not there before. This was a kind of magic that it seemed important to share. And so, the idea of a book about the paintings began to take shape. I wanted to tell the story of how I came by them, what they portray, and how the children came to represent things in the way they did.

What soon fell into place was a project that unfolded easily and seemingly under its own momentum. I began to study the paintings more closely and consider them in terms of their content and aesthetic impact. I revisited notes and photographs I'd collected as part of my doctoral research between 1978-80. I had not looked at these for decades – they too had gathered a lot of dust. Re-visiting these materials felt like a kind of time travel in which I was transported back to the strange mix of curiosity, excitement and anxiety I experienced when first living in the rural south of Sri Lanka in the late 1970s. My curiosity tweaked, I made enquiries about people I had known back then and soon began to re-make connections. A former student, Dr. Tharindi Udalagama put me in touch with A.D.K. Madhushani Taraka [Sanju], a former colleague of hers who came from Matara and who had relatives in the Kotapola area. Sanju was able to make contact with Mr Premawantha, then head of the Kotapola National School where the paintings were originally made. The initial communications left them incredulous: a retired professor from the UK talking about paintings made at the school 45 years ago? A very fortuitous connection that emerged from this early contact was with Miss T.L.G. Nandawathi, a science teacher at the school. She had been a pupil at the school, and at the age of 13 had completed the painting reproduced in figure 2. She remembered me visiting the school, the competition and the prize giving. She had gone on to do advanced levels in science but maintained an interest in the arts throughout her career. Although she didn't paint or draw, she did write poems and stories for radio and newspapers. The connection with Miss Nandawathi proved crucial. She was enthusiastic about the paintings project and, to my delight, was still in touch with several schoolmates from 1979.

Mr Premawantha, the school's head, retired about the time that I made contact and responsibility for dealing with my enquiries was passed on to Miss Nandawathi who took up the job with great interest. About the time that ideas about how to proceed with the project were coming together I had a conversation with Vindhya Buthpitiya from St Andrew's University in Scotland. Having carried out much research into visual culture in Sri Lanka she too was captivated by the paintings. I have to thank her for suggesting the possibility of a reunion of the painters and also the idea of a second art competition on the same theme to provide a comparator with the first one. At that time, these seemed remote possibilities as I had no plans to return to Sri Lanka. However, a return visit beckoned when Miss Nanadwathi identified ten of her classmates who had made paintings and passed on details of their names and phone numbers. Sanju was able to contact some of these. What followed was a remarkable encounter. I was able to match names to paintings. Photos of the paintings were then sent to Sanju's phone and, if the painters had smart phones, she was able to send the images to them. The response from the painters, now approaching retirement age and scattered across the island, was one of astonishment. Several commented that they found looking at the pictures deeply moving; they too were launched into a kind of time travel. The paintings were a sudden link with their childhoods that they could not have imagined. As one painter commented: 'I don't have a single thing to remember my school days by'. The paintings were even more poignant given that, for many of the painters, childhood had been brought to a sharp, and for some, a terrifying end with the onset of the civil conflict that consumed the southern provinces in the 1980s. This is a theme which I explore in more detail in the penultimate chapter. I was also put in touch with one Mr. Kaushalya, the son of Miss Gamage [now deceased] who was the art teacher who presided over the original art competition. With the initial response from the school in Kotapola I was motivated to go further with the project and the idea of trip to Sri Lanka began to take shape. My to-do list had the following things on it: repatriate the paintings into a local archive of some kind, learn more about art and art education in Sri Lanka, visit the school in Kotapola and the nearby temple where the Perahera had taken place, organise a reunion of the original painters, set up a second art competition at the school and, finally, identify a local publisher for the book I planned to write. All of the above were greatly facilitated by contacts that Vindhya supplied. One contact in particular proved to be very important; this was with the artist Pala Pothupitiye. A film about Pala's life had been made for which Vindhya, along with Theena Kumaragurunathan, had written the storyline. The film, entitled simply 'Pala' gives penetrating

insights into the life of this remarkable character. [1] Pala was born in 1972 in a remote village on the edge of the Sinharaja forest. The nearest town of any size was Deniyaya which was just up the road from Kotapola where the paintings came from. This meant that not only was he familiar with the area but was also a contemporary of the children who produced the paintings. His family were of the Navandanna or blacksmith caste and, like the Berava caste with whom I worked back then, people of the Navandanna caste are highly creative makers of things but also have a long history of prejudice suffered at the hands of those from 'higher' castes. Pala's father had been a ritualist [*kattadiya*] and in addition to metal working skills was able to dance, drum and perform healing rituals in which the malign attentions of demons are confronted and dispelled. Pala had imbibed much of his family's knowledge and skills and in later life channelled these, not into exorcism, but into his art. The film of Pala's life is set around a full scale Suniyam ceremony. These elaborate and complex rituals are staged to cut a sorcery that is afflicting a sick person [*āturiya*]. The film had a profound effect on me – more time travel. I was seeing a ritual performance which in most respects was identical to the ones I had witnessed in 1979 and, moreover, one that I thought it was no longer possible to perform at this scale. I even recognised one of the drummers from my time doing fieldwork in the Southern Province; the young man I had known back then was, like me, now elderly and grey. The ritual which features in Pala's film was the first one to be performed for decades and was a major event in the area. I am still intrigued by the fact that such a large-scale ritual conducted over 18 hours could still be performed after being in effect dormant for so many years.

It was clear that Pala was, in so many respects, a person whose insights would be valuable to my project. There seemed to be so many potential links and connections. When I did eventually get to Sri Lanka in March 2024, I met Pala and a great friendship was established. I was also introduced to the extensive network of artists, teachers and art collectors that he moves among. Even though he is now a very successful international artist, Pala was both humble and generous. He is without doubt an extraordinary individual. During my time in Sri Lanka, I often stayed at Pala's soon-to-open arts centre and also travelled with him on several occasions. His interest in the children's paintings led him to join me when I did eventually get to visit Kotapola school. Together we judged the new art competition that was held in the school, and he attended the reunion celebrations that took place on the 19th March,2024. Coming from that area it was clear that there were people he knew from his childhood. His presence added yet another dimension to what I was able to see and understand was going on at the event.

As I describe in the final part of the book, the reunion proved to be a remarkable event. It was one that I found deeply moving. In Sri Lanka, termites and the tropical climate soon see off paper and books. Many times I have seen once precious documents and tomes damp, disintegrating and full of holes. It was not surprising therefore that paintings made in an art lesson over forty years ago still existed caused amazement. People were deeply appreciative of the fact that not only had I kept the paintings but also physically brought them back to the school for the reunion. What was most moving however was that many of the people who came to the event had not seen one another since childhood. The meeting was a very happy one. The reunion brought me full circle. I spent an extremely formative spell in Sri Lanka between 1978-80 and in 2024 I returned as a retired academic [for another formative experience]. It also brought the painters full circle too. This arc across lifetimes is the story I tell in what follows. I begin with my first meetings with ritual specialists from the Berava caste in 1978; how I came to meet the temple priest at the Getabaru temple and got to know of its annual Perahera; my experiences of the annual Perahera at the temple and how this became the subject of a children's art competition. The story of the paintings also raises issues of much wider significance. Making sense of children's representations of the world in which they were growing up throws light on the place of art in Sinhala culture and how this has been refracted through educational policy and the troubled quest for a national identity following independence.

Part One

Serendipity

The Berava.

In 1978 I began doctoral fieldwork in Sri Lanka. That I began studying there was pure serendipity. Before it was the British colony of Ceylon, Sri Lanka had many names, one of which It just so happens was Serendib, derived from classical Persian. It was from this word that art historian and man of letters Horace Walpole coined the term serendipity in 1754. Walpole was enchanted by a Persian fairytale in which three princes travelled the world "making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things they were not in quest of..." (Remer, 1965:20). My initial application to the UK's Social Science Research Council in 1977 was for a project to study pilgrimage in north India. Over the course of my first year as a PhD student one thing led to another and an interest in the material paraphernalia of pilgrimage began to take shape. This evolved into a project on the anthropology of art, craft and representation in Sri Lanka. One of the things that I was 'not in quest of' in this study was the collection of young people's paintings that over forty years later have given me the reason to write this book.

When I arrived in Sri Lanka in 1978, I was interested in what might broadly be thought of as cultural reproduction. However, my curiosity was not so much with the objects produced as the social relations that enabled reproduction to happen in the first place. I was eager to learn more about the transmission of knowledge, apprenticeship and ritual practice. Again, by pure serendipity, I fell in with members of the Berava or drummer caste.[2] It soon became apparent that across the kinship networks of the caste, a significant portion of the Island's ritual and artistic production was going on. In addition to drumming, the families that I came to know were adept at dancing, astrology, mask-making, creating ritual structures out of plant materials [*gok kalāva*], and making images [*rūpa*] of deities and demons for various rituals as well as statues for Buddhist temples. They were also in command of a vast oral tradition of poems and incantations that enabled men from the caste to perform rituals and ceremonies to bring relief and protection to those facing the inexorable facts of death, decay and disorder.

My time with ritual practitioners of the Berava caste and their families provided an extraordinary introduction to the rich cultural traditions of southern Sri Lanka. These people had kept the lifeblood of ritual performance flowing across generations and, during my time among them, it was clear that this was still a responsibility they felt towards future ones. It was through knowledge and insight provided by my Berava friends and associates that I came to understand something of the way in which the rich cosmology of the Sinhalese works, made up as it is of a hierarchy of gods, deities and demons with Lord Buddha venerated at its apex. The daily work of many Berava men is to service this hierarchy with the drumming, dancing and complex body of knowledge and ritual skills needed to bring others into relationship with its supernatural powers and possibilities. Yet, there seemed to be something of a contradiction in place. Although members of the Berava caste were at the heart of ritual and artistic production across the island and drumming is an essential element in almost all ritual that takes place in Sri Lankan society, they occupied a lowly place in the Sinhalese caste hierarchy. By 1979, many of the most visible excesses of caste prejudice had greatly ameliorated. Berava men could now go about in public with their upper bodies covered and educational exclusion was mostly a thing of the past. However, humiliating traces of caste prejudice were still in evidence. Back then, rules that set the community apart, such as prohibitions on marriage outside a person's caste or rules about who could sit together at a table to eat, were still strongly observed. These attitudes were clearly survivals of an earlier feudal hierarchy in which service tenure to royal courts and temples was fundamental. At the time of my fieldwork, many Berava people had never touched a drum or engaged in ritual performance. Nonetheless, the stigma attached to their profession remained strong. For people of the Berava caste, the view of their place in society was rather different. They believe themselves to be descended from high status sages [*bamunu*] who had migrated from India centuries ago bringing with them esoteric knowledge about how to perform healing rituals and how events in the world might be given meaning through astrology.[3]

To carry out my study of the social organisation of knowledge and tradition within the Berava caste, I settled in the provincial town of Akuressa, some 18 miles inland from the coastal town of Galle. Specifically, I was keen to learn more about the ceremonies intended to heal and dispatch the malign attentions of demons and ghosts from sick and troubled individuals. Having witnessed an all-night exorcism ritual [*tovil*] early on in my days in Akuressa, I was totally captivated. Just how were these exceptional feats of performance organised practically and conceived of intellectually? How was the considerable knowledge and skill necessary for such performances transmitted from generation to generation? Much had been written about Sri Lankan ritual traditions but with little mention of the creativity that runs through these complex and vibrant ritual practices. When completed, my thesis described how ritual knowledge and skills were passed back and forth between Berava families. At the heart of this exchange were intra-caste apprenticeships taking in ritual performance as well as a wide range of other artistic and craft skills. This system of co-operation between families, was often cemented by marital alliances. The typical pattern was for women to move to the village of a husband - known as a *diga* marriage - and for her children to move back to her natal village to study with her kinsmen, and more often than not, one of her brothers [*māmā*]. I argued that this close interweaving of marriage, apprenticeship and performance ensured the continued dynamism of the ritual tradition and its recognition in the wider community.[4]

The *kapurāla* and the temple.

As well as the art of drawing down supernatural powers to provide healing and relief, ritual exponents of the Berava caste were also renowned, and indeed somewhat feared, for their knowledge of how to use these powers for nefarious purposes. Although less talked about, some men in the community knew about sorcery and how to visit harm on an adversary. For a fee, those skilled in these dark arts would compose *vas kavi*, literally poisonous poems, or intone mantra over hair or nail clippings to enlist demons or minor deities to cause misfortune to fall upon someone. In a society in which recourse to formal channels of justice and retribution are lengthy and often ineffective, appeal to supernatural retribution is widespread. With the collapse of the traditional, village institutions for the resolution of disputes on the one hand, and a deep distrust of the machinery of state justice on the other, a space had opened up in which these dark arts flourished. Among the rural and urban poor, sorcery and related activities offered one of the few means to achieve justice and, perhaps, revenge and retribution.[5] This was a space in which Berava ritual exponents were believed to operate.

It was clear that some people would commission the services of those skilled in these arts but the fear of being the target of such attacks was probably out of all proportion to any such practices. Rather, day to day concerns about jealousies, social conflict and any resulting malign intent readily translate into fears of sorcery. In Sri Lankan society these suspicions typically fall on relatives, friends and neighbours. Knowingly or unknowingly, people might have committed wrongs that then bring the enmity of others upon them. Ritual practitioners from the Berava caste [*ædūra*] are called upon to provide protection against these forces, which are also ones that they themselves can summon to cause harm. That they are comfortable with these kinds of supernatural transactions comes down to the fact that many of their number live in a world in which demons, ghosts and spirits are never far away. This is not simply a matter of belief, but a deep feeling of sensory engagement with unseen others cultivated over generations. Through their apprenticeships and training these ritual virtuosi have acquired special words, actions, and ritual tools that can take them into other worlds and bring the powers of those worlds into this one. Under certain conditions malevolent forces can be summoned, resisted and, on occasion, take hold of a person in the form of the gaze [*disti* or *bælma*] of a demon or god. For the *ædura* or his patient to fall under this gaze, is to fall under the power of unseen powers witnessed by onlookers as hysteria, catatonia, and glossalalia. An *ædura* is able to create, confront and expunge these effects. I was present at these kinds of encounter on many occasions and they are terrifying things to witness.

Conversations about this darker side of Berava ritual activity were often guarded and uncomfortable. Such actions were not ones that should be broadcast too loudly. Indeed, enquiries about such matters tended to result in acknowledgement of their existence by the person being asked but denial that they themselves had ever actually practiced them. This response would be followed by a referral on to someone else who was better informed about such matters – a common strategy for dealing with an inquisitive anthropologist.

One of the points of referral was to a *kapurala* who lived and worked further up the Nilwala valley near Deniyaya. A *kapurāla* or *kapumahattaya* is a priest who intercedes with gods [*dēviyō*] and sometimes with gods who are also demons [*dēvatāva*]. In the Sinhala Buddhist pantheon there are gods and goddesses who live in their own domain, the *dēva lōka.* They are virtuous and follow the Buddhist precepts and strive towards the final release of *nibban*. They are called upon by people for relief and protection. Beneath the world of gods is the world of demons, the *yakṣa lōka*. Whereas the gods are benevolent and protective, the demons inflict illness and suffering. They are the epitome of irrationality, cruelty and disorder and widely feared for the havoc they can bring to the world of humans [*manusa lōka*]. The *kapurāla* that I was referred to, although of a different caste, was a regular collaborator with many of my Berava associates. Like them, he worked at the interface of the worlds of men, gods and demons. He was well known for his ability to intercede with benevolent as well as malevolent agents, albeit it in the interests of justice and revenge for his clients. It was suggested that he was someone who I should definitely meet if my questions were to be answered.

The *kapurāla* officiated at the Getabaru temple on the hill above the small town of Kotapola and close by the school where the art competition would eventually take place. Although working alongside Buddhist priests in a temple compound, the *kapurāla* serves a very different purpose for those who seek his services. Whereas visits to a Buddhist priest might be about accumulating virtue and merit for future rebirths, the *kapurāla,* rather like the Berava ritual exponents I had come to know, looks to address existential questions in the here and now. Whereas for the Berava their work mainly engages demons and ghosts, the *kapurāla* works at a more elevated place in the pantheon. He intercedes with a variety of gods with whom he has a special relationship. People come to him with questions such as: how might the gods look favourably on my next business venture? How might they protect my children as they enter their next stage of education? In the face of misfortune, the gods might be enlisted to answer questions such as 'why me?' and 'what can I do about it?'. The *kapurāla* at Getabaru was widely known for his ability to enlist the aid of a powerful local deity, Rajjuru Bandara, to bring about retribution for those who have been wronged. In this role the *kapurāla* worked as a kind of spiritual amplifier. He received the private grievances and anxieties that are common place in Sinhalese society and, with the aid of the gods he served, transposed these into publicly announced desires for justice in the form of violent and corporal punishments meted out by a powerful deity.

The *kapurāla* mentioned as someone who could help with my questions went by the name of Andris and on 21st August 1979 I set off with Wije, who often acted as an assistant, to visit him. We travelled up in a Ceylon Transport Board bus from Akuressa. In rural areas buses have timetables but they bear little resemblance to what actually occurs at the bus stand. One simply shows up and waits patiently along with others, hopeful that a journey will happen at some point that day. There is no telling what adventures might occur for a bus and its crew when off the beaten track. Accidents are common and, in the monsoons, roads can quickly become waterlogged or washed away. A journey of less than a dozen miles might take a whole day. The Deniyaya bus when it arrived was a single decker of the dirty diesel variety. Pressed, day after day, into arduous service and badly in need of a service and repairs, CTB buses in rural areas are a sorry sight.

We climbed into the bus, carried along by the frantic scrum of people eager to secure a seat along with their bags, reed boxes and sacks of grains and pulses. A sweat-soaked and harassed conductor tried in vain to make the ingress of people more orderly. With passengers three to a bench and those who came late condemned to strap hanging, the conductor set about collecting fares. CTB conductors are the unsung heroes who help meet Sri Lankan people's seemingly insatiable need to journey. They wriggle and

squirm their way through a packed crowd taking fares as the bus swerves and bumps its way at reckless speed along roads that are winding and pot-holed. With remarkable dexterity they take money, give change and dispense tickets which were in those days written out by hand in duplicate, then carefully repositioning the carbon paper between pages as each one is completed. Passengers accept, for the most part stoically, the airless heat and the all-too-close proximity of their fellow travellers. From time to time the driver would do what could be mistaken for an emergency stop to let passengers off. The sudden stop had the no-doubt-intended effect of compressing the standing passengers towards the front of the bus thereby making more room for passengers to get on. '*bahinavā bahinavā*' ['getting down, getting down'] someone would shout as they fought their way to the exit, fearful that the bus would roar off before their feet had reached the safety of *terra firma*.

The route to Deniyaya climbs steadily up the Nilwala valley and as it does a cooler breeze comes through the open windows to dilute the fug of the crowded bus. The journey becomes less uncomfortable and almost pleasant. The green canopy begins to change as coconut trees and paddy fields give way to forested hills. Once through the small town of Morawaka we prepare to disembark. On the outskirts of Kotapola, the bus stops at the foot of the hill on which the Getabaru temple is built some 1400ft above sea level. This is an important stop for pilgrims wishing to visit the temple. The bus makes a longer than usual stop. Pilgrims disembark. Those travelling on convey a small donation or *panduru* to the temple offering box proffered by temple lackeys. Some passengers rise briefly from their seats in token homage, others ignore altogether the fact that they are entering the jurisdiction of a powerful deity. It is a relief to step down from the bus into fresh and cool air. We are left standing before an imposing archway or *makara torana* which marks the entrance to the lower temple. The gateway is shrouded by an enormous Bo tree, the first point of veneration on the pilgrimage to the mountain temple. Having composed ourselves after the ordeal of sitting wedged for an hour in an over-crowded bus we began the ascent of Getabaru Kanda. Through the archway is a path that gives way to the lower temple grounds. After that, the ascent to the upper temple begins in earnest. The climb was steady and we paused in the heat to take in the vista which opened as we climbed. Spread before us was a sea of green across which ghostly wisps of cloud drifted. To the north lay the beginning of the ancient and now much depleted Sinharaja forest. This magnificent rain forest once covered most of the south of Sri Lanka but relentless timber extraction has reduced it to a fraction of its former extent. Scanning the horizon further takes in the Rakwana hills and the Morawak Kanda. The staircase zig-zagged up the mountain following the hill's contours to make the climb less arduous for pilgrims. On either side of the path were large boulders, between which pushed grasses and thorn bushes. The canopy above us was a profusion of palms, vines, fruits and flowers all in the shelter of sprawling jak and mango trees. At the top of the stairs were a collection of buildings in the lee of a steep and imposing rock face. This is the upper temple of the Getabaru Rajamaha Viharaya where a sacred rock cave is home to a large sculpture of the sleeping Buddha [*sætapena buddha*]. The statue is accessed through a long, low building with a tiled roof that covers the front of the massive overhanging rock face. Attached to this building at the head-end of the sleeping Buddha, is a shrine to the gods Vishnu and Kataragama. At the foot-end of the Buddha image is a small shrine to the powerful regional deity Rajjuru Bandara – also known as Batahira Rajjuru Bandara or Basnahira Deviyo. The buildings were weathered, and the peeling plaster and paint gave the impression of a site of some antiquity. The shrine to Rajjuru Bandara looked like it was still under construction.

We made some enquiries about the *kapurāla* from a man sheltering from the heat on a verandah. He shuffled off to another building and shortly after a short man with a large girth appeared. He was wearing a blood-red shirt, a large necklace of beads and a white sarong. This was Andris, known by the more honorable title of Ratnayake Kapumattaya. He came towards us and my first impression was of a rather threatening individual. His hair was tied tightly back in a traditional bun or *konde*. His face was wide and unsmiling. He had a thick black moustache that hung down on either side of his mouth. His eyes were dark and penetrating. I wondered whether we had disturbed him during an afternoon nap. We explained our interest in the temple and his work there. Any sense of hostility was misplaced and Ratnayake Kapumattaya was both charming and helpful. Indeed, we went on to have several more meetings with him.

Ratnayake Kapumattaya told us how he had been resident at the temple for twenty five years. He had come to the temple with his father in the mid-1950s to perform a healing ritual [*tovil*] for a priest. The priest was impressed with their work and they were offered a regular position at the temple as priests to the gods. He was also keen to elaborate on his credentials for the role. He was the twentieth *mutta*, that is, the twentieth in a line of pupillary succession [*parampará visak kapurāla kenek*]. It was a line, he claimed, that stretched back for over a thousand years. To make such a claim is to draw on the considerable power of ancient lore and ritual practice passed down from father to son. The claim makes a link with ancestors who are believed to have been closer to the gods and capable of the remarkable feats celebrated in myth and legend. Yet, as with all beings in Buddhist cosmology, their powers are subject to an entropy which sees the relationship with divine sources weaken. Over time, poems, mantra and the prayers petitioning the gods lose their potency. Ritual knowledge becomes corrupted and distorted and its efficacy compromised. Today the actions of a *kapurāla,* whilst inspiring awe in some, are a source of scepticism in others. In the emergent sophistications of modernity, those who mediate between mundane, visible worlds and invisible, supernatural ones are often cast as charlatans and frauds, until, that is, illness and misfortune raise questions that cannot easily be answered. Ratnayake Kapumattaya was not troubled by criticism, however. He explained that he was happy with his lot in life and was devoted to the work he carried out. He didn't own paddy lands but earned a good living from the *dēvāle*, particularly on full moon days [*poya*]. His relationship with the gods, and particularly Rajjuru Bandara, was reverential and deeply personal. The gods were not mere lumps of painted plaster but living entities with whom he communicated directly and with ease. His reputation for integrity and the results of his intercessions with the deities had spread far and wide. He was a man who was known to produce results. As evidence of his reputation he listed *kapurāla* from the most powerful *devāle* in Sri Lanka who regularly visited him.

Ratnayake Kapumattaya explained why Getabaru Devale was such an important pilgrimage site. The story he told linked the site with events of great antiquity which resonate strongly with the dominant themes of Sinhalese ethno-history and nationalism. Following defeat by Tamil invaders, a king called Valagamba fled to the south of Sri Lanka where he lived in the jungle for fourteen years before regaining the throne. During that time, he lived in a cave high on a mountain which was later to become the site of pilgrimage at Getabaru. In his exile, the king was aided by a Buddhist monk who fed him from his begging bowl. In return for the monk's kindness, the king built a temple or *vihāra* close by the cave. There is no evidence that these events took place, yet, the association with the king persists and adds to the overall pull of Getabaru as a place of great historical significance.[6] It identifies the area as one in which Buddhism, when under threat was, protected and preserved. Indeed, the story of Getabaru is a fractal replication of a myth of Buddhism in peril that features regularly within a wider Sinhala Buddhist historical and cosmological consciousness.[7] The original *vihāra* has long since gone, but over the centuries Getabaru Rajamaha Viharaya developed into a thriving pilgrim centre and has continued to do so into the present day. In 1979 there were places of worship, priests' residences and Bo trees along the path leading to the hill-top cave and steady stream of visitors making the arduous ascent up the mountain.

Ratnayake Kapumattaya went on to tell several other stories which marked Getabaru out as an extraordinary place. One story told of a hunter who, at some point in the early nineteenth century, went in search of a white elk said to live on the Getabaru Kanda. He tracked it down to a cave high in the hillside. He shot at the elk but missed and then lost its trail. He began to clear away the growth around a cave so that he might track the elk coming and going. Inside the cave the hunter found a large and ancient Buddha statue. This cave and its statue are nowadays the focal point of the Getabaru complex. As a coda to the story of the statue , he told of how the hunter waited outside the cave hoping to catch the elk. It started to rain and he took shelter inside the cave where it was cold and damp. To help cope with the cold he wished for a chew of betel. At the point a crab wandered past and

Figure 3

placed an areca nut at his feet which was exactly what he had been wishing for. In short, the mountain is a sacred place which has the power to satisfy inner wishes and desires.

Another story which for Ratnayake Kapumattaya greatly enhanced the reputation of the place concerned the power of the God Rajjuru Bandara. It concerned a wondrous bunch of bananas. The enormous fruits were growing on a tree in the nearby village of Urumutta and news of their spectacular size and quality spread far and wide. However, one day the comb had been cut and had fallen to the ground and was ruined. The villagers were furious at this, believing it to have been an act of malice on the part of someone jealous of the owner's good fortune. A group of villagers went to petition Rajjuru Bandara to punish the miscreant. Despite their entreaties nothing happened and their disenchantment with the god grew. Sometime later, however, someone noticed that close by the banana tree there was a cane creeper whose end had been burnt to a cinder. It was established that the creeper had gown around the banana tree and its back-and-forth movement in the wind had severed the comb's stalk. No person had felt the god's wrath, but the cane creeper had. After this episode the people's belief in the god's ability to identify wrongdoers and punish them was enhanced even more.

As well as stories, Ratnayake Kapumattaya treated us to black tea and cake and a guided tour of the *dēvāle*. The image of Rajjuru Bandara was housed in a modest building that appeared to be still undergoing construction. After paying obeisance and muttering some prayers, he slowly pulled back the curtain to reveal the god Rajjuru Bandara. Ratnayake Kapumattaya claimed a special relationship with this deity. His work with the deity demanded his utmost devotion and respect. He always wore white when communing with the deity and would never take his clothes home for fear they would be become contaminated, and especially by the women of his household. Because of this special relationship he could enlist the god to help people with a wide range of illnesses and misfortunes. Such is the power he can command he claimed, he could cause the death of a person if their deeds had been dastardly enough. The request for such an action would have to be signed with his own blood.

The god Rajjuru Bandara and his agent, Ratnayake Kapumattaya , are renowned for the practice of *avalāda*, the act of petitioning the gods for retribution. On the day that Wije and I were there a stream of people arrived to present their problems. We sat in a dark corner of the *devālē* and listened as each of the appellants presented their case to Ratnayake Kapurala. A 91-year-old woman had struggled up the mountain to tell of her desperate situation. She had been a beggar all her life and lived on government public assistance. On Maha Poya Day earlier in the month, she had been robbed of Rs1350/50 and her house had been burnt down. She appealed to the God to destroy those who had caused her such distress and hardship. A middle-aged woman knelt at the foot of the God and described how a wallet containing three pairs of golden ear studs had been stolen. She appealed to the God to give her some tell-tale signs of who the culprit was so that she might take action. An affluent looking woman complained that a young man had snatched her right ear stud whilst she was wearing it. Not only had she lost the stud but her ear lobe was badly damaged. She wanted the thief to be punished. A school teacher described how there was conflict among his colleagues. He appealed to the God to bring about better relations between himself and his colleagues and particularly the school principal. It was notable that this appellant came in trousers but changed into a more traditional sarong whilst the offering was made and then changed back again when the work was done. A stenographer to a Supreme Court Judge complained that trees on his land were frequently cut down and removed. He wanted severe punishment for those who were guilty of the thefts. A man complained that another man, who he specifically named, had repeatedly made false complaints against him. He asked for this to stop and to be granted redress. A social services employee came telling the story of how his brother had been murdered. Someone had poisoned the toddy that he had drunk. The appellant asked the God to visit the same fate on the murderer. A young mother carrying a small baby asked the Kapurala to invoke the blessings of Vishnu and Kataragama. The baby had become ill and she believed that this was due to unfavourable planetary configurations [*apala kālaya*] but also that evil [*æs vaha*] and evil mouth [*kata vaha*] had played their part. A blind woman petitioned the God. She had been the victim of an acid attack which she believed to have been caused by a woman who was 'friendly' with her husband. In each of the above cases Ratanayake Kapurala did the petitioning but in one case the appellant went directly to the God. This was a Buddhist priest from Galle who recited a *vas kavi*, literally a poison poem. His grievance was that a fellow priest, was a mischief-maker and did not follow the precepts at all [*dusilmahana*]. In terms unbecoming for a priest, he appealed to the God to send a harmful sorcery [*yakpilliya*] to the other priest. He asked that the king of demons send his hoards to destroy the errant priest by fire. When this business had finished the priest recited another *vas kavi*. This one concerned a young girl who had eloped with a scoundrel. The priest asked that the God help send her home. At the end of each of these heartfelt petitions, the *kapurāla* would intone his plea for the God to act: 'Let his hand break from the wrist, may he be unable to eat rice, may he be destroyed by unseen forces and may his family meet with disaster'. Through a fog of camphor, a coconut, along with whispered instructions, was passed to each complainant. Outside the *devālē* , the coconuts were smashed on a large stone littered with the debris of the day's hopes for justice. After a brief moment of contemplation on the fate awaiting their tormentors, the appellant would with varying degrees of fury dash the coconut on the slab. In several cases, Ratnayake Kapumattaya stooped to inspect the way that the coconut had smashed, for this would tell him whether their efforts would bear results.

Back in 1979, the god Rajjuru Bandara was not so well known in Sri Lanka. In the South of the Island however, his powers were widely known and respected. The region in which Getabaru is located is known as the Morawak Korale which was once an administrative district of the Kandyan kingdom. The Bandaras were a lineage of officers at the highest levels of service to the king and keepers of the king's treasury. Bandaras were also regional heads of the districts surrounding the Kandyan highlands. Over time, the Bandaras took on the trappings of kingship and became revered as gods after their passing. Worship of the Bandara gods, of which there are many, is prominent in the Kandyan region. Rajjuru Bandara became the regional deity for the south-west of the Island and his jurisdiction survives in titles such as Batahira Devindu and Basnahira Deviyan. Rajjuru Bandara is the only Bandara god worshipped in the southern province and provides an important point of connection to the Kandyan tradition.[8] The association of the Getabaru mountain with the God Rajjuru Bandara is a major attraction for pilgrims from all over the island.

The main event for pilgrims to the Getabaru temple is the annual Perahera celebration in which the sacred objects associated with Lord Buddha and the gods are paraded around the town and its environs. In particular the crowds come hoping to get the benefits of the god Rajjuru Bandara. Indeed, the rise to prominence of both the god and the event are mutually reinforced with the efforts of Ratnayake Kapumahattaya fundamental to both. The Perahera is a grand, ceremonial procession that takes place once a year. It is modelled on the more famous and lavish Kandy Esala Perahera.[9] These processions are common and occur at varying scales. In each case they offer a powerful dramatisation of the cosmological hierarchy consisting of Buddha and the gods. The procession is also an important ritual of state. It demonstrates how the political hierarchy is mapped onto, and thereby receives authority from, the powerful characters that animate the Sinhala Buddhist pantheon. The image taken from The Graphic magazine of 18th July 1885 shows an early representation of the Kandy Perahera (figure 3).[10] What is striking about this image is the durability of the Perahera as a public spectacle. As will be seen in part two, over one hundred years later many elements of the procession and the order in which they appear are still present. Today, as back in the 19th century, walking behind the many elephants that are brought in for the event, politicians and state officials in ceremonial dress occupy key positions in the running order of the procession. Originally, the festival was closely linked with the need to ensure rains came and the annual rice harvest was thus secured. The Getabaru Esala Perahera was in many respects modelled on the Kandy Esala Perahera and was to become the theme of the children's art competition.

The Getabaru mountain has been a site of religious significance for centuries. However, it is in the mid-19th century that a community of monks took up residence and the present Getabaru Rajamaha Viharaya religious community began to take shape. In 1834 the Ven. Weerasinghe Kanda Sumangala Thero became the Chief Incumbent of the temple and a chain of pupillary succession established. Throughout this period the temple and its mythical links with the times of ancient kings was not widely known or celebrated. Ratnayake Kapumahattaya explained that the temple was poor and undeveloped when he and his father came in 1955 to perform a *tovil*. The Esala celebrations at that time were small-scale and attended only by people from the locality. In the account of the development of the Perahera that Ratnayake Kapumattaya gave he claimed much credit for the success that the event came to have in subsequent years. However, his account of the rise to success of the Perahera hinted at the fraught and difficult preparations that went into organising it. Each year, the event was planned by a committee of interested parties. Squabbles would break out between the monks in the upper temple and the ones in the lower temple. Party political differences – Sri Lanka Freedom Party [SLFP] vs United National Party [UNP] - would surface among the local politicians who were patrons of the event. The Esala Perahera should take place in July but, during the insurrection that had taken place in the early 1970s, the event had been put back to August. In recent years the conflicts over its organisation meant it had been put back to October and at several junctures it looked like it might have been cancelled all together. The calendrical link with the onset of rains and ensuring a good rice harvest was thus dislodged, despite much of the original symbolism and ceremonial being retained. It was clear that a major challenge in getting the Perahera to occur at all was navigating between feuding priests and interfering local politicians to say nothing of policemen, notaries and government officials. It was perhaps made even more difficult in that Ratnayake Kapumattaya himself had once stood as a candidate for the Communist Party and had later stood as an independent.

Beside politics, Ratnayake Kapumattaya also bemoaned money as an abiding source of conflict. Each year he aimed to make enough money at the Perahera to fund the next one. This arrangement had worked well for many years. However, the change of government from SLFP to UNP in 1977 saw one of the temple's main advocates [an SLFP politician and prominent local businessman] emigrate to the UK. Under his patronage and the close collaboration of Ratnayake Kapumattaya, the Perahera had grown such that during the period 1970-77 the grandest Peraheras were held. These had as many as 24 elephants in the procession, elephants being a ready index of the scale and grandeur of the event. Ratnayake Kapumattaya and the politician worked well together and it was a great loss when he left the country. Out of gratitude and respect, Ratnayake Kapumattaya still did *puja* regularly to bestow blessings on the man. Even though the businessman continued to give support from the UK, financing the event became more fraught. Things had got particularly difficult in run-up to the 1979 Perahera. A substantial sum had disappeared from the books recording the previous year's earnings. The police and the local member of parliament were involved in trying to trace the missing funds, and the fraud brought suspicion on everyone. Ratnayake Kapumattaya was particularly aggrieved that his own financial situation had come under scrutiny. Although he paid a regular amount to the temple, it was suggested that the earnings from the *devālē* during the festival period, which were considerable and which he regarded as his own income, should in future go to the temple fund in general. He was adamant that the temple and the annual Perahera would not have developed as they had done without his work. Moreover, it was his intercession with the god Rajjuru Bandara that had assisted in rural development activities in the region, and it had even enabled local ministers to secure positions in government. Despite bad feeling and festering enmities, the 1979 Perahera did in fact happen and I attended as a guest of Ratnayake Kapumattaya. My encounter with this extraordinary man was indeed serendipitous. He gave me important insights into the event that would in due course provide the subject matter for the children's art competition.

The school teacher and art competition

It was some weeks after the 1979 Getabaru celebrations that I was in conversation with Mr Mawdasa, the brother-in-law of my landlord. Mr Mawdasa lived further up the Nilwala valley near the town of Morawaka and was deputy principal at the nearby Kotapola Maha Vidyalaya. He was a regular visitor to his in-laws down in Akuressa. While his wife was catching up on family gossip he would amble over to my room and sit, uninvited, and quietly read his newspaper. It seemed that he was glad to have somewhere to escape from the mundanities of family life. Mr Mawdasa was a handsome man [figure 4]. One of his pupils later remembered him as being like a 'Hindi actor'. He was also an earnest and thoughtful individual. He didn't' say much but we would occasionally touch on the staples of Sri Lankan life, that is, politics and religion. I was interested to know what he thought about things and *vice versa*. He was particularly curious about my research even though the idea of a foreigner coming all the way to Akuressa to study healing rituals by way of befriending their marginalised low caste exponents was a little difficult to comprehend. In one conversation, the to-and-fro got onto children and how they view the world. It was when thinking about this

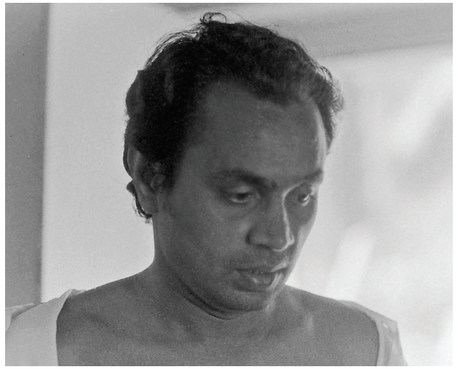

Figure 4

question that the idea of an art competition was hatched. The theme, we hit upon was one with which all the children at his school would be familiar: the recently held Getabaru Perahera celebrations. The children would be asked to paint scenes from 'our village festival' [*apē gamē utsavaya*]. The idea was that I would attend the school and simply observe the making of the paintings in a classroom. All participants would then be given a prize of paints, paper, or pencils which I would supply. Mr Mawdasa went away to gain the appropriate permissions and put the plan into operation. However, for reasons I was never able to understand, the competition went ahead with the whole school participating. I was not present at the making of the pictures, and I was simply handed a large sheaf of paintings some weeks later. I was delighted with the paintings which were of different sizes and in different media [water colour, poster paint and crayon] produced by children as young as six and young adults up to the age of nineteen. However, I was disappointed that I had no sense of the conditions under which they had been produced, nor any sense of the children who had made the paintings. Prizes were eventually distributed at a school sports day, but this was rather random and didn't connect at all to the art competition. The absence of context was perhaps one of the reasons that I didn't do anything with the paintings on my return to the UK.

The paintings that the young people of Kotapola Maha Vidyalaya produced in 1979 gave an important snapshot of cultural life.[11] The event was one that had happened recently and which they would have witnessed. Indeed, many of them would have participated in it directly as helpers or as part of the procession. Moreover, it was one that they would have watched every year from a very early age. Although a single event, the Perahera is made up of a wide range of elements which the children captured from memory with surprising accuracy. The memory I refer to however is not simply a matter of mental recollection, and, as I go on to show, it is one that comes via the body and their own experience of movement and rhythm. Many of the children were not just spectators but viewed events with what might be thought of as an informed or skilled vision which came from their actual participation in movement and dance. It is also not simply the content of the imagery that conveys something of these young people's cultural lives but the stylistic and aesthetic conventions they seem to draw upon with such ease. These aspects of the young people's work render them important documents that give insights into society at that time; they represent a unique meeting point of culture, politics and the emergent identities of young people. Finally, and perhaps most important of all, they defy any simple classification. They convey a kaleidoscope of influences which I attempt to disentangle in part three.

So, my serendipitous meetings with ritual practitioners of the Berava caste, a priest of the gods at a local temple and a helpful school teacher at a nearby school resulted in me acquiring approximately 80 paintings of the annual Esala Perahera at Getabaru. In the next section I describe my own experience of the 1979 Perahera alongside the images that the children produced of the event. The paintings correspond to aspects of the Perahera as I witnessed them and the name of the artist, their age and gender are given. The sequences of paintings are grouped together thematically and broadly follow the order in which the 1979 proceedings occurred.

Part Two

Apē Perahera

The 1979 Esala Perahera.

The annual Getabaru Esala Perahera is a three-day spectacle which draws in massive crowds from all over the Southern Province. I spent three exhausting days and nights at the festival trying to absorb the sensory extravaganza which is created when religion, commerce and carnival are brought together. The focus of the celebration is the sequence of processions that pass, late at night, up and down the main road at the foot of the Getabaru hill. The centrepiece of these processions are the caparisoned elephants that carry on their backs elaborate caskets containing the temple's relics. These are items associated with Buddha and the sacred objects of the gods. Other than for these three nights, the relics are housed all year long in the temple's image houses. Pilgrimage to the Getabaru Perahera involves witnessing the procession and visiting the various shrines on the mountain top. This is an act of worship and veneration that brings benefits, not least of which are merit, good luck and a sense of spiritual renewal. However, the festival is not merely about the enactment of piety. The event is an opportunity for people to see things and do things which are far removed from their usual day to day experience. It is an opportunity to turn holy days into holidays.

Figure 5

Figure 6

Somasiri Gamage 14M [figure 5] and K.B. Bandula Patmananda 13M [figure 6]

The first painting captures very effectively the sense of a big crowd stretching back as far as the eye can see. The impression of a mass of people is further reinforced by the way the people spill off the paper on either side. Considerable effort has gone into making each of the faces in the crowd different. There is a sense that the crowd are pushing forward and, in the foreground, a police officer with a baton attempts to keep the crowd back. A second policeman appears to be leading a young girl away. The young man in the foreground is dressed in modern clothes – fancy shirts and denim jeans. One of them wears a wrist watch – at the time a small but important signifier of economic status. The second picture gives a similar scene. Here the crowd are not watching an event but rather moving hither and thither, no doubt between different aspects of the Perahera. Crowds and a crush are common at events such as this and a warning regularly given is to beware of 'pickpockets' [*hōra katiyō innava*]. A small drama unfolding in this picture is that the young man second from the right has his hand in the pocket of the person in front of him and is about to lift a wallet. The policeman behind him is raising his stick as if to draw attention to the incident. The painter signals the pickpocket's deviance with some common markers: a cigarette and a beard. As in the previous painting, 1970s fashions are in evidence. Alongside more traditional sarongs and sarees are fancy shirts, gaudy trousers and short dresses.

In the week before the festivities commenced on the 6th October, traders had been arriving from far and wide. For half a mile on either side of the of the entrance to the temple, the road had been marked off with bamboo poles at intervals of six feet. For a fee of 100-125 Rs the traders could erect their stalls or simply hawk their wares from a plastic sheet on the ground. I counted around 140 stalls on one side of the road and 50 on the other. From conversations with some of the traders it was clear that they had a schedule of religious festivals that they travelled to all year round. One man, selling betel chews [*bulat vita*] for 25 cents a time, listed festivals at Sankapala, Embilitiya, Dondra, Kataragama, Tihagoda, Tangalle and Tissamharama as places where he had recently been. He also pointed out that he was doing very good business! The stalls were mostly of a small-business variety and run by individuals or family groups selling wares that originated in cottage and often caste-based industries.

By day the road in front of the temple looked like any other main street. But, as night fell, lights appeared everywhere, and the night was pushed back by every conceivable means of illumination. There were festoons of lights the length of the road, coloured lights, flashing lights, spotlights, lights made into floral displays to say nothing of the coconut oil lamps and pressure lamps that hung about the place. The path leading up the mountain to the temple was lit all the way by lamps that made for a crooked ladder to the moon. At the foot of the mountain was a series of scenes from Buddha's life. These large structures were illuminated by hundreds of flashing, coloured lights. A large crowd was gathered. The people stood gazing in awestruck wonder as the lights flashed on and off before their eyes.

Food is a necessary ingredient of the festivities. I counted 11 Ice cream vans all from Alerics, a company based in Colombo. Sweet stalls selling traditional delicacies such as *dodol, kævum, puhul dosī, būndi* and *pæni valalu* were to be found at regular intervals. These sweets, brightly coloured and in curious shapes, were heaped in sticky piles. Business was brisk with the sweets dispatched to customers in neatly folded paper bags made from yesterday's news. All the while, crouching women pushed around the next batch of sweets in pans of hot oil making sure there was an ongoing supply. A fragrance of woodsmoke, coconut oil and burnt sugar permeated the air all around these stalls. Houses along the main road had taken the opportunity to open up their verandahs and front gardens as pop-up cafes [*kade*] selling tea, minerals , bananas and cakes. The *kade* in the town served food and drink both day and night for the duration of the festival.

A trip to such a festival is also an opportunity to buy household essentials. Among the stalls were those selling pots and pans, dishes and cutlery, knives, axes and locks. Some stalls displayed an array of brass made by members of the *navandanna* caste who are traditionally associated with metalwork. The main items for sale on these stalls were the tiered oil lamps used by householders to initiate auspicious events and notably their new year celebrations. The lamps ranged in size from just a few inches to gargantuan ones decorated with finely tooled designs. The work of weavers was in evidence too. Their stalls were laden with hats, bags, mats, winnowing trays and wicker baskets. Clothes sellers' stalls presented a riot of colour and an abundance of rolls of cloth for sarees and sarongs. Others sold towels, vests, baby cloths and the latest in 'western' trousers and shirts. In one location there was a van out of the back of which were sold slippers made by Ceypa, a Colombo company.

By far the biggest category of stalls were those selling souvenirs and novelty items. The stalls of trinket sellers bulged with plastic and imitation gold and silver rings, bangles and necklaces. Others sold plastic flowers and balloons. Plaster ornaments of the worst quality were in evidence everywhere. Dogs, cats, women carrying water pots on their hips and floral designs were just some of the ornaments for sale. Painted in the most garish colours it was unlikely that these would have survived the bus journey home before they chipped and cracked. Another seller had on display an array of ornamental musical instruments such as drums and tambourines. One man sat on his plastic mat making sausage dogs and giraffes out of balloons.

Many of the above stalls seemed to be doing their business with women. This is hardly surprising given that many of the purchases related to the running of the household. It also struck me however, that for women who spend much of their time in the home an event such as this is an occasion to enjoy a certain kind of freedom to peruse and consume more than just essentials. I recall an occasion back in 1979 when the wife of the landlord whose house I was living came back from a trip to the festivities at the Maha Devale in Dondra. Much to the chagrin of my landlord, who never liked to part with money, she arrived with many different kinds of sweets, toys for the children, a new water jug to go in the kitchen and a variety of baubles and imitation jewellery for herself.

K Kanti 15F [figure 7]

In this picture, men and women are approaching a stall where children's clothes are for sale. One of the vendors cuts a length of material. The style is somewhat cubist with the figures divided into simple planes that are painted monochrome. This way of capturing the event will be encountered in many subsequent paintings. A particularly striking feature of this painting is the image of the woman to the right. She has her back to us, but the bun and the rendition of the saree communicate a certain elegance as she reaches for a child's dress.

Figure 7

Studio Seva from Kotapola had set up an impromptu photo studio. Pilgrims could have a passport-size photograph taken. These images would no doubt remind them in the future that they had made the journey to the festival and perhaps rekindle some of the excitement of being there. A rather different reminder of attendance at the festival could be obtained from a tattooist who plied his trade using a car battery and a precarious and seriously unhygienic contraption that he had made himself. The tattooist introduced himself as A.E.Shelton from Embilipitiya, pupil of the now deceased Jeremis, a famous tattooist from Colombo. Shelton was, he announced for all to hear, the greatest tattooist in Sri Lanka. This was not something I was going to dispute as Shelton had a menacing presence. His body was covered in tattoos: wild animals, a dragon, a lion, a tiger and some occasional inscriptions adorned his legs, arms and chest. While we talked, he worked away with his stabbing machine on a man who struggled not to yield to the pain he was so evidently suffering. From time to time, Shelton wiped the man's bloodied arm with a much-used rag. The repertoire of tattoos on offer seemed very familiar to a westerner and could probably be traced back to the soldiers and sailors who had passed through the Island when it was a British colony. Typically, the images suggested freedom and resistance among the oppressed and were invariably tied up with masculine and perhaps deviant identities. Shelton's illustrated menu consisted of wild beasts, lions, tigers, scorpions, snakes mermaids, and scantily clad women with large breasts. There were also daggers and swords around which banners bearing dedications to parents, wives and perhaps the nation could be unfurled. Whilst I was there several people had tattooed on their left hand or left breast the legend '*eka hita*' or 'one mind'. Someone explained that this sentiment corresponded to the idea of 'do or die' in English. The people of the south of Sri Lanka are renowned for their fighting spirit and fierceness. Here were young men, inscribing these characteristics permanently on their bodies so that people might know not just who they were dealing but with but what they were dealing with. The crowd around Shelton's pitch was all male. They were sarong-clad, wearing cheap shirts and often bare-foot which marked them out as from the rural, working class. Shelton raised a laugh from the crowd when he offered, free of charge, to tattoo a beauty spot on my cheek. An offer I politely declined.

Some stalls were there to elicit funds for different charities. One such was stall staffed by teachers and volunteers from Kotapola Maha Vidyalaya in which the painting competition would later take place. They were selling a range of donated items such as Laksprey powdered milk, tinned goods and soap to raise funds for a new school building. By far the busiest charity stall was at the top of the hill near the temple and *dēvāle*. Here there was a stall staffed by volunteers, many of whom were from the school. They were selling *pin* papers to the hordes of pilgrims visiting the temple. For 50 cents, or more for a longer dedication, one could have merit transferred to a deceased relative. Punters would write their name, address, and the intended recipient of the merit on a piece of paper, the details would then be read out over a very loud loud-speaker followed by calls for the blessings of the gods and the transference of merit. The recipients were mostly deceased parents. I did, however, catch one message that asked for merit to be transferred to D.S. Senanayake, the first prime minister of what, back in 1947, was Ceylon. On the night I spent on the mountain top the stall was doing roaring business until 3.00am when the Perahera ended and the relics were returned to the temple.

Along the road was a bookstall run by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna [JVP], a Marxist-Leninist party with a strong following in the area. The stall sold Sinhala translations of all the classic works of Marx and Engels as well as pamphlets and newspapers promoting the JVP and its ideals for the nation. The JVP had been responsible for an insurrection in 1971. The nearby town of Deniyaya had been cut off and held by the insurgents between 5th and 24th April commencing with an attack on Deniyaya police station.[12] When control of the town was eventually taken back, harsh retribution was visited upon JVP activists and sympathisers. In the late 1980s, insurrection would again erupt in this area and, after much violence on both sides, once again fail. On the nights I was at the festival, the JVP stall was busy and mostly surrounded by young men. It is painful to think now that just a few years later many of these young men would be singled out for arrest, torture and extra-judicial execution. They might also have been perpetrators of atrocity in the mayhem that came to be known as the 'terror' [*bhēshanaya*].

Marxist orthodoxy and historical materialism might at first sight appear out of place amid the carnivalesque atmosphere that prevailed among the crowd. Yet, the essence of such events is to take people out of mundane reality and land them in a time and space of possibility where futures might be glimpsed and hopes reaffirmed. Consistent with these moments of life lived in the subjunctive, I counted six palm readers. There was no shortage of people eager to hold out their hands. People shared their problems *sotto voce* and predictions and solutions sought from the palmists. Beneath the flickering yellow light of pressure lamps, the palmists scrutinised the skin-borne tracks of destiny. Some of the poorer palm readers did not have lamps and seemed to be reading palms in the dark. It happened that one of the palm readers was a man I knew from Owitigamuva. He was standing dressed in bleached white garb on the upper slopes of the path to the *dēvāle*. For a small fee he would read a palm or recite a poem of blessing [*seth kavi*] and give the pilgrim a red spot on the forehead [*pottu*] so that others might know of their blessed state. There were also two female sooth-sayers offering their services on the slopes of the hill. For a small fee and a few words of explanation from the pilgrims, the women would go into trance and convey glimpses of what the future held for them. Another way in which a different future might be glimpsed was in the purchase of a national lottery ticket. A van from the lottery inched its way through the crowds. Large, trumpet-like speakers on its roof blasted out inaudible calls to buy tickets. A one-rupee lottery ticket could win a life-changing 100,000Rs. Punters carefully selected their tickets from the boards on the side of the van as if looking for signs that a winning ticket might make itself known.

Pilgrims could make further flights out of their mundane realities in the area set aside for the fairground. Here there was a small and very rickety Ferris wheel. Families were raised above the melee to the accompaniment of a group made up of clarinets and drums playing some loud and chaotic *bhaila* rhythms. Reality was stretched further in a side show that advertised a 'mesmerising illusion' [*maya mohat*]. This was a corrugated hut inside which were four mirrors. Punters paid a few rupees to stand in front of the mirrors to see themselves misshapen, headless or with another's body. In another part of the fairground was a 'wall of death'. This attraction was a precarious cylindrical construction about thirty feet across and made of coconut trunks and planks lashed together with coir ropes. From an equally rickety platform around the edge of the cylinder astonished onlookers looked down as a young man hurtled round a few feet beneath them on a stripped down and very ancient motorcycle.

The world was further turned up and down when a party of five transvestites, disparagingly referred to as *ponnaya*, came mincing through the crowds waving and posing as they went. Coins were solicited from the crowd until, that is, stick-waving police intervened and chased them away.

With so much money flowing into the town it is unsurprising that beggars of all descriptions would find their way there. The blind, the deaf, the crippled, the aged and those just chronically poor had positioned themselves at points on the path leading up the mountain to the temple. Up here it was less busy than on the streets where the crowds would be more interested in surviving the throng rather than noticing the outstretched hand of a beggar. It would also be the case that those making their way up the mountain had more on their mind than festivities and commerce. Pilgrims to the temple would be looking to earn merit and a little charitable giving on the way would no doubt help with this.

At the top of the mountain, I met with Ratnayake Kapumahattaya. It was clear that he was very busy. With a polite tilt of the head and a smile he indicated that he could not speak with me. A small corrugated hut had been erected in the temple compound. This was his operational HQ, so to speak. He later explained that this was where the food of the gods was to be prepared and the sacred ornaments kept after each night of processing. Inside the hut, purity was of the essence and something akin to operating theatre hygiene was in play. Mouths and hair were covered and restrictions in place as to who could come and go.

At 7.40 on the first night the dignitaries began to assemble. The district minister for Matara, Mr Kirti Abeywickrama, was the guest of honour. Abeywickrama was appointed to this position in 1977 when J.R.Jayawardena's

UNP government came to power.[13] Another dignitary present on the first night was the chief custodian [*basnayaka nilame*] of the *dēvāle* at Ratnapura, one Harry Wijerathna. His presence caused quite a stir as the *dēvāle*, at Ratnapura is associated with god Saman, a powerful deity believed to have jurisdiction over Sabaragamuwa province. This was of significance as the *dēvāle,* is reputed to have once been the wealthiest in Sri Lanka.[14] The presence of the minister and the *basnayake nilame*, along with three *kapumahattayō* from other local *dēvāle,*, brought serious political legitimacy to the event. It also demonstrated the way that in Sri Lanka popular culture religion and politics are often plaited into a single cord.

The proceedings began with the minister, dressed in all-white traditional dress, lighting the traditional oil lamp. The lighting of an oil lamp is associated with new year celebrations but also features widely at any event at which an opening or inauguration is to be publicly marked. The lighting of the lamp is an auspicious act and one usually bestowed on elders or dignitaries. The lighting of the lamp was followed by floral offerings [*mal puja*] to the image of Buddha in the central shrine. Next, the *basnayake nilame* did the same followed by the other dignitaries.

B.L. Gamini 16M [figure 8]

This painting is the only one that explicitly deals with the lighting of the oil lamp at the beginning of the festival. At the reunion, Gamini, the artist, recalled that the art teacher, Miss Gamage, had instructed him to do a painting for the competition but he had refused as he was more interested in playing with his friends. Miss Gamage scolded him saying that as he lived right opposite the Getabaru temple he saw it every year and he, of all people, should do a painting. He drew the opening ceremony because, as he pointed out, he had attended all the opening ceremonies since early childhood.

In Gamini's painting the lamp is being lit by young people and not the dignitaries who were actually present. The image shows the oil lamp cut in two. One side is black and in darkness and the other side is white and in the light. The symbolism is intriguing for the binary that it brings to our attention. The right side shows three young people – two boys and a girl - lighting the lamp. They are dressed in modern garb: long trousers, fancy shirts, a tie and shoes. The one lighting the lamp has a wristwatch. The boys have fancy hair styles. The girl is also dressed in the modern style and wears shoes. Gamini pointed out that the young man lighting the lamp was the chief guest, who he described as a 'rich guy from the village'. The bell bottom trousers and printed shirts, he explained, were included because they were the trend in those days and a fashion that most young people wished to emulate.

On the opposite side of the oil lamp are a drummer and a youth; both male. In contrast to the fashionable dandies on the right, they are clad in sarongs and barefoot. Light is a powerful symbol in Sinhala culture and is linked with ideas of vision, clarity and power. Light and dark are also associated respectively with present knowing and past ignorance in popular thinking. The painting offers the viewer an explicit separation of the very different ideas about values, class and legitimacy that would have existed in rural areas at the time the paintings were produced and which the children would be trying to make sense of. The configuration of the young people and what they represent would suggest an awareness of some of the profound economic tensions that were beginning to emerge at that time. The country was emerging from a period of serious economic hardship under the premiership of Sirimavo Bandaranayake. Under the recently elected government of J.R.Jayawardena there was a promise of good times just around the corner. What the image captures is the 'development' [***diyunu***] being implemented as the way forward for the nation beginning to be in tension with backwardness [***nodiyunu***] and what it was thought needed to be left behind. The neoliberal, rightward shift of Jayawardene's UNP government had recently created a highly market-oriented society in which business, consumption and the quest for prosperity began to take a prominent place in people's thinking. It is interesting to note however, that the binary opposition – ***diyunu***/***nodiyunu*** - is bridged by the symmetry of pots containing areca nut flowers which appear on either side. These are ***pun kalasa*** which is equivalent in some respects to a cornucopia or what in French is referred to as the ***vase d'abondance***. Whilst future prosperity is the aim, its achievement still requires deference to tradition.

Figure 8

At 7.40, the identified auspicious time, the relics of Buddha [*dhātu*] were brought out of the image house. This event is preceded by a performance of the *magul bera*. The *magul bera* literally means the joyous or auspicious drum. The term, however, does not refer to the drum itself but the beats that are played on it. The performance of a distinct sequence of beats [*pada*] is a sound offering to Buddha [*sabda pujā*]. The beats are believed to be constructed in such a way that they bring good luck and a sense of well-being to an occasion. For this reason, the *magul bera* features as an item at ritual events such as investitures, opening ceremonies and weddings. The second *kapurala* emerged out of the building with the sacred parcel. He was dressed in a white turban and his mouth was covered with a red cloth to prevent him contaminating his precious bundle with spittle or any other source of impurity. His lower body was covered with a multi-coloured cloth. His upper body was bare except for armlets and dust. The dust had got there when he had prostrated himself face down in front of the image house before entering. Once re-assembled, the cortege moved from the Buddha image house to pay obeisance to Kataragama and then Vishnu and bring out their ornaments [*dēva abharana*]. Throughout a group of temple musicians played drums. The beat of the drum accompanies every part of the event – temple rituals, opening ceremony, processions and entertainment. [15]

Amaradasa Panagoda 18M [figure 9] and H.G. Sujivani 11F [figure 10]

In the first picture, four drummers pose in ceremonial dress. Their apparel – turbans, decorated bodices and red waist bands – marks them out as drummers about to perform at an auspicious event such as the lighting the ceremonial lighting of the oil lamp. Their dress is Kandyan in style. A similar marker of this tradition are the tapered drums [***gata bera***] as distinct from the low-country ***yak bera*** which is more tube-like. The artist here has captured the details of the ***magul bera*** performance simply and effectively. The image is virtually monotone apart from the red of the turbans and waistbands. The simple device of a slightly lighter band running up each drummer's body gives them each volume and a sense of presence. The painting of facial features is simple yet manages to convey a different character for each drummer. The posture of the drummers to the left and the right of the painting are finely observed. On either side of the drummers are ***pun kalasa*** symbolising fertility and well-being.

The second picture also portrays the ***magul bera*** episode. Again, there is a suggestion that these are up-country drummers. The conical shape of the drum and the adornment on the chest [*ārulheraya*] being clear indicators. The drummers are in the process of playing and the parallel body postures would suggest they are moving in unison. As in the previous image the ***pun kalasa*** is included as a necessary accoutrement of the ***magul bera*** performance.

Figure 9

Figure 10

A T Gamini Priyanta 18M [figure 11], Champa Udani da Silva 10F [figure 12], B.L. Sarath 13M [figure 13] and G. D L Saman 13M [figure 14]

The next four paintings each show drummers as they would appear in the Perahera. The first shows three sarong-clad individuals holding ***yak bera*** which is typically a low country drum. A significant observation to be made in this painting is the presence of a child in between the two adults. Traditional skills such as drumming are not passed on through instruction ***per se*** but rather acquired through 'situated practice'.[16] Children from an early age accompany competent adults in their work and over a long period of apprenticeship progressively acquire expertise. The inclusion of a child in the line-up of drummers is recognition of the living transmission of knowledge and skills [***paramparāva***]. It is impossible to say whether the subjects of the painting are of the Berava caste but the ***yak bera*** and their sarongs and bare feet would suggest that they are marked as being of lower status.

Another clue to caste identity can be seen in the painting by Champa Udani. Here three drummers play together. They are wearing sarongs and turbans. They are also wearing vests or banians an item of clothing that has particular significance and sensitivity for the Berava.[17]

The third painting shows three drummers in colourful costume. The intention here would most likely be to capture drummers in one of the episodes in the Perahera, for example, as part of a ***hēvisi*** band. An interesting detail in this picture is the way that the arms of the drummers overlap creating a sense of co-ordination between the drummers as they play.

In the fourth of this series, three drummers are colourfully dressed. The two on the outside appear to be playing ***davul bera*** and the one in the middle is playing the pair of small drums known as a ***tammettama.*** A notable point in this painting is the accuracy with which the curled ***tammettama*** sticks have been painted. Behind this line of dancers are two boys. Whilst they are mostly obscured by the drummers their presence is evident from the Buddhist flag and ***sesatha*** held aloft and the boys' legs seen between the figures of the drummers.

Figure 11

Figure 12

Figure 13

Figure 14

AGMC Kariyavasan 16[M [figure 15]

This painting shows a group of youths playing drums. They are unlikely to be playing in a traditional element of the Perahera as such but joining in 'just for fun' as would many young people from the town. That they are young and rowdy is signalled by the fact they are wearing shorts and the youth on the left is holding a cigarette. Neither of these would be acceptable in the main body of the procession. The crowd in the background are not just focused on what is in front of them but look at what has just passed and what is yet to come. There is a sense of a procession passing by and not just the group of drummers as the focal subject of the painting. The faces of the crowd are all pink as are the drummers', suggesting fair skins. The child on the right hand of the picture is disproportionate to the size of the adults and indeed appears to be a miniature adult.

Figure 15

G H Premasiri 15 [figure 16] and A S Jayasekera 17 [figure 17]

The next two paintings show drummers in action. The technique is one commonly used by the older children and will appear in many other paintings. The style is strongly influenced by the modernist art that emerged in Sri Lanka in the 1940s and inspired by European modernism and particularly Cubism. The technique used involves breaking the subject down into planes and, using a single colour, creating a sense of volume using light and dark shades. In the painting by Premasiri, the positioning of heads and arms gives a dynamic sense of movement. The painting by Jayasekera conveys a similar sense of movement but here the emphasis is on repetition. The dancers are virtually identical in posture and appearance. In both paintings, the impact is enhanced by the way in which the edges of the figures have been left unpainted, giving the impression that they are fringed with white.

Figure 16

Figure 17

At each of the *dēvāle,* the minister, the *basnayake nilame* and two very aged priests went inside. The second kapurala carried a *vel*, the sacred lance of Kataragama and a *trisula,* the sacred trident of Visnu. At the inner *dēvāle,* of each of these gods the party stayed behind the curtain for about fifteen minutes. During this time the instruction was given for the music to stop and the serious business of invoking the blessings of these powerful deities undertaken [*abharanava* and *kannalavva*]. Finally, the cortège moved to the shrine of Batahira Rajjuruvo where supplications were again given. A second round was made of all the *dēvāle,* and then the procession was ready to begin. At this point I was told to take a photograph. The cosmic hierarchy, with Buddha at its apex, was echoed in the positioning of the main actors in the ritual. The district minister as the most elevated participant held the miniature stupa containing the relics of Buddha above his head. Ratnayake Kapumattaya, his mouth bound by a cloth, clutched the ornaments of Batahira Rajjuruvo close to his chest as if he was nursing a newborn baby. The other *kapu mahatvaru* had similar bundles that they carried out with great reverence into the temple compound. In the middle of the crowd were a group of young men holding aloft a canopy of white cloth. The cortege assembled under it ready for the descent to the lower levels of the mountain where the procession proper would begin. One of the *kapurāla* transferred his sacred ornaments into baskets suspended from a pole that he carried on his shoulder. The baskets were draped in Buddhist flags. The party made their way slowly down the steep steps to the next level. The crowds lining the route bowed with hands together as the sacred paraphernalia passed before them. At the next level there was much delay in getting the procession ready to depart. Here, the crowds were becoming restless and there was much complaint about how late everything was getting. One man said that the delay was intentional so that the traders could do more business from the crowds that thronged the streets below. The relics were carefully placed on the pagoda-like structures on the backs of the elephants and the procession was ready to move. When the procession did eventually leave the lower temple, it descended to the main road and took a left turn, passing close by all the market stalls on either side of the road. Starting on this night, and for the next two nights, the sanctity of the *dēvāle,* would be turned inside out. In an act of public purification and blessing it was believed that good fortune and prosperity would be brought to the region and its inhabitants. At one time, the good fortune sought would have been linked to planting paddy, the coming rains and hope of a plentiful harvest. In 1979, the benefits sought from the gods were more to do with commerce and protection in times of political turmoil. For their part, the gods received acts of mass devotion from the assembled congregation and from this they derived their power. In short, the gods need people as much as people need the gods, and politicians need both.

The Perahera that set off down Kotapola main street back in October 1979 was about 300 yards long. Its entire length was illuminated by a string of tube lights connected by skeins of wire and powered by a generator on the back of a lorry. Each light was carried aloft on the end of a pole. The whole system courted catastrophe and never more so than on the second night of the procession when it rained heavily. At the head of the procession was a police land rover with a loud hailer instructing the crowds to make way. Khaki clad constables yielding bamboo lathi pushed back the throng. Not to heed their instructions was to risk a whack across the shins. Behind the land rover came the first item of the Perahera proper. This was the whip-crackers or *kasa kāriyo*. A group of about a dozen muscular young men wielded long, heavy whips, cracking them as they went. A further reason for the crowds to pull back. The significance of the sight and sound of cracking whips lay elsewhere however. The *kasa kāriyo* emulate the lightning that precedes the coming of thunder and, after that the rains. The link with the seasonal rains is a survival of the archetypal Kandy Esala Perahera and its causal link to the bringing of rains for a successful rice crop.[18]

Following the *kasa kāriyo* came another group of equally muscular young men. These are the *gini bola kariyō* or fire-ball carriers. This group carried heavy, four feet in diameter, metal wheels. Around the perimeter of the wheels were blazing balls of oil-soaked cloth. With acrobatic skill they rolled on the ground, twisting and tippling whilst all the time keeping the wheels spinning. They also tossed them high in the air, catching them as they processed forwards. The wheels of fire again evoke the coming storm.

SN Sumit 13M [figure 18]

The boys in the painting are muscular and their postures, whilst anatomically unfeasible, capture the twisting and bending movements needed to make such heavy whips crack. The style is somewhat reminiscent of Matisse [for example, his 1910 work ***Dance***]. As in many of the other paintings, the hairstyles of the boys are very much of the era. Hair is wavy, long and worn over the ears.

Figure 18

GG Ananda 13M [figure19]

The picture shows three ***gini bola kariyō*** or fire-ball carriers engaged in this skilled and highly dangerous antic. As with the painting by Sumit, Ananda is able to capture something of the physicality of this skilled series of movements.

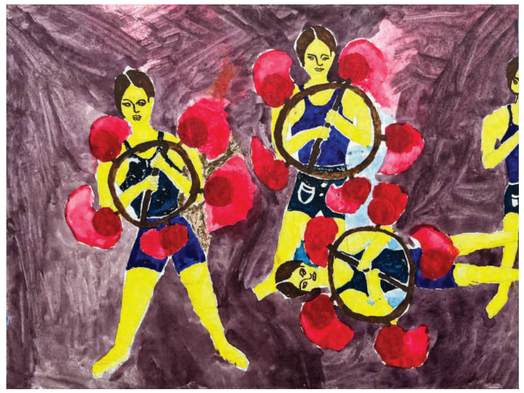

Figure 19

Next in the processions was a contingent from Kotapola school. Dressed in their crisp white uniforms and neat school ties, the students carried Buddhist flags. This ubiquitous pennant captures the colours that are believed to have emanated from Buddha's body when he attained enlightenment. The school children also carried Sesatha. These are a traditional sunshade in the form of a decorated disc held aloft on a pole. The Sesatha is a highly auspicious object. It is believed to have shaded the sapling of the Bo tree under which Buddha attained enlightenment when it was first brought to Sri Lanka. It later became associated with the prestige of kings and dignitaries. Within the rain-making logic of the procession, the Sesatha are also associated with clouds in the pre-monsoon sky. Other forms of sunshade that appeared in the procession are ones depicting the sun and the moon. The image of the moon always has a hare in it. This commemorates a story from one of Buddha's previous lives, the Sasa Jataka. In this story a hare vows to sacrifice his life and is tested by God Sakra. The god, disguised as a Brahmin, demands food and the hare obliges by leaping into the flames of a fire in order that his flesh might be cooked. The act of sacrifice is recognised by the god and in recognition he paints an image of the hare in the moon so that all might remember it. "'O wise hare be thy virtue known throughout a whole aeon'. And squeezing the mountain, with the essence thus extracted, he [Sakka] daubed the sign of the hare on the orb of the moon' [Cowell 1895:34-37]. The schoolchildren were followed by a troupe of drummers who, to the beat of their drums moved forward in synchronised dance steps, twisting and turning as they went.

P. Ariyaratna 19M [figure 20]

In the foreground of this painting are the ***kasa kāriyo*** and the ***gini bola kāriyo***. The painting also features someone on a pogo stick. At the rear of the procession are the ***sesath kāriyo*** carrying various kinds of sunshade. In many of the other paintings children go to some lengths to include the Buddhist flag, the various symbols that appear on the sunshades along the length of the procession. Ariyaratna also captures the pressing throng that line the route of the procession.

Figure 20

Figure 21

D.D. Dulsi 8F [figure 21]

A feature of the procession are elements which are intended to impress and amuse. In the previous painting it was the man on a pogo stick. In this one it is a group of stilt walkers or ***bōru kakul kāriyo***. The Sinhala term translates as 'false-legged people'. The notion of ***bōru*** draws attention to lying and deception but its meaning is rather wider than that. An act or utterance that is ***boru*** is not necessarily always a negative one. In some circumstances it is used positively as a way of testing or teasing reality, a theme which runs through many elements of the Getabaru celebrations.[19] The stilt walkers with their multi-coloured leggings and frilly skirts look like women but in the spirit of ***boru*** could well be men dressed as women. Like the Sesatha that feature throughout the procession the stilt-walkers are in the sky among the clouds. A nice detail in this painting is the drummer in the top right-hand corner. The whole procession moves to the rhythm of the drum.

The first elephant in the procession was a magnificent tusker draped with sequined cloths. Elephants are venerated across South Asia and have multiple associations in religion and mythology. In Hinduism the elephant is worshipped in the form of Ganesh, the half-man half-elephant god who is believed to have the ability to remove obstacles and bring good fortune. Ganesh is also the wise one who is a teacher to other gods. In Buddhism, the elephant carries similar connotations, as the vehicle of Lord Buddha's divine teachings. Buddha was believed to have taken the form of an elephant in previous lives and these feature in numerous Jataka stories. In these parables, elephants appear frequently as an exemplar of Buddhist values. The Lotus Sutra, for example, links these values to the elephant's character and appearance stating that the "Dhamma is in his belly". In another key Buddhist scripture, the Dhammapada, Buddha advised that: "there is no fellowship with the ignorant; let one live alone, doing no evil, care-free, like an elephant in the forest" [Narada Thera, 2000: 256]. The elephant is thus a creature to be emulated; it is wise, calm, patient and, as everyone knows, seldom puts a foot wrong. The elephant is also associated with the beginning and end of Buddha's life. When Buddha's mother, Queen Maya, became pregnant she is believed to have dreamed that a white elephant had entered her side. This was to be Prince Siddhartha who later became Gautama Buddha. Pali texts also record that:

> The form under which Buddha will descend to earth for the last time will be that of a young white elephant, open jawed with a head the colour of cochineal, with tusks shining like silver, sparkling with gems, covered with a splendid netting of gold, perfect in its organs and limbs and majestic in appearance. Holder:1888.

In short, for Sinhala Buddhists the elephant is a powerful icon which has multiple resonances with Buddha's philosophy, biography and exalted status.

As the first elephant in the Getabaru Perahera strode gracefully by, the crowd fell silent, simply staring in awe. A slit in the finery that covered the elephant's head revealed a dark and sagacious eye which calmly took in the excitement around. The majesty and magic of an elephant in a Perahera is further enhanced for onlookers in the belief it places its feet to the beat of the drums [Seneviratne 1981:8]. On its back was an elaborate pagoda-structure housing the miniature golden stupa in which Buddha's relics were stored [*dhātu karanduva*]. The crowd reverently put their hands together bowed their heads as the casket passed in front of them.

The elephant was followed up by a troupe of Kandyan dancers, resplendent in their silver ornaments and head-dresses. In unison they stamped and twisted their way through classic postures and routines. Behind the dancers came the *Basnayake Nilame*, dressed in the costume typical of Kandyan aristocrats. He was followed by the district minister and several local MPs wearing national dress. More elephants followed, each with a casket containing some sacred relic or ornament. The *kapu mahatvaru* and lesser dignitaries followed up.

P A Vijitha 7 [figure 22]

This painting is by one of the youngest artists and shows several sequences of the Perahera. There are dancers, drummers and elephants. Even at this stage certain important details are in evidence. On the top row there are dancers in coloured costumes, a drummer, stilt walker and an elephant with a relic casket on its back. In the second and third row are another stilt walker, some flag-bearers and several dancers in identical floral costume who appear to be dancing in unison. In the fourth row an elephant leads the way.

Figure 22

I have grouped the next seven paintings together as they all show the procession underway with particular focus on the elephant and the relic casket. The crayon drawing by Namali has an excellent representation of an elephant for an 11-year-old. In the centre is the mahout with the hooked stick used to control the elephant [***henduva***]. A large crowd look on in the background. The painting by Priyanta whilst similar in content pays closer attention to the drummers and dancers in the procession. There is no reference to the crowd. The elephant is caparisoned in a decorated blue cloth and the casket on its back is carefully detailed. It shows the canopied ***caitya*** in which the relics are conveyed. That others are following up behind is suggested by the waving Buddhist flag and ***sesatha.***

In the paintings by Aravinda, Shamini and Nandavati, the composition is similar. The elephants are to the fore of the procession, followed by troupes of dancers. In each painting, careful attention has been paid to the relic casket. There is also a person riding on the elephant with the casket. This is a detail which is rather odd in that the casket is deemed to be sacred and it would be sacrilegious for someone to sit alongside it, whatever their status. The painting by Aravinda shows the elephant's finery in great detail. A group of Kandyan dancers follow up and behind them are school children in white uniforms bearing flags and banners. The background is unelaborated which brings out the colours in the painting more vividly. In the painting by Shamini, the elephant is not decorated but carries a relic casket. Two drummers accompany young women dancing with pots [***kala gedi***] held aloft. The alternating movement of the drummers and the fact that the dancers are painted from behind suggests that the painter has an idea of the temporal unfolding of the event. A large crowd look on from behind. In the third painting, Nandavati has given a colourful rendition of the elephant and the dances going on around it. An interesting detail in this picture is the string of lights being carried along by the side of the Perahera to illuminate it. Nandawati has attempted to convey perspective by using different size figures.

The painting by Champa Priyanta gives an unusual view of the procession. Here the elephant, flanked by dancers and drummers is viewed head on. The elephant is colourfully decorated and carries a relic casket on its back. Sun shades [***sesatha***] and fly whisks [***chāmara***] wave in the background and, as in other paintings, the actual carriers of these objects are referenced by the appearance of a pair of disembodied legs to the left of the elephant. Also, this artist has conveyed the synchronised movement of the dancers through the parallel positions of their legs to the bottom right of the picture. Nimal's contribution contains many of the elements that feature in other paintings of the procession. However, his efforts are more playful. The figures appear as if viewed in the hall of mirrors which featured at the event's fair ground. The slightly surreal effect is further evident in the faces that peer out from the dancers' skirts.

Namali Wickramasinghe 11F [figure 23],
U.S. Priyanta Jayanath 10M [figure 24],
S.H. Aravinda 13M [figure 25],
Shamini Mallika Hevaranna 13F [figure 26],
T.L.P. Nandavati 13F [figure 27],
P.G. Champa Priyanti 15F [figure 28],
K Nimal 13M [figure 29].

Figure 23

Figure 24

Figure 25

Figure 26

Figure 27

Figure 28

Figure 29

P Siripala 14M [figure 30] and BL Ranjit 13M [figure 31]

The scenes captured in these two paintings convey a sense of the busy-ness of the procession as it moves along. Dancers, drummers, school children, flag-bearers and crowds of on-lookers are all present. The attention to detail is notable. For example, in the painting by Ranjit there are three different kinds of drums in evidence [*geta bera*, *tammaettama* and *yak bera*].

Figure 30

Figure 31

Nihal Virasekera 18M [figure 32] and W G Ratnasiri 18 [figure 33]

The last two paintings in this section are the work of older students. They both show an engagement with the semi-abstract technique which features in several other works by older students. It is clear that the students have been given basic instructions as to how to achieve this effect. Backgrounds are unelaborated – in these two paintings they are both black. The use of colour is restricted, indeed in many of these kinds of painting there is a single colour and the sense of volume is achieved using different shades of the same colour. Most striking is the way that the students have broken down their subjects into planes and segments. These are strikingly outlined with edging in yellow, white and black. The effect is that the viewer apprehends shape and pattern first and only then the figurative content. The painting by Ratnasiri is exceptional for the way it captures the spirit of the procession in a light-hearted way. The figure of the *Basnayake Nilame* under the parasol at the front of the procession is particularly endearing.

Figure 32

Figure 33

The procession as it stopped and started in front of me was punctuated along its length by dancing groups and school bands. This is an important detail as many of these bands would be made up of children from Kotapola school who some weeks later would take part in the art competition. Several of these were *hevisi* bands featuring the barrel-shaped drum strapped horizontally to the waist [*davul bera*], the small pair of drums beaten with curled sticks [*tammettama*], the shrill flute [*horanæva*], small finger cymbals [*tālampota*] and the conch [*hakgediya*]. These instruments provide a riot of sound. They are found in most Buddhist ceremonial but have a special place in the Perahera. Their rhythms, and particularly the cymbals, provide the beat to which the entire procession marches. Skilled orchestras can shift their rhythms from standard marching beats [*gaman pada*] to ones that feature auspicious sequences of syllables [*matra*] of a kind that are suitable for honouring the deities [*puja pada*]. [20]

The Perahera is an opportunity to display the wide range of dancing traditions that exist in Sri Lanka. The dances are performed by adult troupes as well as children from local schools. The three traditions are the Kandyan tradition [*uda rata natum*], the low-country tradition from the south of the island [*pahatha rata natum*] and the Sabaragamuva tradition of the south west [*sabaragamuwa natum*].

The mainstay of the Kandyan dance tradition as it features in the Perahera are a series of eighteen dances known as Vannams. The word Vannam means 'descriptive praise'. The steps and rhythms of the Vannam are expressive of moods and feelings associated with different creatures and objects. The most well known are the ones dedicated to the monkey [*hanuma vannama*], the Eagle [*ukusa vannama*] and the elephant [*gajaga vannama*].

The low country dance tradition draws on a series of rituals known as Kolam. These include characters from myths and folktales as well as depictions of episodes from Buddha's previous incarnations. The Low Country and Sabaragamuva traditions both have repertoires of dancers associated with rituals propitiating demons [*tovil*] and minor deities [*devol maduva* and *gam maduva*]. These traditions are famous for the masks that are worn in the various rituals. Sabaragamuva is also famous for dances by women to honour the God Saman.[21]

Female dancing troupes wearing identical costumes, make-up and hairstyles featured throughout the procession. Their sarees were colourful and adorned with gold braids and sequins. One troupe dressed as bright blue butterflies; another danced with bowls in their hands and vases of flowers on their heads. A group of stilt walkers [*bōru kakul kariyo*] in brightly coloured costumes strode high above the procession waving at the crowds. A man dressed up as an old hag touted money from the crowd, embarrassing them with his insults. A group of young boys ambled along dressed in ochre costumes and turbans, their faces made up in white with exaggerated black beards and waxed moustaches. This was an imitation of the *vadiga patuna*, an episode from the Suniyam ritual held to cut a sorcery. In this episode the arrival of ritual knowledge of exorcism from India is celebrated in a performance that has Brahmins, unable to speak local languages or understand local customs, strutting comically about the ritual arena. The boys, aged no more than 10, captured the comedy of the episode perfectly.

M E Chandrawathi 15F [figure 34]

Figure 34

This painting introduces several visual themes that appear in subsequent ones: vibrant colour, strong sense of rhythm and movement, spatial awareness of the group, a monochrome background and the repetition of postures. The painting depicts a group of women dancing 'the water pot dance' (***kala-gedi nāṭuma***)]. The ***kalasa*** which is an earthen clay water pot is associated with fertility and prosperity and provides the focus of this well-known folk dance. It is a dance that would have featured in the repertoire of dances learned as part of the school's dance curriculum. The dancers in the picture are wearing traditional blouses which expose the midriff. Their dresses have decorative aprons and their hair is bobbed in the traditional style. Three dancers face outwards and three have their backs to the viewer. Their arms are raised and in parallel with each holding a ***kalasa***. This is a movement that is regularly repeated in the dance as the troupe make their way in the procession. A striking feature of this painting is way in which the viewer is drawn into the movement of the troupe. A device which enables this is the inclusion of dancers with their backs to the viewer. Chandrawathi doesn't just know what dancers look like from the front but also from the back. The sense of synchronised rhythm is further reinforced by the way in which the arms of the dancers are in parallel thus creating the impression of a vertical flow. The posture of each dancer is seemingly carried on in another. The dancers are not simply individuals dancing together but are portrayed in a way that unifies them as a group.

A similar rhythm is in evidence in the painting by Premasiri. Here a band of female ***hevisi*** musicians march towards the viewer. In this picture the music is provided by a long trumpet [***kombu***] played by the girl in the centre. Other instruments are played by those following up. In the crowd can be glimpsed a barrel shaped drum [***davul bera***], the shrill flute [***horaneva***] and a flat, hand-held drum [***rabana***]. This kind of ensemble of instruments was originally to be found accompanying rituals in Buddhist temples but later developed into the music for marching bands. The ensemble is made up of both boys and girls; girls are to the fore in dancing postures, the boys are to the rear playing instruments. In the painting, the symmetry of the dancers is used to striking effect and rhythm is created by the way the figures relate to one another. What we are seeing is not so much individuals but a group in a state of flow. The eye is drawn across the painting by the wave created by the positioning of the girls' arms and up and down by the strong lines of their patterned skirts. The painter of the picture is a boy which would suggest that an embodied awareness of dance movements and postures is not just a female attribute. In contrast to the carefully worked symmetry of the dancers, the randomness of the rest of the procession is suggested by the tops of relic-bearing elephants and waving ***sesatha*** behind the crowds in the foreground.

G.H. Premasiri 15M [figure 35]

Figure 35

MG Mallika 14F [figure 36]

In this work, the artist again captures the dynamism of the dance. Seven girls are dancing in unison; four in the front line and three to the rear. The sense of unity and co-ordination between them is caught in the way their arms are held in parallel. Hands poised in a dancer's characteristic position are also repeated across the figures. The heads are similarly in parallel, although the figure third from the right appears to be leaning into the dance with an even more characteristic posture than the rest. In contrast, the legs and feet of the dancers are difficult to disentangle giving the impression of a snapshot that will at any moment give way to another configuration. A further impression of movement is gained from the coloured bandings of the girls' skirts which oscillate as the eye moves across the picture. The bodices of the dancers – green, yellow, blue, green, blue, yellow, green - create a similar effect, only this time the contrasting colours suggest depth and a front to back movement.

Figure 36

Figure 37

G G Champa Priyanti 15F [figure 37]

The appearance of the women in this picture is unusual and indeed they could be mistaken for Spanish flamenco dancers. They have flowers in their hair and their dresses are colourful and flowing. The style is reminiscent of the more flamboyant dress worn by some Tamil women. Undoubtedly, the artist has brought out something of the variety of dance troupes and styles that appear in a Perahera. What she may be conveying in the painting is a cosmopolitan vision of the Perahera and one which recognises a wider conception of the nation than a solely Sinhala Buddhist one. As in other paintings, however, the artist has beautifully captured the poise of the dancers and their collective co-ordination by way of their parallel arms and torsos. The dancers seem to be mid-twirl yet they present as a single unit.

W Roshan Nishanta 10M [figure 38]

Here two females are dancing, and a third female plays a pair of drums [*tammaettama*] with curled sticks. A Buddhist flag waves in the background. Although simple in style this image captures well the interaction of the two female dancers. The dancers are positioned in opposition to one another, and the artist has constructed one with the other in mind. This image highlights the strong sense of pattern that the proximity of figures creates.

Figure 38

These three paintings represent a progression in terms of the precision with which the dress and ornaments of the dancers have been captured.

The first is by a nine-year-old. It shows two dancers and two drummers and a third rather cat-like figure who we might assume is the ***gurunnānse*** who oversees and directs the performance. The spinning of the dancers is suggested by the cords which flay out from their waists and from the top of their head-dresses. They are wearing ear-rings and necklaces and their lower cloths are covered with an apron of ornaments [*inahendaya*]. One of the drummers plays the ***yak bera*** and the other the pair of small drums [*tammaettama*]. The painting by Bandu Kumara aged 12, show four dancers and the detail is greater than in the previous painting. The lower body cloths in particular are filled in with much detail. The dancers are wearing jingling anklets [*salambu*] and each has a slightly different head gear. Moving from left to right, figures one and three show parallel arms held downward and figures two and four show figures held upward in a classic dance posture. The painting by Thilakasiri shows two drummers and four dancers. It is unusual in that it is has a lined background which gives the figures the effect of performing on a chessboard. Also, the bodies appear stiff with movement almost entirely from the waist. That said, what this painting does capture is the dancers moving independently of one another and doing so with a look of calm contentment on their faces.

Ranvalage Anil 9F [figure 39], Bandu Kumara Kaluarachchi 12M [figure 40] and E. Thilakasiri 13M [figure 41]

Figure 39

Figure 40

Figure 41

M. Lata Malkanti 14F [figure 42], Sidath Vithanage 13M [figure 43] and G Somatilaka 13M [figure 44]

These three paintings portray costumed dancers in full flow. They are similar in style and format – subjects taken head-on, background unelaborated and careful attention paid to posture. Each one illustrates well the way dancers move in unison. Heads, arms and legs of the dancers are in parallel. Whilst the work of Lata and Sidath attempts a more realistic rendition of the scene, that of Somatilaka shows signs of a more abstract reading. Bodies are becoming more fluid and facial features are somewhat formulaic. The overall composition of the painting is quite remarkable for a 13-year-old and it is perhaps unsurprising that he went on to be a professional artist and sculptor. He captures the pleasurable engagement of the dancers with relatively few brush strokes.

Figure 42

Figure 43

Figure 44

Mahinda Ratna Wijayasinghe 11M [figure 45] and R.G. Kanti 16F [figure 46].

As in the previous group of paintings the subject matter is taken head on and the background is unelaborated. The paintings show female *hevisi* bands. The painting by Kanti is packed with detail. The figures that fall outside the frame at the top of the picture give the impression of a procession moving forward. A nice detail in this painting is the muddy puddles in the top left-hand corner. It is true to say that the 1979 Perahera was something of a washout! The painting by Mahinda has the dancers in a less organised arrangement. As a younger male will not have had the experience of being in a group of female dancers and musicians and this is perhaps where the sophistication of Kanti's painting lies.

Figure 45

Figure 46

M.H. Sunil 12M [figure 47] and H G Srimathi Manohari 16F [figure 48]

These two paintings have been put together because they each convey a powerful sense of groups in movement. In the painting by Sunil the dancers appear to be in somewhat random motion as they twist and turn and posture towards one another. Some of them are dancing with burning torches [***pandam***] whilst others dance with pots and areca sprigs [***pun kalasa***]. A decorated elephant in the top left hand corner follows the troupe. The painting by Srimathi gives a magnificent sense of movement as two pairs of dancers move in opposite directions to the beat of a drummer. The dancers' postures are in parallel and the back row are a mirror image of the ones in the front row. The strong line that encloses the figures in Sunil's painting is greatly exaggerated in that of Srimathi. In her painting the figures seem almost electrified. The strong white outline also has the effect of creating patterned spaces between the dancers which give the image a secondary dynamism; it is not just the shapes of the dancers that are of interest to the eye but also the patterns created by their proximity in the dance. An interesting detail in this painting is the string of lights in the background. These are used to illuminate the procession as it makes its way through the night.

Figure 47

Figure 48

K. Sriyavati 13F [figure 49]

The painting by Sriyavati also captures with superb effect the movement of dancers. Here four women are engaged in a traditional rural dance sequence. The artist has conveyed with great confidence the feminine ideals of this dance. The movements have a lot of charm [***lalitiya***] and the women communicate a sense of modesty. These are characteristics that are emphasised in the training of female dancers. They are associated with idealised notions of womanhood and celebrated in nationalist discourses [Reed 2010:200]. The hips of the two women on the left are full and pronounced. The hips of the two women on the right do not appear so full, giving the effect of the women moving in a front to back plane. An exceptional detail in this picture is the accuracy with which hands and feet have been positioned.

Figure 49

VA Bandusena 15M [figure 50], R Bodhidasa 19M [figure 51], J D Tilak Prasanna 13M [figure 52], A B Kusuma Jiva 17 [figure 53], Upasena 15M [figure 54].

The final group of pictures in the section all show the application of more abstract techniques to the subject matter in hand. The first, by Bandusena, is unusual. It shows three Kandyan dancers against a plain blue background. The figures are simple outlines with minimum detail added. Nonetheless, the position of the arms and head-dresses of the two dancers on the right suggest that they are dancing in unison. R Bodhidasa was one the oldest contributors to the competition. His painting shows a drummer and a horn player in the background and a dancer in the foreground. A ***sesatha*** with an emblem of the sun looks over the troupe, providing a central focal point for the viewer. The rendition of the figures is extremely sophisticated. The bodies and posturing of the performers is beautifully exaggerated. For example, the spine of the horn-player is curved and snake-like. It is as if he is wrapping himself around the instrument. The hand of the dancer partially covers his face and his gaze is narrowed, a detail that reminds us that what a dancer does with his or her eyes is an essential feature of the dance.

The paintings by Tilak Prasanna and Kusuma each show a different approach to abstraction. Tilak Prasanna presents a troupe of dancers against a plain yellow background. Simple black lines are used to create a considerable amount of detail in the dress of the performers. The figures are monotonal with volume and perspective being achieved by simple variations in shade. The right arms of the dancers are perfectly parallel. The painting by Kusuma takes abstraction to another level. Using just two shades of blue with white outlines round the figures, a scene from the Perahera is created. Drummers and dancers approach with ***sesatha*** waving in the background. Out of what seems at first to be total abstraction, bodies, limbs, costumes and drums begin to make visual sense.

The painting by Upasena is, in my view, quite exceptional. A group of dancers and a drummer advance towards the viewer. The rendition is simple. Heavy black outlines are used to delineate patches of colour. Paint is daubed here and there with a freedom that Picasso might have envied.

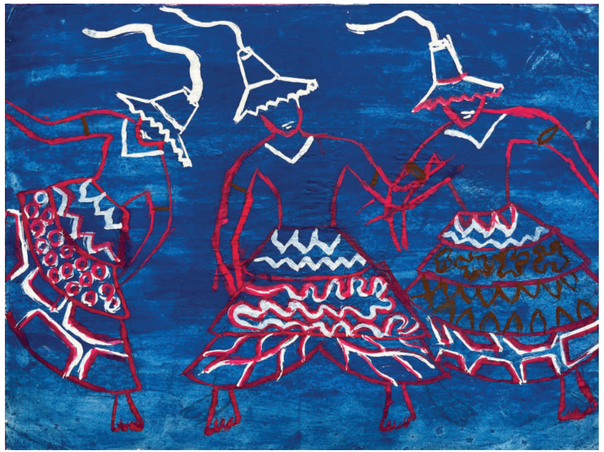

Figure 50

Figure 51

Figure 52

Figure 53

Figure 54

At several points in the procession *kavadi* dancers appeared. These were young men carrying on their shoulders the semi-circular structures decorated with flowers and peacock feathers that are associated with worship of the god Kataragama. The word *kavadi* means 'burden' and represents the spiritual debt that devotees must carry having sought assistance from the deity on behalf of a sick relative or to bring good luck in some future venture. More extreme versions of the 'burden' are to be found at the Kataragama shrine itself where pilgrims demonstrate their devotion by piercing their cheeks and togues with needles and lances or by attaching hooks to their flesh from which they are then suspended.[22] The God Kataragama is noted for his bravery and capacity to overcome obstacles but his character, like that of Rajjuru Bandara, is also ambivalent. In short, these are just the kinds of gods to help with the uncertainties of modernity and especially when it comes to navigating the business and educational opportunities that came with the neoliberal shift that J.R. Jayawardene tried to introduce following his landslide victory in 1977. As a god who can help overcome adversity and one who is not averse to meting out retribution on wrongdoers, the rise of Kataragama was all of a piece with that of Rajjuru Bandara. As the young people danced joyfully down the street throwing their feathery floral burdens from side to side I wondered how aware they were of these recent trends. The dancers were accompanied by a band of raucous and anarchic musicians. Taking their rightful place at the end of the processions were a group young people dressed in demon masks and enacting some of the dance moves typically found in exorcism ceremonies [*tovil*]. It was well after midnight that the procession returned to the temple and the relics and ornaments carried once again reverently to the top of the mountain for safe keeping overnight.

W M Padmasiri de Silva 14M [figure 55]

The group in this picture are all wearing matching, coloured shorts and vests which would suggest that they are an organised troupe. They also seem to be moving in a co-ordinated fashion. The dancer at the front of the group carries a lance, the weapon of Kataragama [***vel āyudha***]. The shape of the lance appears to be replicated on the dancers' faces as well as on their costumes. The style of the painting by this fourteen-year-old looks like an attempt to experiment with a style which becomes more controlled in some of the paintings by older students. For example, whilst attempting a realistic rendition of the dancers, their legs and arms are broken down into planes and rendered in two tones.

Figure 55

I.G. Samarasiri 15M [figure 56]

Here the ***kavadi*** dancers are wearing modern clothes – flared long trousers and western shirts. Unlike the previous ***kavadi*** dancers these youths are an informal grouping likely to have come together for fun and entertainment rather than serious vow fulfilment. In the procession, such groups are often exuberant in their dances. They are accompanied by a ***raban*** player and flute player.

Figure 56

C.N. Thilakasiri 12M [figure 57] and L. Ariyaratna 15M [figure 58]

These two painting each show the ***kavadi*** dancers as part of the wider procession. The dancers are wearing ordinary costumes [rather than dancing as a troupe or as random youths]. The painting by Ariyaratne shows the dancers on either side of an elephant. On its back is a relic casket which we might assume carries the sacred weapon of Kataragama

Figure 57

Figure 58

On the night of the 7th the whole ceremony was repeated once again. Dignitaries were in attendance. The sacred relics and ornaments were taken from the temple and carried to the waiting Perahera. There was frustration as the delay in starting was even greater than the night before. It also began to rain heavily, arguably an intended effect of the Esala Perahera. Nevertheless, it made for a miserable start to the second night. Many of the dance troupes didn't appear and what started as a massive crowd thinned out considerably once the rains came down. One man with tongue firmly in cheek opined: 'next time I'm only going to put in half the offering I put in this time, can't the god see how much people are getting wet and stop the rain'. Once again it would seem that the gods are dependent on the attentions of people as much as the other way around. Another man suggested the problem stemmed from the fact that nowadays it was easier for pilgrims to access Getabaru. The logic here was that the more difficult it was for pilgrims to physically reach the gods, the greater would be the gods' respect for their devotion. Hence, the gods would be more willing to grant boons and perform miracles – and stop the rains! A half-formed procession, washed out traders and a lot of soaked spectators was not what this particular man had in mind. When the procession eventually did get under way it took a right turn out of the temple passing in front of a new set of traders to sacralise the southern part of the town. The procession went almost a mile down the road. It was nearly 3.00am by the time it got back to the temple compound. By then, the crowds had mostly dispersed and the return of the relics was hurried and carried out by lesser officials. The general sense was that everyone was tired and just wanted to go to bed.

The final night of the celebrations was to be concluded with the performance of a Kohomba Kankariya. The ritual was given a huge billing. There were to be twenty dancers and drummers coming down from Kandy and the ritual was to be performed on a grand scale. The hope of the organisers was that the ritual would be a real crowd-puller. However, things didn't quite work out as planned. The reasons for this will be explained but before that it is necessary to give some background on the significance of the Kohomba Kankariya in Sinhala culture.[23] The dancing and drumming that make up the ritual are now to be seen, and indeed expected, at weddings, public events, opening of business ventures, sports events and many other occasions at which the imprimatur of tradition is required. Indeed, the Kandyan dance tradition once rooted in rituals of blessing and forgiveness is now taken *prima facie* as an essential expression of an authentic Sinhala heritage. One reason why the Kohomba Kankariya has come to occupy such an important position in Sinhala national consciousness is its link with the mythical origins of the Sinhala race. The founding myth of the ritual describes how in the fifth century BCE King Panduvas became ill because of a curse from Queen Kuveni, an indigenous demoness. King Malaya was brought from India to perform a curative ritual. At root, the Kohomba Kankariya is a re-enactment of this archetypal act of healing and blessing that has echoed down through the ages. King Panduvas was the nephew of Vijaya who was banished from India and established the race of Sinhalas on the Island. Kuveni was the consort of Vijaya. The link to these characters and the re-enactment of a royal healing in the Kohomba Kankariya connects the ritual with the mythical origins of the Sinhala race. Over the centuries the Kohomba Kankariya has evolved, drawing in different deities and serving a range of functions: healing ritual, a way to fulfil a vow, an agricultural rite or simply fostering forgiveness and community solidarity. Crucially, the Kohomba Kankariya is associated with the up-country or Kandyan dance tradition [as distinct from the low-country and Sabaragamuva traditions]. In the early twentieth century, Kohomba Kankariya dancers and drummers began to feature in the rituals that centre on the Temple of the Tooth and as a part of the Esala Perahera procession. The inclusion of a Kohomba Kankariya in the 1979 Getabaru celebrations was somewhat novel. The presentation of the Kohomba Kankariya as spectacle by an organising committee dominated

by UNP sympathisers was entirely consistent with the wider shift in political tectonics that was taking place on the Island at that time. Alongside free market economic policies was an appeal to re-invigorate the artistic traditions of the Island through the promotion of emblematic and nationalistic cultural forms. At the local level however, events did not go smoothly.

The night had started well enough. In the hut where the sacred ornaments had been stored the *kapu mahatvaru* set out about making the food to be later offered to the gods [*muruten*]. The *kapu mahatvaru* entered with their mouths masked and their hair bound in tight turbans. They were followed by the various elites and dignitaries. No women were allowed near the preparations for fear that the food would become polluted. The food being prepared, as is fit for the gods, was very rich. It had been provided at considerable expense by a local sponsor from Kotapola. When the party emerged, they formed a line underneath the waiting baldachin with the pots containing the food on their heads. A band of drummers and a temple flute [*horaneva*] player led the procession up the hill to the *dēvāle,*. The way was lined with crowds jostling to get a view of the spectacle. Once it had passed the crowd fell into line and followed it. The first stop at the top of the hill was the Buddha shrine. One of the visiting *kapurāla* came forward to offer *buddha pujā,* a collection of fresh flowers placed before the image. Before placing the offering, he made a series of dance movements before fully prostrating himself on the floor. I later learned that there was some disquiet at these actions. For some, the dancing and the prostrating was seen as disrespectful. One of the Buddhist priests in attendance was clear: this kind of worship was for the gods not 'our' Buddha. Having paid respects to the head of the pantheon, respects were paid to those next in line. The entourage moved to the Kataragama *dēvāle,* disappearing behind the curtain to make the offerings. It was at this point that the atmosphere in the temple compound became excited and events took an ecstatic turn. Space opened up in the crowd as three women and two young girls began to sway and dance to the beat of the drum. One of these was a famous priestess of the gods [*kapuamme*] from Imaduva. Another of the women was from Kirullpone and well known for her ability to go into trances. I later learned that she had come to Getabaru to make a vow. The movements of the women became more violent as they appeared to dissociate from what was going on around them. One of the *kapu mahatvaru* strode into their midst and began pulling at one of the women's hair and slapping her across the face. Despite his efforts to bring the women under some kind of control their movements became more extreme as they jumped up and down and shook their heads wildly. Whilst this was going on the entourage continued to move from the Kataragama *dēvāle,* to the Vishnu *dēvāle,* and then into the Rajjuru Bandara *dēvāle,*. It was while they were inside the Rajjuru Bandara *dēvāle,* that another young woman made her way to the front. She stood still before the shrine breathing deeply as if something was welling up inside her. Then, suddenly, she let out the most blood curdling scream I have ever heard. Then another and another. This most primal of screams went on for four to five minutes. When the screaming stopped, she fell exhausted to the floor, at one moment sobbing uncontrollably and the next laughing hysterically. The crowd were transfixed and I was wondering what was going to happen next. After a moment's pause she threw herself headlong onto the floor and began to twist and writhe as she inched towards the entrance to the shrine beating the ground as she went. Just outside the entrance to the shrine she stood up and began to worship furiously. She threw her body back and forth, slapping her thighs one moment and then pummelling her head with her fists the next. All the time she shouted unintelligibly. The only bit of her babble that I could get was her repeated statement that one should come to the *dēvāle,* pure and that she was very pure. I was later told that the woman was possessed by the god-cum-demon Suniyam.

It was in the midst of this symphony of chaos that one of the *kapurala* peeped out from behind the curtain of the Rajjuru Bandara *dēvāle,* and beckoned me over. I was to be given a rare glimpse of what happened behind the curtain. Inside, the image house was small, dark and there was a dankness which was barely covered by the heavy smell of incense. There, illuminated by the light of numerous oil lamps, stood the figure of the god. The figure was about four feet high dressed in the suit of a Kandyan noble with walking stick in hand and his vehicle, a jewelled cockerel behind him. If the flaking paint was anything to go by, it was a very old image. I was struck by a vertical slit in the wall which connected the *dēvāle* to the main chamber in which the reclining Buddha was situated. Looking through the slit one looked directly into the chamber and onto the decorated toes and soles of the feet of Buddha. The feet of Buddha provide a much-venerated set of symbols known as the *buddhapada*. The footprints remind worshippers of Buddha's earthly existence and what remained after he reached *nibban*. It is perhaps appropriate that such a wordly god as Rajjuru Bandara should be positioned at the feet of Buddha. All the time I was in the *dēvāle,* Ratnayake Kapumahattaya was crouched before the god and seemingly awestruck. After some time, he touched the god's feet and then moved a coconut oil lamp around the length of his body, moving slowly from feet to head, illuminating the deity with its flickering yellow light. When this procedure was complete Ratnayake Kapumattaya invited all to come forward so that we might have this sanctified oil smeared across our foreheads. The party then began to leave the *dēvāle*. We all crouched and bowed as we backed out of the shrine. It was important that no one's back was presented to the god for fear of offending him. Outside, the temple compound was as febrile as ever. The crowds jostled, the drummers beat loudly and several women danced frantically. One of the kapu mahatvaru was dancing before the Rajjuru Bandara shrine and violently smashing coconuts on the step to the entrance. There was a moment when he began to lose control – the gaze [*disti* or *belma*] of the deity had fallen upon him. Several men came forward and rushed him into the *dēvāle.* Minutes later he emerged, restored to proper consciousness and resumed his dancing. As he passed by, he gave me what I am sure was a broad grin from behind the scarf covering his mouth. He also handed me a piece of the coconut that had been used in the rite; clearly, an auspicious piece of coconut to have. The offerings having been given to Buddha and the gods, the entourage moved back to the hut. It had been a very hot and intense couple of hours. But, just as thing were settling down there was another frisson passed through the crowd. A tall man wearing a blue cloak and carrying a long staff arrived making his way through the crowd. He looked almost Nordic and cut a very impressive figure. This was said to be Kandeswami, a famous *kapurala* from the Vedihitikanda shrine at Kataragama. He had come to visit his friend Ratnayake Kapumahattaya on his special day.

It was late in the evening when the Kohomba Kankariya began. However, the troupe of twenty from Kandy that was promised turned out to be less than half that and they were from the town of Keppetipola, not the hallowed place of the tooth relic. Moreover, their main activity in Keppetipola was to perform to tourists on a daily basis. These were not the top notch performers that people had been led to expect. For their part, the performers complained that they had received little co-operation from the local organisers. The shed [*maduva*] in which they performed was poorly constructed and only had two offering shrines [*mal yahana*]. The abundant decoration of the ritual arena intended to represent the fecundity of the harvest amounted to a single comb of bananas. Ratnayake Kapumahattaya later explained that he was against bringing a Kohomba Kankariya to the Getabaru Perahera. It was a break with tradition that he feared would offend Rajjuru Bandara. It was also apparent that many present were not impressed by this innovation. In the Southern Province a ritual known as a *gam maduva* was the usual way to bring well-being and fertility to the area. For southerners, these rituals invoke a more familiar set of gods and in particular celebrate the goddess Pattini. The performance wasn't helped by repeated power cuts which each time plunged the arena into darkness causing the ceremony to be stopped and re-started. The power cuts were seen as a bad omen. One suggestion was that the gods were displeased with the change of format. Another was that the power cuts were an act of sabotage. Somewhere down the hill someone, who presumably wished ill for the festival, was mischievously connecting and disconnecting the power line. Perhaps it was a member of the JVP displeased at the presence of political elites? Another theory was that it was a local ritual specialist, outraged at the importation of up-country rituals and dances which amounted to a loss of income for him and his relatives. By midnight on the night of the Kohomba Kankariya, the crowd had thinned

out significantly. It was unclear whether this was because the deities, dances, poems, and procedures enacted before them were unfamiliar or whether it was the fractured performance and power cuts or perhaps just the soaking they got from the constant drizzle. Whatever the reason this was not a good end to the 1979 Esala Perahera. It was also not a particularly good night for me. Looking back at my notes, by the time the Kohomba Kankariya started on the third night, sleep deprived and exhausted, my ability to take much in was at an end. There was much by way of dances and ritual episodes that passed before me and it is a regret that I have no way of recalling the detail of what these were

Nevertheless, the dancers when they first presented themselves were a magnificent sight, dressed in their resplendent Ves costumes. Their dancing was spectacular: elegant, athletic and precise. The dancers did little to endear themselves to the crowd, however, as they repeatedly performed a sequence called the *adavva*. This episode involves spectacular dance steps performed for spectators and is followed by requests for money, a practice which is now very common when dancers perform for tourists. For part of the evening I was standing with a Berava friend, himself a very experienced dancer in low-country *tovil*. He was not impressed with what he saw. His assessment of the dancers was that: 'their bodies are good but they don't know much'. For him the whole thing was a rather shallow spectacle rather than a meaningful rite.

The dancers worked their way through the main episodes of the ritual as best they could until 5.30 am when they rather unceremoniously gave up. The main promoters of the Kohomba Kankariya had been the high priest from the temple and the local government agent. Both declared themselves well-pleased with how the evening had gone. This was not a sentiment shared by many others, including the performers themselves.

D.M. Pemananda 17M [figure 59], Ranjit Kaluarachchi 15M [figure 60], WG Jayavira 17M [figure 61], U D B Kamal 12M [figure 62], Vipula Liyanagama 14M [figure 63] and G.H. Premasiri 15M [figure 64].

The first three paintings are of the Kohomba Kankariya. The first, by Pemananda, shows two drummers and two dancers performing before a floral arch. The arch is decorated with coconuts and areca sprigs and on either side are ***pun kalasa***, pots signifying fertility and abundance. The painting by Ranjit shows a similar scene but here there is far more detail. Particular attention has been paid to the offering platforms in the background. These are highly detailed and show numerous clay oil lamps which not only illuminate the structures but are also offerings in themselves to the deities. The offerings being made are the main subject of Jayavira's painting. Here the troupe of dancers reverently make offerings to the deities while a large crowd look on from behind. A notable detail in this painting is the brazier which is used to burn the incense - typically sandalwood [***sandun***] - that accompanies the making of offerings to the gods. In the fourth painting, Kamal clearly has the ritual action taking place in a ***maduva*** with a large crowd looking on. However, the performance is not of a Kohomba Kankariya but portrays a scene from a low-country ritual. This is evident from the costumes of the dancers and the fact that they are wearing masks of demons [***yaksa muhunu***]. Also, the drummers are playing ***yak bera***, the drum associated with low-country rituals. Interestingly, what is portrayed here is what perhaps should have happened at the Perahera rather than what actually did take place.

The one by Vipula shows a team of Kandyan dancers performing the Kohomba Kankariya. They are wearing ***ves*** costumes including the elaborate, tiara-like head-dress which is characteristic of Kandyan dance. The dancers perform in front of an offering table [***mal yahana***] and oil lamp. The strong black shading has the effect of projecting dancers out from the background. The poses that the dances are held in are powerfully evocative of a troupe of Kandyan dancers in full flow.

In the final image, Premasiri has chosen to capture the occasion when the relics are returned to the mountain shrine after the conclusion of the three-day celebration. The sacred objects are carried in pots and on a tray on men's heads. Several youths hold aloft a canopy to further protect them. The entourage make their way up the steep steps to the mountain shrine. In the distance can be seen more steps leading the domed caitya and the temple bell [***gantara***]. The stairway up the mountain is decorated with ***pun kalasa***. The placing of the sacred objects in their respective shrines signals the end of the Perahera.

Figure 59

Figure 60

Figure 61

Figure 62

Figure 63

Figure 64

Part Three

Creating the Creators

Photo credit: Upasena Gunawardena

An exceptional teacher?

Had children the verbal skill to express the joy they experience through seeing beautiful things, they would triumph over poets by virtue of their spontaneity.

Martin Wickremasinghe. Ape Gama

In the previous chapter, attention was focused on the Perahera and the children's portrayals of the event. The emphasis was very much on the content of the paintings and the information they convey. There is an assumption here that a straightforward act of representation is in play. Things are seen, heard and felt which are then later brought to mind by the students as memories of the festival. Yet, in phenomenological terms a very complex operation is in play. By participating in the art competition, with its given theme of the Getabaru Perahera, the students were being asked to retrieve an experience that is, to use Merleau-Ponty's term, 'prereflective'. In other words, an inherently embodied form of experience that has been acquired all-of-a-piece. Such experiences only become 'reflective', that is, a kind of propositional knowledge when processed after the event. Borrowing from translation studies we might use the term 'explicitation' to capture what is going on here; the pictures literally make things explicit by drawing attention to them visually. These evocations are shaped by the idiosyncrasies of each student's embodied experience, personal history and temperament. Their ability to communicate these sensations is both enabled and limited by their technical abilities when it comes to making images in two-dimensions. In this respect, the paintings show a clear trajectory in terms of age. The younger children's paintings use conventions that can be seen in the representations produced by young children anywhere. For example, disproportionately large circles for heads and sticks for arms and legs. However, as the children get older the imagery is increasingly infused with style and technique that could only come from a particular blend of tuition in art and a wider cultural sensibility. This is not to say, however, that there is standardisation. What is striking about the paintings is the diversity of technique, colour and convention across the paintings. Each one shows different levels and kinds of sophistication in acts of transformation [elicitation of pre-reflective experience] which are also acts of preservation [by drawing on and reinforcing a tradition of coherent relationships between available signs]. Each child's painting as an act of creation is thus also an act of re-creation in which the world is seen anew by both artist and audience. But, these acts of creation do not begin with some mystical emanation. What we are seeing are representations that are informed by processes of socialisation, enculturation and education. Children have to make sense of their conditions in a world created by adults. In turn, these processes become the basis for what the children will go on to use to make sense of the world into which they grow. This process of experiencing and knowing is the basis of an aesthetic. By this I do not mean discourses about beauty and how it is evaluated. The sense of an aesthetic I want to convey here relates to visual propositions about relations, classification, space, causality and how these play out as naturalised understandings of power, hierarchy, gender, identity and cosmology.

When, in 2023, I began to look closely at the children's paintings this aesthetic became more apparent. It was not only that they were exuberant, imaginative and colourful; they also articulated a sophisticated sense of movement and spatial organisation. Indeed, what was immediately striking about the paintings to me as someone brought up with a broadly European aesthetic sensibility is the distinctive visual grammar of space, colour and perspective that is in play. The features of this grammar that occur in many of the paintings were as follows:

- Visual memory: the pictures were produced by the students several weeks after the Perahera and, to the best of my knowledge, with no visual aids to copy from. Given that they were produced in this way, the attention to detail is extraordinary. Dress, musical instruments, ritual paraphernalia and personnel are translated from memory with great accuracy. Children had internalised not only the details of the event but also the structural relationships between its elements. For example, the running order of the Perahera or the postures and attitudes that are to be adopted towards sacred paraphernalia.
- Embodiment: An especially important aspect of the children's visual memory can be seen in the way that dancers are portrayed. The accuracy with which many of the older children capture posture and movement is exceptional. It is hard to see how such images could have been created without the children themselves having a deeply embodied sense of the routines and movements that they were trying to capture in their work. The visual information coming in is met with a sensibility about movement and the body coming the other way.
- Temporality: Even though a painted image is atemporal, the subject matter that the paintings mostly deal with is dynamic. The pictures capture events that are happening in time. Many of the paintings portray dance, processions and their musical accompaniment. A powerful feature of many of the paintings is a strong sense of rhythm, movement and, indeed, musicality. When looking at many of the paintings, the eye cannot help but dance. Even though the viewer is presented with a frozen frame there is a sense that something happened before it, and something else will happen after it.
- Framing: The play on temporality is also evident in some of the framing conventions used by the children. The picture frame and the containment of images is a powerful device in western art and photography. In the young people's paintings, it is not unusual to see action spill outside

of the edges of the frame. For example, half bodies feature in some paintings giving the impression that people are about to enter or leave the range of vision. This apparent disregard for the conventions of framing, gives a sense that the events portrayed are passing us by at a particular moment rather than the edges of the paper delimiting or 'framing' action as is common in western art and photography.

- Spatial awareness: a similar technique to that described in relation to over-spilling frames is one in which care is taken to include parts of people or objects in ways that suggest that the painter is paying attention to things that are not necessarily in vision. An impression of space is thus created by the inclusion of people or objects partially obscured by those in the foreground. Vision is thus not just about surfaces but about things that are imagined beneath and behind surfaces, whether this be the inclusion of the backrow of dancers, the suggestion of large crowds, or people carrying flags and sun-shades bringing up the rear of a procession. In some images, being out of sight does not equate with being out of mind. There is a sense of three-dimensional space and not merely the presentation of surfaces.
- Outlines: a convention, often discouraged in art education in the west, is the use of heavy outlines and fringes to contain figures and objects. Here rather striking outlines are commonly used to make figures stand out, a feature often found in both modernist art and ancient Buddhist temple art.
- Blank backgrounds: another convention that gives the figures portrayed power and prominence is the use of blank, mono-coloured backgrounds. In many of the pictures there is no attempt to anchor the subjects in a place or situation but rather figures often have the appearance of being free-floating. The technique is found in western medieval art as well as in Sri Lankan temple friezes. The effect in both is to focus attention on the main subject of the painting.
- Repetition: In the images that portray the dancers, the sense of rhythm is amplified by the inclusion of repeated body postures and stances. Just as the aesthetic impact of a real troupe of dancers is the impression that distinct individuals are moving as if a single entity, the painters capture this aesthetic by paying careful attention to the ways that limbs, gestures and body postures are replicated in parallel across the members of a troupe. A residual effect of this repetition is the creation of patterns in the spaces between bodies moving together.
- Connection: in some paintings there is a glimpse of a different sense of sociality in play. Notwithstanding the fact that many paintings portray troupes dancing, there is often emphasis placed on the contact between figures. Arms and legs are frequently presented as overlapping and intertwined. In some paintings it is possible to follow the line of arms and legs across the whole of the picture. This emphasis on contact resonates strongly with a sense of spatial awareness that features prominently in Sri Lankan sociality. It is my contention that what we are seeing in many of the paintings are not so much paintings of individuals as paintings of individuals in relation to one another. In Sri Lankan society, people like to be aware of the location of others and, especially in kinship contexts, physical proximity and touch are integral to communication and mutual recognition.
- Asian beauty ideals: The painters often choose to represent men and women in ways that correspond to Asian ideals of beauty. In many of the paintings those portrayed have fair skin. Women are often given almond eyes. These characteristics are commonly achieved by the use of make-up as in ritual performance, classical theatre or in the more recent penchant for tele-dramas. It is notable that many of the children in creating 'art' as visual representation include these idealised characteristics.

In studying the paintings the question that immediate comes to mind is how did the children acquire their distinctive use of visual grammar? What was involved in creating the creators?

In the late 1970s children's access to visual culture was not so well developed. Television had not yet arrived to any significant extent. Children's films at the cinema were rare. After years of austerity during the Bandaranayake years, books and visual materials were generally in short supply and particularly in rural areas. However, one genre that was widely available at the time were comic strips. These appeared in newspapers and cheap magazines and were widely touted on advertising hoardings on buildings, buses and even bullock-carts. The style of these cartoons was influential in communicating fashions and attitudes. Reflecting on the paintings, one of the artists at the reunion commented that at that time many young people were influenced by the work of an artist called Balangoda Sarath Madhu. In the 1970s he was an illustrator for romantic comic newspapers (eg. Siththara, Situwama, and Dasuna). One of his most popular strip cartoons was a love story called 'What's Next' [*ithin ita passe*]. Influences of this popular imagery from the late 1970s are clearly evident in the older children's paintings. For example, in young people's hairstyles [long, full, wavy and over the ears] and the way they dress [gaudy shirts, bright trousers, and western style skirts]. However, whilst these influences might account for some aspects of the paintings there is much more to think about.

It struck me that probably the most important influences on their visual literacy must have come from their art classes at school. Furthermore, given the variety and quality of the paintings, I surmised that the children must have had an exceptional art teacher. Enquiries made at the school in 2023 suggested that this was indeed the case. The art teacher in question was a Miss Gamage who by all accounts was a much-revered teacher. She also played an important role in the art competition and the works that the children produced for it back in 1979.

Figure 65

Figure 66

Figure 67

Miss Shanta Kamala Gamage was born in 1943 and died in 2008, long before I returned to the school in 2024. I met her son, Mr. Kaushalya, at the reunion. He shared memories of his mother and some photographs of her as she was around the time that she worked at Kotapola School [figures 65, 66 and 67]. Her early schooling was at Sanghamitta College, Galle. In 1970 she gained a place at the Government College of Fine Art and she graduated in 1975. Her first appointment was at Elpitiya Ananda College in Galle District. In 1977 she took the post of art teacher at Kotapola Maha Vidyalaya where she taught for just over ten years. In 1988 she moved to Deniyaya Central College where she worked until her retirement in 2004. She married in 1974 and had two children.. This simple biography is typical of many teachers who spent their lives educating children in rural areas. Their efforts are mostly unsung, except perhaps at election time when the platitudes of politicians draw attention to their role in building the nation and its future. However, their role is a vital one and one which is rarely the subject of close attention. Essentially, the transmission of knowledge and skills in the arts is particularly significant in understanding cultural reproduction and the making of persons within this process. The work of the art teacher is but one of many threads that are woven into a child's emerging sense of self in society. However, I would argue that it is a very significant one, as the paintings give clues as to habits, schemes of perception, classification, feeling, and the naturalisation of action and intent. In the sections that follow, I attempt a sketch, albeit speculative, of the influences that might have been at work on Miss Gamage during her time at the Government College of Fine Art in the early 1970's. What I outline are the kaleidoscope of values and impressions that she would have carried into her work as a teacher dedicated to 'creating the creators'. Much has been written about the artists who participated in the struggle to make and define Sri Lankan art in the twentieth century whereas the art teachers who came out of the Government College have received little attention.

The Government College of Fine Art: Circa 1970

In 1970 Miss Gamage entered what was then the Government College of Fine Art. During this time principals of the college were the sculptor Tissa Ranasinghe [1969-71] and the multi-talented artist, poet and film-maker Mahagam Sekara, Among the staff were Albert Dharmasiri [art], H.A. Karunarathe [art], Mrs Polpitiya [Leatherwork], Wijesekara [sculptor], Dharmathila de Silva [Sculptor], S.P. Charles [traditional art], QV Saldin [art], W.A. Ariyasena [art], and R.M Dharmasena. The artist Geoffrey Beling served as a visiting teacher for some of this period. The main subjects taught in the institution were: Painting, Drawing and Sculpture. Subsidiary subjects included photography, printmaking, graphic design, illustration, and craft subjects such as textile, ironwork, leatherwork, ceramics and pottery, and wood carving.[24]

The College was located in Horton Place in Colombo 7, a prestigious part of the city. The College was also known as the 'Heywood' because it was housed in a former colonial residence of that name. On 1st July 1952, the Government College of Arts [GCA] took up residence in the Heywood with J.D.A. Perera as its first principal. Perera had taken charge of the Department of Arts and Crafts of the Ceylon Technical College in the late 1940s and oversaw its emergence as the GCA in 1952 with a remit for teaching drawing, painting, arts, crafts, sculpture, music and dancing. in 1953 the GCA was re-designated as the Government College of Fine Arts [GCFA].[25] Perera continued as principal, a post from which he retired a few years later in 1956. As head of an independent college and against the backdrop of a post-independence cultural renaissance, Perera was able to bring in some significant innovations. Traditional dance and North Indian music courses were introduced, thus giving them scholarly credence. The new school was now a Department under the Ministry of Education which signalled an important ideological alignment between national cultural policy and education. It offered courses in drawing, painting, sculpture, music and dance which were to be delivered by traditional artists and performers rather than cultural elites. In 1952, Perera appointed Pani Bharata (1920-2005), a famous Berava dancer from Kegalle, as the head of the dancing section of the GCFA. In the 1940s, Pani Bharata had taught and performed with Chandralekha, who was not only one of Ceylon's most celebrated female dancers but also Perera's wife, thus establishing an important connection between the world of dance performance and that of education.[26] Perera was also the first person to offer arts courses in Sinhala medium. As a keen dramatist

he also produced performances of classic Sinhala plays such as 'Vessantara', 'Siri Sangabo' and 'Harischandra.' These popular productions contributed greatly to the revival of Sinhala drama that was underway through the efforts of E.R. Sarachchandra and others. Perera's approach to the teaching of art was eclectic, combining elements of his earlier experience of painting and exhibiting in Europe with a keen sense of the value of indigenous traditions. His philosophy of art education he described as one which 'allowed complete freedom to work on basic design, pictorial composition and experiments in colour' [Bandaranayake and Dharmasiri 2016:40]. This spirit of freedom not only found its way into the staff of the GCFA but also into the many students who were to pass through its doors.

In the 1950s the Government College of Fine Art was soon established as Sri Lanka's premier institution for art education. A Government report issued on the College in 1958 highlights one of its objectives being to create educators and teachers in art for the country's government school sector. [27] The ideological push behind this objective came in 1960 when the GCFA came under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture. The Ministry of Culture was created in 1956, the same year that S.W.R.D. Bandaranayake was swept to victory on a nationalist ticket. At this time there was a decisive shift towards a view of Sinhala culture as imperilled and in need of preservation and protection. There was also emphasis on recovery of the culture believed to have existed in pre-colonial times. To achieve these objectives the SLFP government invested heavily in the promotion and embedding of the arts. For example, Reed points out that in 1958 there were only eight government dancing teachers whereas in 1959-60 the government had created six-hundred new positions [Reed 2010:140]. Along with this initiative went standardised curricula in the arts, the teaching of dance in primary and secondary schools and a system of national exams and awards.

In 1965 the Government College of Fine Art once again came under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education. At the time that Miss Gamage studied at the GCFA the institution was undergoing another of its numerous administrative transformations. In 1974, the year she graduated, the GCFA was incorporated into the University system as the Institute Aesthetic Studies (IAS) under the University of Ceylon and later attached to the University of Kelaniya. (Lanka, U.o , 1987). The transformation of the College into a full-fledged university faculty offering Bachelor of Arts degrees in a variety of arts subjects involved a move away from traditional studio- and craft-based practice to a more curriculum-based approach to the arts. In 2005, IAS became the faculty of visual arts within in the newly constituted University of Visual and Performing Arts [UVPA].

Administrative change was not the only shift taking place in the delivery of art education. Throughout the last century, visual culture was essential in the struggle between competing versions of national identity and values fought out in the shadow of colonial power and the influences it had embedded. On the one hand, efforts were put into re-inventing and celebrating tradition and giving it fixity through policy and bureaucratic underpinnings and, on the other, new generations of artists were pushing the boundaries of accepted orthodoxy and what was acceptable in the arts. Throughout much of the history of art teaching and practice this struggle to reconcile traditional forms with modernist and progressive influences has given Sri Lankan art its dynamism and distinctiveness. A significant figure in this regard was Charles Freegrove Winzer (1886 – 1940). Winzer was born to Anglo-German parents in Warsaw. He was a printmaker, lithographer and painter who was a contemporary of Picasso, Modigliani and a close friend of Matisse. In 1920 he came to Ceylon as the Inspector of Art in the Education Department. Winzer took his duties very seriously. He is credited with promoting instruction in schools in both Sinhala and Tamil and also produced a handbook on drawing. Although his own work was largely mainstream for the time, Winzer is credited with establishing the conditions for modern art to develop in Sri Lanka. He was a close associate of Lionel Wendt who was to make a major contribution to the development of the arts in Sri Lanka. He also tutored J.D.A. Perera (1897-1967) who was later to play a seminal role in the establishment of the GCFA. With Winzer, Perera and Wendt established the Ceylon Arts Club as a forum for progressives to exhibit their work and share ideas. The Club not only provided an alternative to the more conservative Ceylon Society of Arts but was also a conduit through which awareness of the work of contemporary European artists such as Matisse and Picasso could flow. The network of artists who came together around the Colombo Art Club were later to become founders of the influential 43 Group. The Indian art historian Yasodhara Dalmia, along with many others, see Winzer as playing an important role in the development of modern art in Sri Lanka. His knowledge of art and his position as arts inspector enabled him 'to lay the foundation for a more vital movement which moved away from the mechanical mimetic art that existed and towards an archiving of indigenous traditions which he felt were aligned to modernism in art' [Dalmia 2017:11]. Indeed, Winzer was often scathing about western academic art with its 'realistic true to life prettiness and cheap harmonies'. Winzer's disdain for British mainstream art may have come from his background. As a child of mixed parentage, he may have found himself on the outside of a British culture of which he was meant to be a part. His antipathy towards the western academy was matched by his enthusiasm for the work of past generations of Sri Lankan artists whose work, he argued, showed important continuities with modernism. In pointing away from the academy and towards endeavours that were more rooted in local traditions Winzer had a brief but significant influence on the direction of art and art education in Sri Lanka.

After Winzer's departure from Ceylon, Geoffrey Beling [1907-1992], one of his pupils, succeeded him as Chief Inspector of Art for the Western Province in 1932. Beling travelled widely carrying portfolios of large prints of paintings from Europe and India which he showed in schools. With a missionary zeal, he encouraged other art inspectors to inculcate an appreciation of art in children. According to Neville Weeraratne he encouraged children to exercise 'free expression' and to experience the pleasure of painting [1993:56]. He wished to steer children from 'mechanical devices such as perspective' and give them an appreciation of their own aesthetic sensibility. Part of this aesthetic sensibility was an awareness of local traditions of visual representation and particularly the mural traditions of the Island.

The hybridisation of indigenous traditions and imported influences was also evident in the formation of the GCFA. J.D.A. Perera was a close associate of Winzer and had also trained in Europe. These influences led to the College being modelled on British institutions with fine art programmes taught along the lines of the British Royal Academy. For example, Kulasekera has drawn attention to the significance of the College's Greek-Roman Cast Collection and its use in the teaching of drawing.[28] An important figure working alongside Perera in the early days of the GCFA was David Paynter [1900-1975]. His training at the Royal Academy gave his work an eclectic feel, drawing as it did on Renaissance, impressionist, post-impressionist and modernist traditions as well as Asian influences. Another major artist at work at this time was Stanley Abeyesinghe [1914-1993]. Like Perera and Paynter he was an accomplished portrait painter who had trained for a time in Britain. However, he had developed a wide knowledge of the techniques of modern art which he brought into his work and his teaching. He commenced teaching at the GCFA in 1953 and headed it between1965-1969. His style is often poetical combining elements of classical Sinhalese art with modern styles of representation.

Abeyesinghe is credited with introducing several generations of art teachers and students to modern art. Among a group of younger artists who later became teachers at the GCFA , Abeyesinghe was a major influence. This group included artists with national and international reputations such as Tissa Ranasinghe, W.A. Ariyasena, H.A. Karunarathne, Albert Dharmasiri and Q.V.Saldin. These artists were at one stage removed from the generation of artists who been educated and practiced in the shadow of colonialism and European influences. As indicated at the beginning of this section, these artists were working on the staff of the GCFA at the time Miss Gamage studied there. The art that they produced was firmly and confidently grounded in an emerging Sri Lankan artistic tradition, that is, one drawing on traditional topics and techniques yet ready to embrace the possibilities of modernism. Tissa Ranasinghe was an internationally acclaimed sculptor. His crafted bronze statues were compared to those of Giacometti and he was called upon to make statues of three prime ministers.[29] Between 1970-71

he was principal of the GCFA. W.A. Ariyasena, was taught by both Perera and Paynter and recruited to the College as a tutor in 1951. He retired in 1985 although he continued as a visiting lecturer until 2015. Like many of his contemporaries his work brought together modernism with traditional painting and sculpture. He was called on at various points to design nation-defining symbols such as the Ceylon government crest along with emblems for the army and navy and a series of commemorative stamps.[30] H.A. Karunarathne also trained under Perera and Paynter as well as Abeysinghe. His early work was strongly influenced by Abeyesinghe. Following visits to New York and Tokyo in the 1960s, however, his work became less figurative and he is reckoned as one of Sri Lanka's earliest abstract artists. A maxim he often imparted to students was: 'don't' paint the picture, let the picture paint itself'. [31] Unlike Karunarathne, Albert Dharmasiri continued to combine traditional and modernist themes and techniques. For over thirty years he taught at the GCFA, and its later incarnation as the UVPA, teaching painting, graphic design and art history. He is also credited with maintaining links between the GCFA and those who were left of the 43 Group. It is interesting to note in this regard that among the staff remembered from the early 1970s, is Geoffrey Beling, then in his mid-60s, who worked at the GCFA as a visiting artist. Beling was a founder member of the 43 Group and had also succeeded C.F. Winzer in 1932 as Chief Arts Inspector for the Western Province. Dharmasiri was particularly influenced in his own work by George Keyt about whom he wrote an important monograph.[32]

Although not directly involved with the evolution of the GCFA and its predecessors, the 43 Group nonetheless were highly influential in raising the profile of a locally grounded modernist art movement. The 43 Group comprised a collection of artists that formally came together on August 29, 1943, at Lionel Wendt's house at 18 Guildford Crescent, Cinnamon Gardens. Lionel Wendt, although a sometime lawyer, musician and photographer, became the spearhead of the *avant garde* in the visual arts in Sri Lanka at that time. The infamous gathering at his house was attended by leading figures in the arts such as Lester James Peries, George Keyt, Justin Daraniyagala, Geoffrey Beling, and the priest-cum-painter Manjusri. It proved to be a momentous one for the direction of contemporary art in Sri Lanka. Although themselves middle-class and from wealthy backgrounds, the founding group had a shared desire to move out of the shadow of the conservative and colonially inflected Ceylon Society of Arts. The drivers were both political and aesthetic. From a position of entitlement and privilege the artists had their own visions for what a future Ceylon might look like. The group was diverse in style and temperament. They were not in any way a school but a group of closely associated friends who were committed to developing their individual creative impulses and eschewed the need to judge one another's art. The direction of travel of the group challenged the prevailing social and cultural orthodoxy. The turn taken by the 43 Group was decidedly modernist but also one that celebrated local art traditions – 'a mode of indigenised modernisation of great originality and authenticity' as the commentator H.A.I. Goonatileke put it in his foreword to Neville Weeraratne's 1993 chronicle of the 43 Group. One of the leading exponents of this blending of influences east and west was George Keyt (1901-1993). Keyt was also a founder member of the 43 Group who went on to be one of Sri Lanka's best known and most prolific artists. The innovation he brought to Sri Lankan art was a combination of European modernism, and particularly cubism, with South Asian fresco techniques and local themes and settings. He illustrated the folk tales of Sri Lanka in a collection aimed at children.[33] He was also heavily influenced by Buddhism and Hinduism and was a practicing Buddhist for most of life.[34] The stories of the previous lives of the Buddha, known as the Jatakas, featured extensively in his artwork. One of his best known works in this vein is the set of murals painted between 1939 and 1942 at the Gotami Vihara in Borella, Colombo. Here can be seen an extraordinary reimagining of the story of Buddha's life. The images are sensitive yet compelling in the way that they combine centuries of Asian artistic and philosophical tradition with a sensibility which is wholly modern. Much of his other imagery is also firmly rooted in the cultural traditions of Sri Lanka. In addition to Buddhist-related themes he painted scenes from everyday social and domestic life, dancing figures, musicians and gods. Much of his work is clearly in a modernist idiom with strong signs of cubist influence. His works, along with artists such as Justin Daraniyagala and Ivan Peries, show the characteristic fragmentation of figures into planes and volumes, unsettled perspectives, exaggerated facial and bodily features and a dislocation of forms such that there is an altered sense of space and time out of which comes a sense of movement and change. What these artists carried forward from the modernism that broke upon the world in the early parts of the last century was a spirit of 'pluralisation and hybridisation' [Dalmia 2917:190] rather than any simple imitation of outside influence. What they brought from Asian art traditions in general and Sri Lankan art specifically was an engagement with some of the distinctively indigenous ways of representing the mundane and the mythical. Keyt was a towering figure in this movement. His output was prodigious and his works instantly recognisable. His style is characterised by boldness of line, strength of colour and an eschewal of realism in favour of form and shape. The paintings he produced speak directly to the passions and the senses; a sentiment that was later emulated in Dharmasiri's work. Keyt's works have become emblematic of modern Sri Lankan art. His approach to visual representation found its way into the teaching of art at the GCFA through Dharmasiri and others. Motifs from Keyt's work are frequently used for decoration, for example, in batiks and ornaments. The Government of Sri Lanka has issued several stamps celebrating the paintings of George Keyt. It is unlikely that the children of Kotapola had ever heard of George Keyt and the 43 Group. Nonetheless, the spirit of freedom and invention that Keyt and the artists associated with 43 Group ushered in would have touched the tutors of the GCFA and passed through Miss Gamage and on into her teaching in Kotapola. Indeed, some of the older children's paintings show clear signs of style and technique that characterises the modernist work of Keyt as well as that of Dharmasiri, Ariyasena and others. [for example figures 16, 33, 53 and 54].

Finally, mention should be made of S.P. Charles who taught a course on Sinhala Buddhist mural painting and Asian art. Although he did not have the international renown of some of his colleagues he was known within Sri Lanka as the doyen of Sittara Art - stylised depictions of the life of the Buddha and the Jataka stories that tell of his previous births. He played an important role in the work of restoring temple murals throughout Sr Lanka. Like several of his colleagues, Charles lent his artistic skills to the work of symbolising the nation. He is credited with designing the mace for the newly independent parliament and also illustrating the newly designed flag of Sri Lanka under the direction of J.D.A. Perera.[35] Into the mix of modernist art, it also likely that Miss Gamage was also immersed in traditional and nationalist approaches to art.

In the foregoing account there is a lot of speculation. It is based on little more than the fact that in the 1970s the GCFA provided the most important interface between a highly creative, diverse and rapidly evolving tradition of Sri Lankan art on the one hand and, on the other, it provided art education programmes that influenced a generation of art teachers who then went into schools across the country. Miss Gamage would have undoubtedly benefitted from this lively environment and taken forward a broad repertoire of ideas and techniques. Moreover, the time that she studied was one of great national foment. The veteran United National Party [UNP] politician, Dudley Senanayake was defeated in a landslide victory by the United Front [UF] in 1970. The UF was a coalition of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party led by Sirimavo Bandaranaike [SLFP], the Trotskyist Lanka Sama Samaja Party [LSSP] and the Communist Party. The optimism with which the UF swept to power was short lived and within the first year the UF made little to no impact upon the problems that they had laid at the door of the UNP in their election campaign. The nation suffered continuing high unemployment, rising prices and food scarcity. These issues had a particularly severe impact in rural areas, and not least in the area where Miss Gamage came from. Popular discontent was translated into direct action as the JVP launched an attempt to overthrow the government in 1971. Support for the JVP was strong in the area around Deniyaya and Kotapola and many of the parents and grandparents of the children who painted their pictures in 1979 would have been involved with the attempted insurrection. The attempt failed but the government was nonetheless weakened. Its response was a move towards more authoritarian methods to maintain power and control. In 1972 Sri Lanka became a republic and a new constitution was introduced. Power was further

centralised in a National State Assembly whilst at the same time limiting the ability of the judiciary to provide checks on state power. Emergency powers introduced during the 1971 insurrection stayed in place; freedom of the press was curtailed, and public meetings restricted. The centralisation of power bred new levels of cronyism and inefficiency and corruption increased accordingly. The policies of the government also initiated a new phase of communal antagonism and agitation for better rights for Tamils.[36]

Whilst I have little evidence of how any of the above impacted directly on Miss Gamage what I do have are the recollections of those who studied under her and who were responsible for the paintings that I was fortunate enough to collect back in 1979. Notwithstanding the crises that beset the nation in the early 1970s, the spirit in which she went about the making and teaching art seemed to convey something of the vitality, creativity and openness that the Government College of Fine Art had set out to infuse in its students.

Miss Gamage Remembered.

At the reunion in 2024, the alumni painters recalled the passion with which Miss Gamage went about her work. She was singled out as one of the most inspiring and committed teachers during their time at school. She was remembered as one who emphasised for them the importance of the imagination and its expression through art. As one of the painters put it she told us that we needed 'to live a life in which there was art' - not to do so, she asserted, would be to lead an impoverished life. As her tutors had done, she also encouraged creativity and experimentation in her pupils:

She never forced us. She gave maximum freedom to us to do our paintings. We did many paintings for many competitions. I did art for my Advance level exam along with Sinhala, political science, and economics. Art was my favorite subject then.

Bodhidasa Rupuge

She taught us to do paintings using both watercolors and chalk. But she didn't like drawing with chalk, so encouraged us to do painting with watercolors. Sometimes she taught us different techniques such as painting with blades, Cassava pieces, and used cigarettes.

Chandrawathi

I can remember her very well. She was a very talented artist. She recognized our talents and supported us to develop our talents. She can even draw humans and birds. If you sit near her, she would draw you like a living thing. She was such a talented person. We were blessed to have her.

Siddath Vithanage

She always encouraged us to do free hand drawing. She taught us to draw something from our own mind, do some creative work without looking at an object. She encouraged us to draw without using pencil…

… She encouraged us to do paintings directly from a paint brush. She taught us how to draw the human figure by shapes. She never said that it was George Keyt style. She said it was an artistic way of drawing. She taught us how to colour shades in human figures. She taught us how to compose art, how to include more details into out art. She always appreciated our works no matter if they are good or bad. She said that every student must draw something to enhance their creativity.

BK Kaluarrachchi

What comes through in these quotes is Miss Gamage's general emphasis on creativity and freedom of expression. More specifically there are clues to how her education at the GCFA fed into her teaching. One of the things that Stanely Abeyesinghe had encouraged in his students and his staff was the ability to capture figures quickly using available colours. This was in contrast to David Paynter whose approach was much more formal. The reference to the use of cigarette filters as a means to apply paint was a technique used by Abeyesinghe to demonstrate quick figure sketches.[37] Although Abeyesinghe retired shortly before Miss Gamage attended the College it is likely that his enthusiasm, for sensual expression using improvised materials was passed on by other staff members.

Although Miss Gamage was an outstanding and dedicated art teacher her contribution was not just pedagogical. Alongside her skills as an artist in her own right she is remembered fondly as someone who was extremely kind and supportive to the children. She encouraged them to participate in art competitions nationally and at district level and was generally a great advocate for the arts. Her son, Mr Kaushalya Gamage, recalled how his mother would leave at six am to go to school and return between six and seven pm. As he and his brother went to bed at six pm, they often didn't see their mother for long periods. On other occasions, he would be taken to school and sleep on a bench while his mother was teaching.

A theme that came up regularly among the alumni painters was the fact that she bought art materials for her pupils. The catchment of Kotapola school takes in many remote rural areas. The parents of children from these areas could barely afford to send their children to school let alone buy art materials. Miss Gamage would supply these, often paying out of her own pocket.

Poverty also had a rather more invidious effect on her efforts to promote art. Several of the artists at the reunion spoke of how Miss Gamage had encouraged them to develop their art as a career only for more pragmatic considerations to intervene.

I did art only for OL exam. Therefore, I did not get more chances to work with Ms. Gamage. My family was poor. Therefore, we didn't have facilities to continue subjects like arts. We didn't have money to buy paints and papers.

Anil Ranawaka

She was an amazing person. She taught us everything she knew. We spent almost 4 years with her at the Advanced level class. In our time we had to stay 4 years in AL class due to syllabus change. That school time was beautiful. Unfortunately, I was unable to pass the university entrance exam, as I missed it by only 5 marks. Miss Gamage went to the education ministry in Colombo and double checked my results. Then she came back and told me to do the exam again next year. She had high hopes that I would definitely go the University next year. But I wanted to do a job. So I told her that I won't sit again for the AL. She was very angry and scolded me. She said" go and do whatever you like". She worked beyond her limits as a teacher in that incident. She was really worried about me and my future. Once she said, if I continue my higher studies, I would be a good artist one day. We loved her so much.

Bodhidasa Rupage

Those days our parents were poor. They couldn't afford to buy watercolor boxes and drawing books. I think Ms. Gamage brought them by her own money. We rarely find such a teacher nowadays. …[]… She advised me to select arts subjects for Advanced level exams. She said that the Rupavahini Cooperation is starting in Sri Lanka, and lots of job opportunities can be found there for students who do Arts for their A/Ls. But I refused to do arts and did agriculture. Ms. Gamage scolded me for selecting science.

Sidhath Vithanage

Ms Gamage was a dark skinned and bit chubby lady. She loved us so much. She was so pleasant and smiled with anyone she met. She never wore a pleated saree. She used to put the end of the saree to cover one of her hands [a modern style adopted by Malini Fonseka – a leading actress of the day].

W.M Mallika

Although many of her protégés were unable to continue with art as a hobby, let alone a career, Miss Gamage did have some notable successes.

Bandu Kumara Kaluarachchi was aged 12 when he did his painting [figure 40]. Bandu came from a poor family and for him, school and particularly his art lessons, were very important. He recalled walking to school and feeling that his school was a place of opportunity. He was badly affected by the troubles and in 1989 was detained for a period by the army. Eventually however he was able to go to art college at the Sripali Mandapam, Horana. He later became an art teacher, and readily acknowledges his debt to Miss Gamage:

> *She was an amazing teacher. I'm currently working as an art teacher at Rajapaksha Vidyalaya, Deniyaya. I'm influenced by her. …[]… She punished us sometimes. If we didn't do the homework, then she took a foot rule and gave a small touch to our hands. It was not painful. But sometimes she scolded us. She loved us and truly wanted us to have a bright future.*
>
> *Ms. Gamage told me several times to go to the university, but I refused. Now I regret that decision. I could have listened to her and done the degree in university. I could have been a real artist rather than a teacher*
>
> **BK Kaluarracchi**

WM Padmasiri de Silva was 14 when he painted his picture [figure 55]. Even though his career took him away from art he remained very interested. In 1980 he submitted a painting to a prestigious Japanese art competition. He recalled painting a football team and he won a silver medal which was awarded at a ceremony at Colombo Royal College. He even brought along his treasured certificate to the reunion to show me. He attributed his success in the art competition and much else to the support he had earlier received from the school and particularly Miss Gamage.

Geethārachi Somatilaka whose picture appeared in chapter one painted his picture aged 13 [figure 44]. The colour and composition in his painting is quite remarkable for a 13-year-old and it is not surprising that he later went on to be a professional artist. He studied A-Level art and obtained a diploma from Heywood College. However, his journey into the arts was not a direct one. Like many of his classmates, his young adulthood was overshadowed by the 'terror' of the 1980s. He witnessed many deaths – 'on the road, at the junctions, everywhere'. He later joined the Ceylon Air Force and saw active service in the North in the war against the LTTE and again experienced the horrors of armed conflict. These events left some difficult and indelible memories and an abhorrence of politics and conflict. Nevertheless, throughout his time in the air force he maintained an interest in the arts and would work as a temple artist during his holidays. He retired from the air force after twelve years and worked as a teacher in schools in the Deniyaya area. In 2006 he won the award of best temple artist in Matara district. In 2012 he was able to take up sculpture and painting as a full-time profession.

This is work he feels very suited to and at which he is very successful. He has carried out commissions in many of the most important temples in Sri Lanka including Katharagama, Maligawila, Ruwanweliseya and Kelaniya. He also spent a year in Hiroshima, Japan to complete artworks in a Buddhist temple there. His debt to Miss Gamage for her inspiration and support is readily acknowledged:

> *She was like a mother to me. I spent most of my school days in her art class. I was so blessed to stay under her wings in my childhood. Ms. Gamage always preferred the watercolors. She didn't like pastel chalks. Once she told me that real artists use paint brushes rather than chalks. She was committed to her work. We submitted our arts for so many art competitions. She had an amazing personality. May she attain supreme bliss of Nirvana! I have never seen a teacher like her in my lifetime. I am an artist now.*
>
> **G Somathilake**

Figure 68

When I met Mr Somathileke [to my left in figure 68] it was clear that he carries a serious energy and enthusiasm for his profession. He is nowadays keen to emulate the role of Miss Gamage as he himself is a dedicated creator of creators. His wife is a singer and a teacher, and his three children are all creative artists. Furthermore, he hopes to run an institute in which he would teach sculpture, architecture and traditional carving techniques. He was keen to stress that his services would be provided free to anyone who had the inclination to learn.

Figure 69

Figure 70

Figure 71

Figure 72

THE MEMORIES OF OLD PAINTERS – EXHIBITION

Part Four

Reunion

Figure 73

Figure 74

Kotapola National School, 19th March 2024

Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up.

Pablo Picasso.

On February 13th, I held a Zoom meeting with the staff of the Kotapola School. The call was attended by Miss Seewandi [then acting Principal], Mr Epage [Deputy Principal], Miss Nandawathi [science teacher, who was also one of the original painters] and Tharindi Udalagama [Former student of mine and there to correct my errant Sinhala]. The meeting was matter of fact and business like although it was clear that Miss Nandawathi was beside herself with excitement. I too was excited. The idea that I could sit in my house in the Northeast of England and talk on screen to staff in the Kotapola school was rather mind-bending. Anyhow, the three aims of the meeting were quickly agreed. First, I would return to the school with the original set of paintings on 18th March. Second, there would be an event on the 19th march to which some of the original painters would be invited. Third, the school would organise another art competition on the same theme as the first: 'Our Village Festival', the festival being the previous year's Perahera. The Zoom meeting concluded and everyone got busy.

I travelled to Kotapala on 17th march along with my artist friend Pala Pothupitiya, not at all sure what would unfold over the next few days. On the 18th I met with the principal and handed over the original paintings to be displayed. I was also introduced to staff and to the art teacher who now took the art classes. It seemed that little had changed in terms of facilities. The classrooms were dusty and the desks and chairs could easily have been from Miss Gamage's time there. The art teacher was keen to show us the paintings that his pupils had produced for the current art competition. Over 100 paintings were laid out on the desks according to age and grade. We began to inspect the paintings but it became clear that the curiosity of staff and students in their visitors was such that it would be impossible to concentrate. After meeting what seemed like everyone in the school, we returned to our hotel to study this exciting batch of new paintings in quieter surrounds.

On the following day it was clear that the school staff had embraced the spirit of the event and gone to extraordinary lengths to make it special. School prefects were allocated tasks such as arranging chairs and giving flower bouquets. Some of the prefects were to welcome the alumni at the school gate and take them to the principal's office who welcomed them and spoke of his enthusiasm for the event. They were then to be taken to the main hall. Displayed in the hall were their paintings from 45 years ago along with the paintings that the students had produced for the present competition. The staff had also prepared an unusual oil lamp to initiate the proceedings. Rather than the traditional brass oil lamp typically used to open ceremonies, this one was hand-made and rather modernist. It had multiple vertical columns which were bound with coir rope and the whole structure was decorated with fresh flowers. In different positions around the columns were numerous oil lamps [figure 69]. One of a main organizers of the event was Mr. Epage (deputy principal) who, I was told, had worked until 4.00 am on the day to get the hall prepared for the event. We arrived at 9.30am and were escorted to the principal's office. There was a palpable sense of excitement among the staff and the students. We were then taken back to the school gates where a procession waited. On either side of us were the senior staff of the school. In front of us was the school's Kandyan dance ensemble, resplendent in their immaculate costumes. Behind us were the thirty or so painters who had produced work back in 1979. I was presented with several bouquets of flowers by school pupils. A gesture which took the painters by surprise was that many of them also received bouquets from the children. Over twenty, beautifully prepared bouquets of fresh flowers were handed out. Many of the alumni were left tearful by this simple act. To be welcomed back to their old school in this way was something they could not have imagined. As one of them , somewhat taken aback, asked of a school prefect who was about to present him flowers: 'are you giving flowers to us also' [*apitat mal denavada*?] [figure 70].

The drummers struck up and the procession edged its way through the school grounds, stopping at points for the dancers to perform their virtuoso sequences. The sun was burning hot and the bodies of the dancers glistened with sweat as they stamped and gyrated their way towards the main building. Once inside we were directed to our seats. I was shown to the front row where I sat between the school principal and the orange clad monk who was the school's Buddhism teacher. In the rows behind us were the painters and behind them rows and rows of school children all dressed in their pristine white school uniforms. At the rear of the room the paintings, old and new, were on display. The stage in front of us was decorated with a large banner which read 'welcome prof bob' and at the back of the stage 'Memories of the old painters – 1979-2024' was projected onto a large screen. To my surprise the lectern was festooned with microphones from various TV channels. The school was keen to maximise the publicity from the event. There was also an official photographer some of whose work can be seen in figures 71-74.

I found the event deeply moving and had not anticipated quite such a celebration. What moved me most, however, was the reaction of the painters themselves. Seeing them meet up with friends that they hadn't seen since schooldays was deeply touching. Women hugged one another and, men shook hands and embraced. The propriety between men and women was also suspended as men extended a friendly and affectionate touch to their former female classmates. Animated conversations were taking place all around as the painters launched into reminiscences. They talked about their current aches and pains, their spouses, their children's achievements, former friends and where they are today. There was also much laughter. A snippet from one overheard conversation will give a sense of the spirit of the occasion: '*Look at M! I can't even recognize her. She got fat. She was so little then*' and in response: *'No, we can recognize her. She just got fat. Look at her, still the same face as school time. See how time flies. It is so nice that we are meeting again. Who would have thought this type of event would happen? Seeing our paintings after 45 years? I can't imagine.'*

The painters all came along to the day smartly dressed. Sithumini, who helped me by taking notes on at the event, observed that all the women [except for one] were dressed in their best sarees, and wore jewellery and make up. They were dressed up in a way that would normally occur for a formal event such as a wedding. It was clearly a major event for them. Once everyone was settled the speeches began. The headmaster, the deputy heads and the English teacher all welcomed us and spoke of their happiness at the event that had brought the painters back to the school. There was then an interlude in which the school's Kandyan dance troupe consisting of boys and girls performed. The costumes were immaculate and the standard of the dancing very high. It made for a powerful spectacle. One person commented that they danced like 'experts' and that it was probably because they came from families where there was already a dance tradition. There followed several songs from the school choir accompanied by a keyboard and an acoustic guitar – the school's only instruments. The stage was then taken by Mr Kaushalya, Miss Gamage's son. He spoke of his mother's dedication to the teaching of art and her commitment to the school. There was then a prize giving at which school prizes were given out by the Head and I was then asked to give out prizes for the art competition. Prizes, two or three to each year, were given to the entries that Pala and I had selected. The majority of the prize winners called were girls. They each came shyly onto the stage, received their parcel of paints and pencils, shook hands bowed low and hurried back to their seats.

At the conclusion of the formal proceedings everyone was invited to the back of the hall to view the paintings. For some of the painters it was the first time they had seen their pictures and the effect was powerful. There was disbelief, there were tears, there were recollections. It was as if there was a kind of release as the crowd flitted around one minute looking at paintings, next falling into conversation, next taking a selfie with a long-lost friend. The painters were acting like children in a playground and their time travelling was a joy to watch. As one of them later commented when recalling their school days: '*We didn't have responsibilities and we were like free birds*' and, as another one commented, '*Today is the happiest day of my life. I never thought I would meet my old friends again. Meeting them after 45 years is like a dream for me*'. The impact was all the more powerful because the painters had been transported back to a time before a dark shadow was cast across all their lives. As they emerged into young adulthood they all, in varying degrees, experienced a decade of escalating violence and brutality which culminated in 1988-89 in what was known as the 'terror' [*bhēsanaya*].

A cruel end to childhood

J.R Jayawardene was elected President in 1977 following a landslide victory for the United National Party [UNP]. With a strong mandate and little by way of opposition he embarked on a neoliberal transformation of the nation. Beneath a thin veneer of Buddhist morality and an attempt to create a Dharmista society, lay a solid core of self-interested entrepreneurship and wealth creation based on open and unregulated markets. As someone remarked to me at the time: '*in Mrs Bandarayake's time the shops had little in them but at least we could afford to buy things. Now the shops are full of imported goods and no one can afford them*'. This economic transformation of the country occurred two years before the children completed their paintings but the effects of these changes were already begin to swirl around their heads. By the early 1980s portents of trouble ahead were beginning to appear for the Jayawardene regime. The economic miracles promised did not materialise for the rural masses of the country. Disquiet was also fomenting among the Tamil community. The government's response to both expressions of discontent was one of growing authoritarianism. In 1983 a period of serious instability began following the rape of three Tamil schoolgirls in Jaffna, the killing of 13 Sri Lankan soldiers by Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam [LTTE] and a pogrom that followed which left up to 3000 Tamils dead and 150,000 displaced. Growing instability in one of its closest neighbours led the Indian government to coerce the Sri Lankan government into accepting an Indian Peace Keeping Force [IPKF] in 1987. The intervention proved to be disastrous, and the region descended into all-out war. After heavy losses, the IPKF withdrew in 1990. The imposition of the IPKF and the violation of Sri Lankan sovereignty this was seen to represent, proved to be a powerful recruiting tool for the socialist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna [JVP]. The JVP, routed during their 1971 uprising, had re-emerged as a nationalist movement appealing to rural and disenfranchised youth and championing Buddhism and Sinhala patriotism. Many young people joined the JVP in their campaign of strikes, disruption and guerilla warfare. The JVP took on the mantle of protectors and liberators of the 'motherland'.[38] However, as their campaign to overthrow the state gathered momentum, their methods

became more violent and indiscriminate. This aspect of their strategy played an important role in the downfall of the second JVP insurrection. In 1989 the JVP launched 'punishment' attacks on the families of soldiers and policemen. These attacks triggered a violent counter-insurgency campaign. The people who the JVP were aiming to lead and liberate suffered more and more and eventually they turned against the JVP. Into this deadly mix was fed the practice of denunciation whereby people would report neighbours to the authorities or the JVP thereby triggering swift, summary and brutal justice. Many of these denunciations were not political at all but motivated by pre-existing community disputes and grievances. The area around Kotapola was particularly badly affected by these events and the social tensions they brought in their wake. Quite simply, there was no safe place to be. I recall seeing a photo from that time taken near the southern town of Galle. It was taken in the run up to some local elections. It showed a wall and some graffiti. The top line read 'if you vote you will be killed'. Scrawled beneath had been added a line which read 'if you don't vote you will be killed'.

Driving along the NIlwala Valley with Pala on our way to the reunion, he casually pointed out the locations of several 'torture camps'. These were typically community and leisure facilities that were commandeered by the security forces during the counter-insurgency operations. Large numbers of young men and women were abducted and interrogated in these 'camps'. Detention and torture were routine and many who went into the camps never came out alive; their bodies were never found. Pala spoke of venues where planters once gathered in the evenings for refreshments, a game of badmington and a moan with fellow planters about the trials and tribulations of working outstation. During the 'terror' such venues became places where suspects were brought, many of whom were young people, and some mere children. As a young teenager, Pala himself was detained in a camp for several months. Although badly treated himself, he was eventually released, but not before he had witnessed many despicable acts and the deaths of many young people. He recalled that the first months were the worst as the officer in charge of the camp was a brutal sadist. Things improved when a new officer took charge and teachers were allowed to come into camp to put on classes for the young people who were detained. Memories of this traumatic period feature throughout Pala's art. Decapitated figures, for example, are a regular motif that replay the time when, aged nine, and on his way to school he had to step over two headless corpses strewn across the path. This dreadful period was superbly captured in Michael Ondaatje's bleak and penetrating novel '*Anil's Ghost*' published in 2000. More recently, it was the subject of Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida.* A line from this novel that makes me sick to the stomach whenever I think of it, is when one of the torturers, about to go about his work on a young woman, asks his superior whether the purpose is 'punishment or information'.

For all the children who painted their bright and happy pictures of the Perahera in 1979, the period that followed was one of stultifying darkness. The darkness was one that came every night as the sun went down. As electricity supplies were regularly cut the nights were long and filled with fear. Sometimes power was cut off by the insurgents as a way of hampering movement and communications of the police and army; sometimes it was cut by the security forces hoping to do the same to the insurgents. For those trapped in their homes by the curfew, a simple oil lamp might have been all that there was to keep at bay the darkness. But, far more terrifying was the metaphorical darkness that fell during this period. The predictability of social and community life vanished, law and order disintegrated and people's sense of safety and security dwindled away.

At the reunion, we asked questions about the painters' lives after 1979. Experiences of the terror figured significantly in their accounts. Many alluded to that time but did not wish to elaborate. Those that did gave some sense of the shadow that events of the 1980's cast over their lives at that time and thereafter. The disruption they faced took various forms. Schools and colleges were frequently closed which meant that exams couldn't be taken, meaning that plans for further and higher education were stalled. For others, jobs and careers couldn't be secured which meant serious economic hardship for their families. There were also regular curfews which saw families afraid to venture out of their homes for long periods. Several reported how relatives had left their homes never to return.

Some of the painters' accounts also gave a hint of the political tensions that they had to navigate during their young adulthood. As one man said ' we were crushed from both sides'. It was clear that even slight indications of support for the government or the JVP could result in abduction followed by torture and/or summary execution. Indeed, many young people were routinely taken in for interrogation or worse, whether they were activists or not. One man described how he and his father hid away from their home for long periods in a remote paddy field to avoid abduction. However, some JVP operatives cut down a coconut tree to block a road. When the army came to the scene someone told the soldiers that he was responsible and they came to take him away. Parents and neighbours all protested his innocence and begged them not to take him off. To his great relief they did let him go. Another man spoke of how he was taken in for interrogation by the security forces but released without harm. His greatest fear, however, was that his younger brother worked in the security department and the JVP were killing relatives of anyone with government connections. He was sent away to live in his uncle's house to avoid the attentions of the JVP. One of the children in the school in 1979 went on to be an army officer. One man recalled how his and others' friendship with the officer gave them a certain protection from the JVP. As he pointed out the JVP activists of the 1980s were mainly recruited from the younger grades in the school in 1970s. One of the painters spoke of a particularly difficult time as he had become a prison guard after he left school. His distress came not only from what he witnessed in the prison but from the fact that several of his closest relatives were murdered during the troubles on account of his vocation. He had no wish to elaborate on any these experiences. Those who had taken sides with the JVP, of which there were several, had no wish to revisit these times either but all in the room knew who they were.

A particularly poignant moment at the reunion was when one of the painters noticed a picture by his close friend from school days. In tears, he related to Sithumini how his friend was a 'good boy' who had tried to join the army on leaving school, but his application was blocked on three occasions by a local politician. He had then joined the JVP and was responsible for several murders before he himself was taken by the army and murdered. He 'should've been here' was his final comment on looking at the painting. There were no doubt lots of others in the cohorts of 1979 that ought to have been there to see their paintings and the joy of seeing their classmates. Estimates of how many were killed during the civil conflict of the 1980s vary between a conservative 40,000 and an upper figure of 100,000.[39]

On the day of the reunion, however, memories were pushed back beyond the suffering, sadness and upheaval of the 1980s. The magic of their paintings transported them back briefly to a time before their childhood innocence and aspirations were so definitively shattered. The paintings and the memories they evoked belonged to a time lost and found and for this they were very happy.

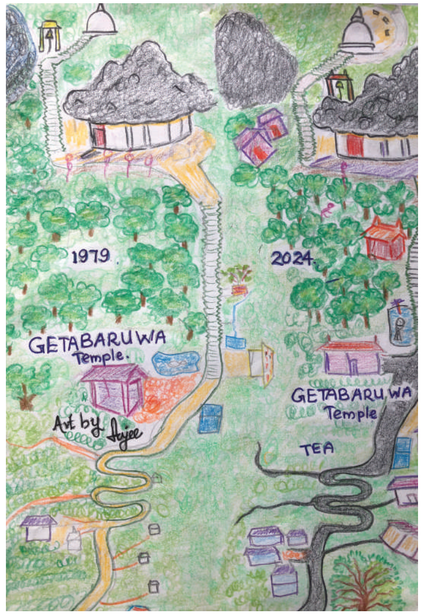

Figure 75

Getabaru revisited

I first visited the temple at Getabaru in 1979. In 2023 I visited it again, but this time virtually. There are now dozens of images of the temple on Facebook and Google. With the aid of Google Maps, I could even stare at the impressive gateway [*makara Torana*] from my computer screen as if I were standing in front of it looking at through my own camera. I could also switch my view so that I was looking up and then down the Deniyaya road. It was clear from the YouTube videos that there is now a tarmac road up the side of the mountain and a designated parking area for vehicles at the top. Pilgrims need no longer suffer heat and exhaustion as they climb the stone stairway. Indeed, pilgrimage has in many respects morphed into tourism with young people on whistlestop visits to ancient sites and holy places across the Southern Province that once would have taken several days each to visit. Needless to say, with the increased flow of visitors, the Getabaru temple has become significantly and ostentatiously wealthier.

I also visited the Temple on my trip to Kotapola school for the reunion on 19th March. No strenuous hike up a seemingly never-ending stairway on this occasion. This time I was driven up the tarmac road with its steep inclines and many hair-pin bends. The site of the Temple and *dēvāle*, has undergone a lot of changes. There are many new buildings and ornate additions to the grounds. Statues and murals have been renovated and the whole place looks pristine, grand and imposing. H.G. Sujeewanie, one of the child painters from 1979 who attended the reunion, gave me a drawing she had prepared [figure 75]. She put the layouts of the Getabaru complex in 1979 and 2024 side by side showing the new buildings that had appeared on the route to the mountaintop temple. She made it clear that she didn't like the way that the Temple had developed in recent years. The roads, the buildings and the increased traffic had taken away much of the character of the place.

On the day I visited, the traffic situation was rather chaotic as we had arrived as the daily *puja* ceremony was about to begin. Men in military uniform marshalled the traffic into the limited parking spaces available. The *puja* was to be taken by a man in his seventies who was a relative of Ratnayake Kapumahattaya, the priest I had known back in 1979. Ratnayake Kapumahattaya had died some years before and his son had then taken over for a short period. After the son's death, Ratnayake Kapumahattaya's sister's husband took over the role of senior officiant at the shrine of Rajjuru Bandara. I met him briefly before the *puja* was to begin. I explained who I was and showed him a photograph of Ratnayake Kapumahattaya I had taken in 1979. He studied it closely, gave a wistful smile of recognition, handed it back and wandered off. He had business to attend to, namely about 150 devotees waiting to make their offerings to Rajjuru Bandara, the deity his family had served since the 1950's. He had to wash, powder his face, clean his teeth and comb and oil his hair if he was to present himself to the deity and to the crowd. The new Rajjuru Bandara *dēvāle* is a substantial building, not the tiny shrine I remembered from the 1970's. Today, devotees crowded in with their bowls of fruit, flowers, incense, money and that all-important piece of paper detailing the wrongs they wished for the God to right. The carefully assembled offering trays were stacked somewhat carelessly on the table in front of the God. A substantial metal grill was lifted electronically to reveal a picture of the God flanked on one side by Vishnu and the other by Kataragama. The Gods were no longer statues but brightly coloured images on Perspex sheets. These, I was told, had been computer-generated [the logo of the advertising agency that had made them was displayed at the bottom of the image!]. The image of Rajjuru Bandara that was the focus of this *puja* was not that of the Kandyan nobleman I had seen previously. The deity portrayed here had the appearance of a higher god with jewelled costume, head-dress and a halo. He still had a cockerel for his vehicle and a walking stick as his weapon, but this was a god who had experienced some upward cosmic mobility. Indeed, his image in the *dēvāle* was substantially larger than the deities on either side.

The *kapu mahattaya*, wearing a red shirt like his brother-in-law had always done, took up his position in front of the deity and began his recitations. With remarkable recall he recited at speed for over an hour: honouring Buddha and calling the judicious powers of Rajjuru Bandara to visit harm on all those who had caused misfortune and illness to those assembled. As in my previous visits to the *dēvāle*, the punishments and torments that would now befall perpetrators were listed in considerable detail. On this day, however, there were no individual intercessions but rather a catchall ritual intended to cover everybody's needs. After a couple of hours, the ceremony was brought to a close and the crowd dispersed. I wondered what would happen to the mountain of fruit and flowers left sitting on the altar – a feast for the hoards of monkeys and the enormous white cobra that is believed to live on the Getabaru Kanda?

As the crowds dispersed, I wandered up to the higher levels of the temple where the sleeping Buddha lies in an ancient over-hanging rock cave. At the feet of the Buddha, where the original Rajjuru Bandara shrine used to be, there was now another shiny, perspex picture of the God. I peeped behind this image to find an original and rather faded wall mural of Rajjuru Bandara on the wall of the cave. He was wearing the Kandyan nobleman's outfit that I associated with the Bandara deities. I later showed this image to Professor Jagath Weerasinghe, an expert on temple murals, and he was of the view that it was early 20th century. His assumption was based on the way that the paint had decayed which suggested it was created using the lacquers that were imported at that time. The headdress also gave clues as to the image's age. This was painted in the style of the popular temple artist M. Sarlis. At the turn of the last century, Ananda Coomaraswamy had bemoaned the loss of

Sri Lanka's great works of temple art. He was also perplexed by restorations that were done with 'weak and ineffectual realism' by 'men from the towns and low country'. [40] Professor Weerasinghe pointed out that this image of Rajjuru Bandara was a good example of what Coomaraswamy was fretting about; a wave of popularist vandalism that came in the name of Buddhist revivalism.

There are now three *kapu mahatvaru* working at the Getabaru Temple. At another Rajjuru Bandara *dēvāle,* I met one of them. He was a large-headed man with a radiant complexion. He wore white shirt and cloth and had a golden coloured sash around his neck. He also sported a conspicuously large gold wristwatch. His helper, a Mr Bandara, was keen to point out that he was from Kandy and, as his name would suggest, had a close link to the Bandara cults. He complained that these days not so many people came to the upper temple as they all went to the large *dēvāle,* below. While I was there a few people came to the shrine. Unlike the mass event that took place below, this was a much more personal encounter with the deity of a kind I had witnessed decades earlier. The *kapurāla* quietly made offerings on their behalf. The focus of their attention in this instance was an image of Rajjuru Bandara which was half-painted and half-embroidered with cloth, sequins and jewels. Devotees also came to this *kapurāla* to make offerings at a small shrine dedicated to the nine planets [*nava graha dēviyō*]. Here, as with Rajjuru Bandara Deviyo, the emphasis is on misfortune and how to avoid it in the present or alleviate it in an uncertain future.

The Getabaru annual Perahera is still a major event at the temple and for the town of Kotapola. Indeed, the event has grown significantly since 1979. Rather than a three-day event it is now five days long and attracts even bigger crowds than before. The annual Perahera has also been recognised at state level by the Government Gazette under the Public Pilgrimage Ordinance Act. It is now acknowledged as a national event and designated as a public charity. Today the financing of the event runs into millions of rupees. The 2023 festival was extensively recorded on Youtube. Looking at the event it is clear that it is not only bigger, that is, in terms of dancers, musicians, elephants etc, but also in terms of spectacle and professional organisation. It is a major pageant in which culture and religion seem to vie for ascendency. The event is part sacred ritual of the Sinhala Buddhists and part cosmopolitan celebration of the nation somewhat akin to Brazilian carnival. The developments that have taken place at Getabaru are consistent with a resurgent Buddhism in the aftermath of war and internal conflict. I couldn't help wonder what Ratnayake Kapumahattaya would have made of these developments to his ramshackle mountain shrine.

Figure 76

The 2024 Art Competition.

As part of the 2024 event at Kotapola, the school's art classes were asked to make pictures once again on theme of 'our village festival'. They were asked to draw on recollections of the most recent Perahera in 2023. As before, the response of the children was enthusiastic and within a matter of days over 100 paintings were submitted from children aged between 6 and 17. The medium this time was almost entirely wax crayon-cum-pastel which gave the paintings a much more vivid appearance than the earlier paintings with their more subtle hues. I had brought 22 prizes [water colours, brushes, pencils and pastel sets] for the best from each grade. I had also had made over 130 certificates so that every child who took part would have something to remember the event by [although I somehow think I will not be coming back to repeat a reunion with these children in 45 years' time!]. The certificates, printed on card, had a florid gold design around the edge and were signed individually by both Pala Pothupitiya and me [Figure 76]. My thinking was that Pala is already a well-known artist and may yet become even more famous. Who knows, like a Picasso-signed-serviette, a Pala-signed-certificate may be of some value in 20 years' time. On the day before the reunion event, Pala Pothupitiya and I took the paintings away to scrutinise and do the judging.

We thought the job would be difficult, but it turned out to be surprisingly straightforward and we were mostly in agreement about style, content and creativity. Once again, the talents of the children were impressive. A lot of care and effort had gone into creating many beautiful images. However, at first glance the paintings seemed far more formulaic than the 1979 paintings and presented a different kind of dynamism for the viewer to reflect upon. In discussing the 1979 paintings in part two I identified ten points that seemed prominent in the aesthetic evident in them [see page 85-86]. It is instructive to make a direct comparison using the previous ten points:

- Visual memory: The attention to detail in the 1979 paintings was extraordinary. In the new paintings there was a similarly impressive representation of dress, musical instruments, ritual paraphernalia and personnel. A major difference, however, was that the subject matter that the children had chosen was much narrower. In 1979 the children concentrated on different aspects of the Perahera [for example, drummers, whip-crackers, lighting the oil lamp etc]. The result was that the whole event was captured in its totality when all the pictures were put together. In the new paintings, there was a tendency to reproduce the Perahera as a kind of *tableau vivant*. Indeed, the inclusion of everything in one frame, rather than focussing on sections was commented on by one of the original child painters as something that differentiated the new paintings from the old ones. The tendency to organise the image as a kind of *tableau*, I would suggest, comes from iconic images of the Perahera that are now found everywhere [see figure 77 and 78] rather than a memory of the event itself. In 1979, the children were responding to their own experience of the event and perhaps the maxim of H.A. Karunaratne, one of Miss Gamage's teachers : 'don't paint the picture, let the picture paint itself'. The 1979 painters' knowledge of dance, folk art and painting styles were blended such that there was fluency in the move between visual arts and dance. In short, they were not only representing the pageantry and ritual of the event but demonstrated an ability to see it in a culturally skilled way to start with. In effect they were not only seeing from the outside but also from the inside. As witnesses to the Perahera and indeed, as participants in it [for example, as Hevisi bands and dance troupes] theirs was an unconscious alignment of experience and expression. Children at the school in 2024 were no less aware of the Perahera but as one painter commented, even if they watch it from the roadside they probably only watch it for a couple of hours. He recalled that when he was a child, they would watch the Perahera every day and often overnight. They would watch all the preparations and most of their relatives would be involved with organizing the event. He mentioned the business of setting up the lighting as well as participating in the actual procession as dancers and drummers. He concluded that the Perahera tradition was a big part of their growing up and that is why they were able to paint it in a way that new painters couldn't. For the children painting today, it would seem that popular representations are taken as more real and authentic than their own lived experience of the event. Indeed, the experience seems to recede in the face of ever greater penetration of television, film and standardised imagery. This point was again borne out by one of the original painters who commented that the Perahera portrayed in the new paintings was more like the Kandy Perahera than the Getabaru Perahera, that, is something akin to a standard or iconic pageant [figures 79,80 and 81]. A detail worth noticing in figure 80 is the prominence of the *Basnayake Nilame*, typically a political leader or prominent local figure who is considered the custodian of relics and sacred objects. The *Basnayake Nilame* appears in the new paintings in a way that he did not in the old. The focus on this figure perhaps suggests the rise of the *Basnayake Nilame* as a political-cum-celebrity figure in recent times.

  Further distancing from the Getabaru Perahera comes, no doubt, from the widespread use of the mobile phone as a camera (most of the children supplied a mobile contact number on the reverse side of the images they submitted for the competition!). With a phone, images

Figure 77

Figure 78


Figure 79


Figure 80

Figure 81

Figure 82

can be easily summoned and traded on social media platforms. These images can then form the basis of representations without the need to engage in the skilled work of memory. A few children did not appear to rely on an externalised memory to generate their images, but most seem to have done so. It is worthwhile noting that in 1979 there was no television, let alone social media. Books, strip cartoons and films were available as sources of inspiration, but the children then did not grow up, as they do today, in a world flooded with reproducible images. The difference in early visual experience might account for two important differences between the two sets of paintings. The first concerns the positioning of the crowds in paintings of the procession. In the 1979 pictures the crowds watching the passing of the Perahera are always on the far side of the procession. In other words, the position of the artist is imagined to be within the action taking place. In the new paintings, the crowd are almost always positioned immediately in front of the procession [see figures 82 and 83 compared with figures 23 and 26]. In the later paintings the position of the viewer is part of a crowd watching a spectacle. In the early ones, the position of the viewer is part of the spectacle with the crowd watching on. A further consequence of this positioning is that the artist then feels the need to complete the scene by supplying a backdrop [for example, filling in details such as the landscape or buildings]. Such details were a feature mostly absent from the 1979 paintings. Second, the pictures of the younger children have a certain cartoon-like quality which suggests the influence of the slew of pre-school cartoons that circulate globally [for example Peppa-pig and Japanese Anime]. In these cartoons, oddly shaped, anthropomorphic characters appear in animated stories. Their faces are one dimensional with exaggerated albeit minimal facial features. The resort to cartoon-like imagery reduces as the children get older but its influence is strong when it comes to representation and composition [see figures 84, 85 and 86].

Much of the art of the twentieth century in Sri Lanka struggled to overcome 'colonised vision'. It is somewhat ironic that the present generation of young painters demonstrate a new form of colonised vision. This time it comes with the global flood of digital technologies that render primary experience and imagination secondary to perceptions that are mediated by the mobile phone and other technologies.

- Embodiment: I argued earlier that an internalised and deeply felt sense of movement was fundamental to the 1979 children's ability to recall and represent the dancers. The accuracy of the way that postures and poses were portrayed was exceptional. There is very little evidence of an embodied identification in the new paintings. It is clear that the dancers are dancing, drummers are drumming and so forth, but the representations are often cruder. It is as if the children in 1979 could paint from the inside out, that is, visual information coming in is met with a sensibility about movement and the body coming the other way. The result is a capacity to capture bodily movements as compelling two-dimensional representations on paper. The new painters are working primarily from the outside in with little by way of sensibility about the dancers' movements. They are trying to paint what they see with little sense of what they feel informing the picture. There is something of a paradox here in that dance is a formalised part of the curriculum today in a way that it wasn't in the past, yet the flow between the different art forms seems to be restricted if, that is, it is taking place at all. This is a point to which I return below.
- Temporality: Like the 1979 paintings the new ones display a lively sense of movement and action. There are, however, subtle differences. The lack of an embodied sense of the subject renders the imagery less free-flowing and rhythmical. They are, as pointed out above, rather like stage sets. The images are set in time but do not in themselves convey a sense of time. With some exceptions, the bodies are stiffer and more static in their appearance.

Figure 83

Figure 84

Figure 85

Figure 86

- Framing: In the original paintings I drew attention to way that many of the children disregarded the frame as a device for the containment of images. In the new paintings there is a similar effect in play. Many paintings do convey the sense that a procession is passing. with action spilling outside the edges of the frame. However, one suspects that this is what the photographic source is telling them to do rather than them demonstrating awareness of activity outside the frame and which just happens to be caught on the area of paper available to them.
- Spatial awareness: in similar fashion, a camera-informed visual sensibility does not compel the artist to be aware of what is behind. Unlike the earlier paintings, in which the painters seemed to be aware of things that were not necessarily in vision, the new paintings are preoccupied with surfaces rather than a space in which people are moving in relation to one another.
- Outlines: the new paintings adopt a variety of conventions regarding the use of line. What is not present in any of them is the striking use of fringes or spaces around figures to make them stand out. The new paintings tend to use line as a container for colour [for example, see figures 87 and 88]. Some children have clearly used pencil to draw the image first and then to set about 'filling it in'. Mr Somatilleke, the child painter who went on to be a professional artist, pointed out that Miss Gamage would not allow the use of pencil in this way. The children had to use a brush or crayon to create a sense of shape and volume. He said that even in his work today he never uses a pencil as the starting point for his work.
- Blank backgrounds: As in the earlier paintings the children would often leave the backgrounds blank and thereby give the figures greater impact. In several of the paintings this technique has been taken to a higher level with some of the older children rendering the Perahera like a temple frieze or mural with a characteristic red or black background [figure 79]. Again, this is a convention which is drawn from iconic images of the Perahera. The effect of the unelaborated background in each instance is to focus attention on the main subject of the painting. In some instances, the 2024 painters use a technique of decorating the background with spirals. However, consistent with the argument made about the impact of photography, the new paintings show a greater tendency to fill the background with the actual backdrop in front of which the Perahera was passing. There is an attempt to reproduce the photograph as it were.
- Repetition: In the earlier paintings I argued that the sense of rhythm was amplified by the inclusion of repeated body postures and stances. A residual effect of this repetition was the creation of pattern in the spaces between bodies moving together. There is little sense of this in the new paintings. Dancers hold recognisable postures and wear the same costumes but only rarely does the painter convey a sense that they are working as part of a highly co-ordinated dance troupe.
- Connection: A significant difference between the two sets of paintings lies in how the individual figures relate to one another. In the earlier paintings I suggested that the children were conveying a distinct sociality; figures were often presented as overlapping and touching such that the paintings were not just paintings of individuals but paintings of individuals in relation to one another giving rise to patterns in the spaces between. This sense of contact seems to be almost absent in the new paintings. Indeed, figures tend to be presented as separate with their actions unrelated to one another.
- Asian beauty ideals: Again, the painters tend to represent men and women in ways that correspond to Asian ideals of beauty. Notable many of the central subjects are fair-skinned.
- Use of colour: An additional difference that was pointed out on the day of the reunion by one of the original painters related to the use of colour. He recalled how Miss Gamage had taught them how to mix colour rather than applying available colours from a crayon or a paint box. Back then only primary colours were available and to create

Figure 87

Figure 88

secondary colours there had to be a knowledge of what colours to mix. Nowadays, he pointed out, a paintbox contains lots of colours and the need to understand how colours are made is no longer needed as they are selected directly from the paint box. Comparing the two sets of paintings he concluded that the old paintings had a lot more different and distinctive colours in them whereas the new ones, although much brighter, display a much less subtle use of colour.

In both the old and the new paintings there are strong indications of a solid development of artistic capability across the different age groups. Both sets of paintings are impressive as spontaneous and vibrant recollections of a significant event in the children's lives. In both instances credit goes to the art teachers involved. There are, however, subtle differences in the direction of travel. This is hardly surprising given a forty-five year gap between their production. This difference might be crudely summarised as being about the role imagination and imitation play in representational creativity. Among the children taught by Miss Gamage there seemed to be an emphasis on painting that is freely and expressively in response to an experienced reality and, if anything, a move away from realism. It is striking that none of the 2024 painters attempted anything like the modernist experiments evident in some of the 1979 paintings. The painters of the present-day works seem to aspire to greater realism with digital images operating as the arbiter of good art. Whether this comes from their tuition or is simply a consequence of the power and ubiquity of digital imagery is not clear. Yet, I believe that the distinction is key to the creation of creators in the two different eras.

By way of a brief conclusion, I want to draw attention to the role of imagination and experimentation in education and the way that contemporary policies and practices have diluted this most critical aspect of child development. During the time that Miss Gamage was training to be a teacher important reforms were in introduced. During the early 1970s education reform was driven by a need to contain the unrest that had built up among rural Sinhala youth which erupted in JVP actions in 1971.[41] The intention was to achieve objectives that had been identified in the 1940s by the 'father of free education' in Sri Lanka, C.W.W. Kannangara [whose large portrait, incidentally, was painted on the gable end of a building in Kotapola National School]. However, in the post-independence years successive governments fell far short of achieving the objectives he so clearly laid out: widening access, eliminating disparities and improving employment prospects for school leavers. In the 1970s there was a renewed effort to address these problems. There was a turn towards vocational and practical education and an emphasis on teaching methods that were activity-based and child-centred. Aspects of these changes would have no doubt appealed to Miss Gamage's creative spirit and her recognition of the importance of education in rural areas. The important point to note, however, is that whilst there were broad outlines of what educational policy ought to achieve, the reality seems to have been that there was considerable freedom when it came to implementation in the classroom. In other words, there was latitude for a creative individual to educate and inspire children who might otherwise have had little access to the creative arts.

Throughout subsequent decades there were continued efforts to bring the work of educators in line with national development objectives regarding employment, citizenship and nationhood. These objectives were in turn yoked to hard external drivers such as the World Bank and soft ones such as the Millennium Development Goals. In 1985 and National Institute of Education was created whose function it was to advise the Ministry of Education on curriculum reform and the education of teachers. In the effort to move from crude quantity to targeted quality in educational provision, policy began to be more technocratic and managerial in relation to children and to their teachers. As it did in the UK and other countries, the language of education policy began over time to adopt a new vocabulary made up of competencies, outcomes stakeholders, pragmatics, financial constraints and all underpinned by the need for an active engagement with technology. Child-centred education and recognition of the individual learning styles and capacities of developing children gave way to standardisation and fragmentation of the curriculum. In the new educational paradigms, teachers and children are all to be measured by the same yardsticks. Achievement is not about the creativity of teachers and the individuation and well-being of children so much as grades and qualifications and how successful teachers are in helping children obtain them. In this increasing instrumentalization of education in society, the role of the arts becomes ever more precarious. What place is there for creativity when the systems are increasingly designed to measure conformity? We will never know what Miss Gamage would have made of the place and function of art teaching in contemporary Sri Lanka. It is interesting to note, however, that at the reunion an art inspector from the region was present. During conversation he expressed concern that there were moves afoot to remove advanced-level art from the curriculum. Sadly, there is an inexorable logic to this kind of policy – afterall, art is merely about drawing pictures and what good can that be to the economy!

Endnotes

1 https://thepalafilm.com/

2 People of the Berava, caste are also referred to as the Nekati Kuliya, a designation which associates them with the more elevated profession of astrology. Throughout I used the term Berava as this is the term which is most widely known and used.

3 Gananath Obeyesekere in an essay speculating on what became of Brahmins who migrated to Sri Lanka from India in the middle ages makes the point in his concluding remarks that Brahmins 'might have descended the caste ladder' and have links with drummers [Obeyesekere 2015:30].

4 My Phd thesis was produced in 1984 and is available on line at http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/1213/ . Other publications dealing with traditions of ritual traditions of the Berava are *Possession, dispossession and social distribution of knowledge among Sri Lankan ritual specialists* [1997] and *On the impossibility of invariant repetition: Ritual, tradition and creativity among Sri Lankan ritual specialists* [2004] **Anthropology and History**, Vol 13:3 pp 301-316.

5 For a more detailed exploration of this argument see Obeyesekere, 1975: 17.

6 There was indeed a king called Valagamba, who reigned during the Anuradhapura period [377BC-1017AD]. His reign began in 103BC but shortly after becoming king, he was overthrown by a rebellion in his court and an invasion by Tamil armies from South India. The king fled and according to the great chronicle of early Sri Lankan history, the Mahavamsa, he hid in the Vessagiri forest south of Anuradhapura. He was also looked after by a monk whom he later rewarded with a gift of lands and the building of the great Abhayagiri Vihara and monastery at Anuradhapura. The great chronicles of early Sri Lankan history do not mention the southern hills of the Sinharaja forest as the place where King Valagamba fled, nor is there mention of a monk there assisting him.

7 Another example is the Kolawenigama Temple, which lies a short distance from Getabaru. This temple is believed to have been built by King Buwanekabahu VII in the 16th century in recognition of the protection that local people gave to the tooth relic. This was during a time of political instability when the relic had to be moved from the Kingdom of Kotte for safe-keeping. [Ranaweera 2015: 33-37].

8 The most prominent of the Bandara deities is Devata Bandara. Obeyesekere states that this god has three aliases. Alutnuwara Deviyo, Vahala Deviyo and Dedimunda. In mythology, Dedimunda obtained this title when he stood by Buddha when he was being attacked by hosts of the demon, Mara [Obeyesekere 1984:70]. Devata Bandara was the son of a demon Purnaka and consequently he, and the other closely related deities are believed to have aspects of the demonic in their character [ibid 66]. They are semi-divine in that although they are associated with the demon hoards they also have the power to direct and control them. Rajjuru Bandara and Dedimunda Deviyo (also known as Dedimunda Dewatha Bandara) bear a strong resemblance to one another in terms of their appearance and the kinds of actions they are associated with . Both Rajjuru Bandara and Dedimunda are also associated with the relief of illness and suffering and are believed to bring swift retribution when its causes are human malevolence.

9 The archetypal Esala Perahera is held in Kandy in July or August. It is believed to date back to the 3rd century BC when a portion of Buddha's tooth, retrieved after his cremation, was brought to the Island [Seneviratne 1978]. In its current form the Perahera probably took shape in the reign of Kirti Sri Rajasinghe [AD 1747-82] as a celebration of his kingship [Obeyesekere 1984:370]. The tooth relic is kept in the Dalada Maligawa – the Temple of the Tooth – the holy of holies for Sinhala Buddhists. Once a year the relic is taken out of the temple. It is placed in a casket and set upon the back of a magnificent, caparisoned tusker. The procession bearing the tooth, known as the Maligawa Perahera, joins with a number of other processions that originate in the shrines of the gods. These are known as the Devale Peraheras and represent Kataragama, Pattini, Vishnu and Natha. At the head of a splendid procession the relic is paraded around the town of Kandy and witnessed by enormous crowds.

10 I am grateful to Vindhya Buthpitiya who introduced me to this image and gave permission for it to be reproduced here.

11 In 1984, Jonathan Spencer carried out a similar exercise. He asked schoolchildren in the village in which he was carrying out field work to write an essay on the theme Ape Gama (Our Village). The younger children didn't write essays but simply drew pictures. Spencer notes that every picture contained images of three iconic items of village life: the tank or irrigation lake, the temple represented by a *caitya*, and the paddy field, even though there was no temple or tank in their village [Spencer 1990:287]. Spencer points to Martin Wickramasinghe (1891-1976) as a post-independence scholar whose work contained popular evocations of a village idyll. It is no coincidence that Ape Gama, was the theme of Spencer's art competition and also the title of one of Wickremasinghe's most famous novels. Published in 1940, Ape Gama is a semi-autobiographical work which attempts to retrieve some of the innocence and simplicity that Wickremasinghe believed modernity was sweeping aside.

12 There was loss of life among both the insurgents and the state forces. Famously, a local doctor, Rex de Costa, was murdered on his doorstep for aiding state forces [Alles 1976, 167-179]. Also see Dhana Hughes' detailed accountant of the insurrection [2013].

13 During the unrest that exploded in the region in the 1980s Kirti Abeyewickrama was assassinated by the JVP in a grenade attack on the Sri Lankan parliament in 1987.

14 A major source of the Sabaragamuva Devale's wealth and influence is its association with Sri Pada, the mountain on which it is believed that Buddha's footprint was once placed. Saman is the Guardian deity of this much-hallowed place of pilgrimage. Although once visited by Buddhist, Hindu, Muslims and Catholic pilgrims the site has been progressively rendered into a singularly Buddhist sacred space serving the interests of the majoritarian Sinhala community. As De Silva argues in his detailed ethno-historical study of Sri Pada, the relationships of domination intrinsic to Sinhala Buddhist Nationalist ideologies have over time become increasingly established and legitimated [De Silva 2015].

15 As stated in part one, the ritual and technical aspects of drumming are traditionally the preserve of men of the Berava caste. Knowledge is passed down within the caste as to how to make drums and how to play them in a wide variety of contexts. Whereas at one time it is unlikely that a non-Berava person would touch a drum, by 1979 the drum was a less potent symbol of caste status

16 This term is borrowed from Lave and Wenger [1991] and their account of the way that knowledge and skill is acquired over time in a move from 'peripheral practice' to accomplished expertise.

17 The 'Battle of the Banian' is a now famous incident in which there was a violent confrontation between Goyigamas and Berava men over their children's right to wear vests in public. Ryan reports events taking place near Tangalle in 1949 [Ryan 1953: 292-3]. My own informants described similar events taking place in the 1960s, again sparked when a Berava child was assaulted in the street for going to school wearing a vest. S.A. Wickremasinghe, then Communist Party MP for Akuressa, was reported to have physically intervened in the confrontation and persuaded the Goyigama groups that their prejudices were unfair and unfounded.

18 Seneviratne tells how, following the fall of the Kandyan kingdom in 1815, the British government banned the annual Kandyan *perahera*. A drought followed that was said to be caused by the failure to perform the *perahera* and accompanying rituals. There was much agitation and the British finally relented. A major ceremony was held after which there were torrential rains and floods; a clear sign of the power of the ritual and the relics it celebrates [Seneviratne 1978:101].

19 Argenti-Pillen suggests that the primary enjoyment of *boru* lies in its capacity to create 'illusory realities' by way of 'obvious pretence' (2007:323),

20 The musician, Lionel Ranwala is credited as having introduced the first Hevisi Band into Sri Lankan schools in 1964 [Vanniarachchy 2022]. Ranwala's efforts to establish folk music in schools was greatly assisted by W.B. Makulolowa who was chief inspector of music and dancing in the 1960s and later director of research at the Ministry of Cultural Affairs [Reed 2010: 133]. Together these two men played an important role in steering school arts curricula away from western influences and towards those deemed authentically indigenous.

21 According to Mantillake [2022] the dances drawn from these different traditions became part of the national curriculum in schools in the 1950s. He identifies the Berava dancer and drummer Pani Bharata as playing a significant role in creating an entire repertoire of dances that reinforced an emerging sense of Sinhala national identity. Although presented as authentic and pre-colonial, Mantilleke argues that these dances which celebrated village day to day activities are largely invented and were formulated in the ferment of cultural revival that followed independence.

22 Obeyesekere argues that these practices are relatively recent and signal the rise of god Kataragama [aka Skanda aka the Hindu god Murugan]. He links the rise of Kataragama as an 'emerging national deity' [1977: 392] with changes in economy, education and the transformation of religious practices in rural areas. The mytho-biography of Kataragama casts him as the son of Siva and the god of war and, for some, the 'patron of thieves' [ibid].

23 The definitive account of the Kohomba Kankariya is provided by Susan Reed in her book*: Dance and the Nation: Performance Ritual and Politics in Sri Lanka* [2010, but also see Amunugama 2021]. In it she documents the development of the Kohomba Kankariya from a small-scale village ritual into a ubiquitous and essential expression of Sinhalese national identity.

24 I am grateful to Dumith Kulasekera who was able to get information about staff and courses delivered in the early 1970s from college alumni.

25 See Dharmasiri, 2010.

26 See Mantillake for a more detailed account [2022].

27 See GCFA, 1958:9.

28 The cast collection (the Praying Boy) of the UVPA has been in storage and Dumith Kulasekera has undertaken research to identify the casts and situate them within the Islands cultural history [Kulasekera 2023]

29 See Neville Weeraratne [2013]. Also see The Sunday Observer 12th august 2007 for an appreciation.

30 See 'A pioneer of Heywood and guide, mentor and role model to me' and appreciation by K.N.O Dharmadasa. The Sunday Times, October 30th, 2022. See also Dumith Kulasekera's 2020 blog "The Red Youth: A Modern Painting in Sri Lanka. https://dumithkulasekara.blogspot.com/2020/07/the-red-youth-modern-painting-of-sri.html [accessed 2nd September 2024]

31 See Bandaranayake and Dharmasiri [2010:75]. Also see Anoli Perera's biographical and conceptual exploration of Karunarathne's 60 years of work [2018].

32 See Dharmasiri 2020. Also see Dumith Kulasekera's blog: 'Sri Lankan Modern Art: George Keyt: A Portrait of the Artist by Albert Dharmasiri'. https://dumithkulasekara.blogspot.com/2021/08/sri-lankan-modern-art-george-keyt.html [accessed 2nd September 2024]

33 See George Keyt *Folk Stories of Sri Lanka* [1974]

34 Yasodhara Dalmia provides a detailed biography of George Keyt in her *Buddha to Krishna: Life and Times of George Keyt* [2017].

35 See 'The Mace and the Man'. The Sunday Observer February 8th 2004.

36 See K.M. de Silva, 2005: 661-677

37 I am grateful to Dumith Kulasekara for sharing these details [personal communication]. He was told of these aspects of Abeyasinghe's work by a senior faculty member.

38 See Uyangoda, 2003:43

39 See Hughes, 2013:2.

40 Coomaraswamy famously appealed to the Kandyan chiefs. In 1905 he wrote an open letter, published in the Ceylon Observer, in which he expressed his deep concerns about the state of Ceylon's temples and the 'neglect and injudicious restoration' of buildings and artefacts. Speaking particularly of temple paintings he listed the following concerns: .. *ill judged attempts at the introduction of perspective ; careless and ignorant, nay often irreverent work, and the introduction of unsuitable objects ; I say bad colours because the old way of making colours has been given up, and with it all restraint in the use of colour, so that where a few colour only were once used (mainly red, yellow, black, white and a greyish green), the painting now displays all the colours of the rainbow ; and at the same time the beautifully conventionalised and restful traditional style is abandoned in favour of a weak and ineffective realism, so that the inside of a vihara whose walls were once covered with worthy and decorative paintings are now as much like an ill drawn Christmas Card as anything*. [Coomaraswamy 1905:5]

41 See Ranepura for an overview of educational policy in Sri Lanka and in particular the changes taking place in the 1970s [2021:11]

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