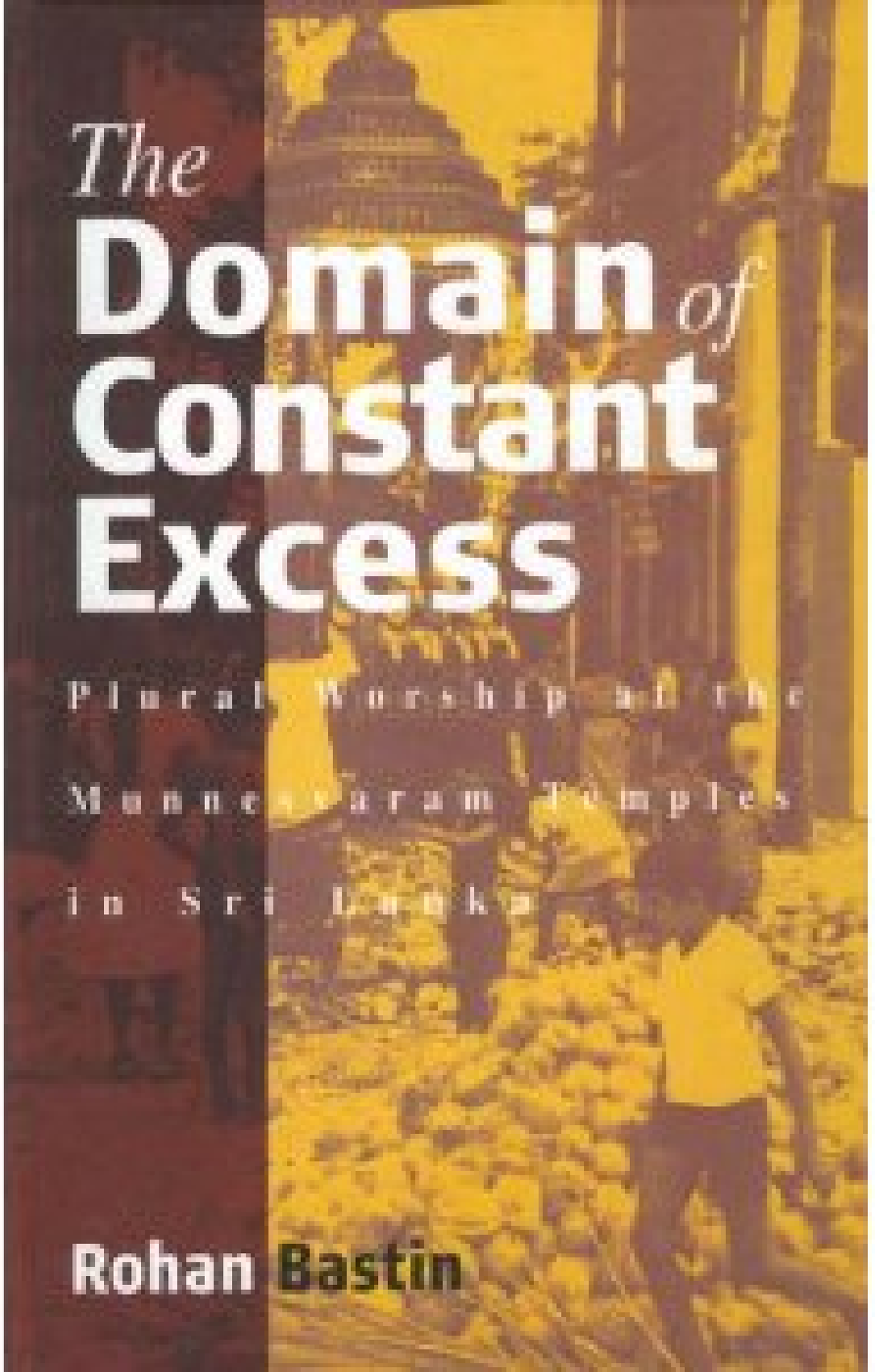

The Domain *of* Constant Excess

Plural Worship at the Munneswaram Temples in Sri Lanka

Rohan Bastin

The Domain of Constant Excess

THE DOMAIN OF CONSTANT EXCESS

Plural Worship at the Munnesvaram Temples in Sri Lanka

ROHAN BASTIN

Berghahn Books
New York • Oxford

First published in 2002 by

Berghahn Books
www.BerghahnBooks.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bastin, Rohan.
The domain of constant excess : plural worship at the Munnesvaram temples in Sri Lanka / Rohan Bastin.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 1-57181-252-0 (cloth : alk. paper)
1. Munnesvaram Temple (Halavata, Sri Lanka)--History.
2. Hinduism--Relations--Buddhism. 3. Buddhism--Relations--Hinduism.
4. Sri Lanka--Religious Life and customs. I. Title

BL1243.78.S72 D66 2002
294.5'35'095493--dc21 2002074582

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

Printed in the United States on acid-free paper.

ISBN 1-57181-252-0 (hardback)

To the Memory of
Neil Edward Bastin
(1929–2001)

Contents

List of Figures and Table

List of Photographs

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people have helped me to write this book and see it to publication, some in more ways than one. The original research at Munnesvaram was initially undertaken as a PhD student at the University of Adelaide where, as an undergraduate, I had the pleasure of learning anthropology in a department which, at that time, and for me through the teaching of Bruce Kapferer and Jadran Mimica, could not be matched for its levels of intellectual excitement. In Sri Lanka I was attached to the Sociology Department, University of Colombo. I completed my PhD at University College London after following my supervisor Bruce Kapferer to his new chair. I received financial support from UCL and the Wenner-Gren Foundation. At UCL I benefited from the intellectual company and friendship of Allen Abramson, Gary Armstrong, Eli Collis, Mary Hull, Jadran Mimica, Nancy Russell and Llyn Smith. Outside the department Paul Batley, Craig Carter, Tim Mares and Billy Roarty were good friends. Of my examiners I single out Chris Fuller for revealing one side of academic life and express my thanks to Tony Good and especially to Stanley Tambiah.

The task of turning the thesis into a book began during my time as an Australian Research Council Postdoctoral Fellow in the Anthropology Program at the University of Melbourne, where I also held a teaching post. My thanks go to my colleagues and friends Nils Bubandt, June Carey, Fiona Hill, Roger Just, Klaus-Peter Koepping, Elizabeth Koepping, Douglas Lewis, Tim O'Meara, Mary Patterson and to my students. The book was finished at James Cook University where, with thanks again to my students, I have enjoyed working with Doug Miles, Rosita Henry, Dundi Mitchell and Darlene McNaughton. Darlene and Lynley Wallis produced the illustrations. Revisions were done while I was attached to the Immigration and Ethnic Research Centre, University of Bergen, where I was the guest of Yngve Lithman.

For their comments and helpful suggestions at different stages I thank Nilu Abeyaratne, I.V. Edirisinghe, Tom Ernst, Kingsley Garbett, Don Handelman, Tom

Morton, the late Newton Gunasinghe, the late Tawney Rajaratnam, Michael Roberts (a big thanks), David Shulman, the late Serena Tennekoon, the late Mahen Vaithianathan and the late Chandra Vitarana. Special thanks go to Judith Kapferer who read critically the first draft and suggested numerous improvements, and to David Shulman who reviewed the manuscript for the publisher and helped me with Tamil and Sanskrit transliteration. I also thank Marion Berghahn, Sean Kingston, Bryn Williams and the staff at Berghahn Books.

Bruce Kapferer first drew me to anthropology with his insistence that anthropology be always rigorously ethnographic, comparative and philosophical. He introduced me to the cultural richness of Sri Lanka and has always known the best thing to do when difficulties were encountered. As a teacher, a colleague and a friend Bruce continues to be generous, patient and inspiring. With Judith, Roland and Michaela, Bruce has made me feel like a member of the family.

The research itself was made possible by the priests and the devotees of the different temples at Munnesvaram. I single out R.S. Karthikeyan, the chief priest of the Munnesvaram temple, and K. Letchiraman, the chief priest of the Bhadrakali temple, for allowing me to work in their temples and for being available to answer questions and express their support for my project. I also thank R.S.M. Thiagaratnam, his late father Mudilihamy and S. Rajaratnam for making me feel welcome in Maradankulam.

Trish Veitch has been party to this project almost from the start, enduring early morning 'readings' and visits to yet another temple with love, good humour and enthusiasm.

Finally, my thanks to my parents Neil and Erina Bastin for their love and support. You did not get to see the finished product Dad, but you did get to know that I would dedicate it to you.

Guide to Pronunciation

a – in 'up'
ā – 'car'
ä – 'cat'
ā̈ – long ä
ē – 'say'
ī – 'ear'
ō – 'over'
ū – 'shoot'
ḍ – 'dice'
ḷ – 'lullaby'
m̆ – 'amnesty'
n̲ – extended 'nn'
ṇ – 'none'
ṅ – 'sing', 'sink'
ñ – 'singe'
ṛ – 'rip'
ṣ – 'sure'
ś – 'shop'
ṭ – 'ditto'

GLOSSARY

abhiśeka (Skt.) – anointing
ācārya (Tm.) – artisan caste(s)
accaryam (Tm.) – marvel
Ādi (Skt.) – beginning, dawning
Ādi (Tm.) – Tamil month corresponding to the Sinhala Asala, July/August
Ādi Pūram (Tm.) – special day in the month when goddess Ambal menstruates
Ādi utsavam (Tm.) – The main Munneśvaram festival
ädurā (Sinh.) – ritual specialist
āgama (Skt.) – tradition, knowledge, authority
āgama nilāyam (Skt.) – temple library
āgamas (Tm.) – the core texts of Tamil Saivism (in Anglicised plural form)
aiśvarya (Skt.) – regal power
aiyyā (Sinh.) – honorific term for sir, lord
ākarśana (Skt.) – 'attracting', a type of sorcery
akaśa (Skt.) – void, ether
alangārathībam (Tm.) – 'beautiful lamps', general name for waving a set of lamps in the puja ritual
alaṭṭi (Tm.) – the offering wave of lamps in puja
ālāyam (Skt.) – abode, shrine
aṁba (Sinh.) – mango
Aṁba Vidamana (Sinh.) – the Mango Shoot ritual that celebrates the birth of Pattini from a mango; a key event in the annual festival at Munneśvaram where it is called in Tamil, the Hunting Festival
ammaṉ (Tm.) – goddess
Amma Pāl (Tm.) – 'Mother Milk', a rare name for the goddess Ambal
amṛta – (Skt.) immortality, ambrosia
anavas (Skt.) – ego consciousness
Angaharuva (Sinh.) – Mars

ankeliya (Sinh.) – horn game
aṅuhasa, anuhas (Sinh.) – divine blessing
āratti (Tm.) – alternative term for alatti
arccanai (Tm.) – personal votive offering
arccanam (Tm.) – as for arrccanai
artha (Skt.) – purpose, name of main public hall in temple
ārūḍha (Sinh.) – divine presence or the experience of divinity through trance
ārūḍha kārayā (Sinh.) – term for the male trance specialists who are the counterparts of the mäniyan at the Bhadrakali temple
aruḷ (Tm.) 'grace', divine presence
Äsala Perahara (Sinh.) – the main Buddhist festival in Kandy that centres on the Temple of the Tooth Relic
āścarya (Skt.) – miracle
asuras (Tm.) – antigods or enemies of the gods
äsvaha (Sinh.) – eye evil
ātman (Skt.) – soul
avamaṅgalla (Sinh.) – episode in the exorcism rites performed by Berava specialists
avatāra (Skt.) – incarnation (of Visnu)
ayālaya (Sinh.) – vagrant
āyudhapuja (Skt.) – offering of 'weapons'
ayya (Tm.) – honorific title, 'lord'
bali (Skt.) – sacrifice
bali (Sinh.) – sacrifice but more commonly the generic name for planetary rituals
balipiṭha (Skt.) – seat of sacrifice
baṇḍāra (Sinh.) – 'custodian', label and epithet for a class of deities usually connected to historical figures
baṇḍhana (Sinh.) – 'binding', a common form of sorcery
Berava (Sinh.) – caste of ritual specialists and drummers
bhadra (Skt.) – auspicious
bhadraliṅga (Skt.) – auspicious linga image
bhaktālayam (Skt.) – devotional shrine; name of shrine for the 63 Saints and repository of village god and goddess statues
bhakti (Skt.) – devotional worship
bhedana (Skt.) – 'splitting', a type of sorcery
bhūta (Skt.) – elements
bilva (Skt.) – woodapple
Brahaspati (Sinh.) – Jupiter
brahman (Skt.) – priestly varna
Buḍha (Sinh.) – Mercury
cakra (Skt.) – 'discuss', significant juncture along bodily axis
cakravartin (Skt.) – ideal king, ruler whose authority encompasses entire domain
Chandran (Tm.) – Moon
Chandraya (Sinh.) – Moon

chēna (Sinh.) – name for the practice and site of slash-and-burn agriculture
Chettiar (Tm.) – trader caste
cit (Skt.) – knowing (seeing, fixing gaze upon)
dāgaba (Sinh.) – Buddhist reliquary
Dākśināmūrti (Skt.) – the right or south-facing form (of Siva)
darbha (Skt.) – tuft of (kusa) grass, mark of the ritual sponsor
darśana (Skt.) – darśanam (Tm.) – gaze, worship as witnessing the deity's gaze
daśamī (Tm.) – tenth day after the new moon
dehi käpīma (Sinh.) – lime cutting, an anti sorcery rite
Demala (Sinh.) – Tamil
deśam kovil (Tm.) – regional temple
dēva balaya (Sinh.) – divine power
dēvāla (Sinh.) – deity temple
devasthāna (Skt.) – 'god's seat' (a temple)
dēvatā (Sinh.) – class of minor interstitial deities with fierce and demonic characteristics
dēvatāvā (Sinh.) – singular of devata
dēviyo (Sinh.) – epithet for deity
diśtiya (Sinh.) – divine gaze
diya käpīma (Sinh.) – water cutting rite
driṣṭi (Tm.) – the divine gaze
Durāva (Sinh.) – a caste associated with elephant trapping and toddy tapping
dvadaśānta (Skt.) – apical point on the body's central axis
dvāja (Skt.) – flag
dvājasthambha (Skt.) – flag pole
gambhara (Sinh.) – village guardian god
gammaḍuva (Sinh.) – name for a body of rites held for the goddess Pattini
Gam Udāwa (Sinh.) – 'Village Reawakening', government sponsored rural development program
garbha (Skt.) – 'womb', 'interior foetus'
garbhagraha (Skt.) – concept
garbhagṛha (Skt.) – the temple inner sanctum or *sanctum santorum*
Goyigama (Sinh.) – cultivator/landowner caste
gopura (Skt.) – temple gateway
grāma sēvaka (Sinh.) – government appointed village official
Grantha (Tm.) – ancient Tamil script used in the Parakramabahu VI inscription at Munneśvaram
gṛha (Skt.) – chamber
Halawatta (Sinh.) – Sinhala name of Chilaw
haskam (Sinh.) – miracle, marvel
hata (Sinh.) – seven
hatkaṭṭiya (Sinh.) – 'gang of seven', the retinue of deity's in the Aiyanar temple at Maradankulam
Hēvesi (Sinh.) – drummers from the Berava caste
Hiraṇya Neram (Tm.) – 'Hiranya Time', sunset as the time of the demon Hiranya

hōma (Skt.) – sacrificial fire
jnāti prēta (Sinh.) – ancestral ghost
Kaḍavara (Sinh.) – name for the deity/demon Sūniyam
kalā (Skt.) – parts; kalā – black
kalañci (Tm.) – the return offering to festival patrons consisting of a half coconut, betel leaf and plaintain
kannūru (Tm.) – eye evil
kapa (Sinh.) – pole, flagpole, sacrificial stake – key object in deity rites
kāppu (Tm.) – protective thread tied around a person or deity's wrist
kapumahattaya (Sinh.) – deity priest, lit. 'pole master'
kapurāla (Sinh.) – deity priest
karakam (Tm.) – metal water pot
Karāva (Sinh.) – caste traditionally associated with fishing and trading
karma (Skt.) – the consequences of action
kassippu (Sinh.) – illegal coconut spirit
kāvaḍi (Tm.) – decorative hoop and pole carried by devotees for special devotional dance of the same name
kemmura (Sinh.) – a deity's special day or days in the week
Kētu (Sinh., Tm.) – the Dragon's Tail planet
Kiri Amma (Sinh.) – 'Milk Mother', label for a class of goddesses identified by Obeyesekere as preceding Pattini
kiribat (Sinh.) – coconut milk rice
kōḍimaram (Tm.) – flag tree, another name for the temple flag pole
kōḍiyettum (Tm.) – flag-raising at commencement of temple festival
kolam (Tm.) – decorative pattern in rice flour used at house and shrine thresholds to protect and order boundaries
korale (Sinh.) – geo-political unit of the Sinhalese state prior to and during European colonialism; a korale consisted of a number of pattu which in turn consisted of a number of villages
kṣetra (Skt.) – field of power (cultivated space)
kulam (Tm.) – irrigation tank, also a term for caste
kumbha (Skt.) – special water pot
kuṇḍalīnī (Skt.) – bodily energy
kunkuma (Tm.) – vermilion powder used for decorative (and protective) pottu mark on forehead (usually of women)
kurukkaḷ (or gurukkaḷ) (Tm.) – Brahmin temple priest
kuśa (Skt.) – type of water reed
kutsam (Skt.) – crown of kusa grass used in the kumbhabhiseka rite
laukika (Sinh.) (Pali – lokika) – wordly, existing
līlā (Skt.) – play, disinterested activity
liṅga (Skt.) – 'sign' or master signifier, the key object of Śaiva worship associated with Śiva's phallus
liṅgodbhāva (Skt.) – special image of Śiva as the god assuming anthropomorphic form through the widening niche of the liṅga. Written at Munneśvaram as 'Lingatbavar'

lōkuttara (Sinh.) (Pali – lōkōttara) – world transcending
maḍam (Tm.) – pilgrims' resthouse
maḍuva (Sinh.) – 'hall', ritual enclosure
mähäla (Sinh.) – old woman
mähänin (Sinh.) – female priest
mahā vasanta maṇḍapa (Skt.) – 'great spring hall', area in temple used for special festival events
mālā (Skt.) – garland
maṇḍala (Skt.) – ritual diagram articulating macrocosm/microcosm relation
māniyan (Sinh.) – plural form of māniyo
māniyo (Sinh.) – 'mother', a female trance specialist and particularly a devotee of the goddess Bhadrakali
mantra (Skt.) – ritual syllabic utterance (linked to both 'measure' and 'mind')
māraṇa (Skt.) – 'killing', a type of sorcery
mariyātai (Tm.) – 'honour', the right to sponsor a special festival event
māyā (Skt.) – illusion, the nature of this world
mōdaham (Tm.) – modaka (Skt.) – special type of sweet pastry linked particularly to the god Pillaiyar
mohana (Skt.) – 'bewildering', a type of sorcery
mokṣa (Skt.) – release from existential fetters (and rebirth)
mūlasthāna (Skt.) – mulasthanam (Tm.) – lit. 'root seat', alternative name for the temple inner sanctum
muni (Skt.) – saint
Munneśvaram – name of Śiva and temple
mūśiga vāhanam (Tm.) – mūśika vāhana (Skt.) – rat vehicle, Pillaiyar's animal vehicle
muttu (Tm.) – pearl, smallpox
nada (Skt.) – resonance, source of all sound, dance
nāgasvaram – wooden reed instrument with fluted end used commonly with tabla by temple musicians
namaskāra (Skt.) – homage or obeisance; form of greeting and worship of a deity
navagraha (Skt.) – nine planets
navagraha śānti (Skt.) – appeasing the nine planets
navagraha mūrtinjaya śānti puja (Skt.) – name of a special rite for the nine planets and their associated deities
nāyanmar (Skt.) – the 63 Saints of Tamil Śaivism
nibbāna (Sinh.) – nirvāna (Skt.) – extinction and release from rebirth
nitya (Skt.) – eternal
nityapūjā (Skt.) – the regular or eternal daily temple rites.
nūl (Sinh.) – protective thread tied around the wrist
padmamūla (Skt.) – the lotus root
Padu (Sinh.) – generic term for low labourer caste often described as 'firewood collector'
palāgi (Skt.) – 'flowery' column design of two mirrored lotus flowers

paligahanavā (Sinh.) – striking revenge, a form of sorcery distinguished from other secretive forms as a form of retribution
paligahīma (Sinh.) – noun form of paligahanavā (rarely used in place of the gerund)
paḷiyidukkurudu (Tm.) – 'striking revenge' main type of sorcery performed at the Bhadrakali temple
pāñcalaṭṭi (Skt.) 'the five waves', the name of the final camphor lamp waved in the puja
pāñcamahābhūti (Skt.) – the five elements
panneer (Tm.) – flower and sandalwood infused water used in abhiseka rites
pansala (Sinh.) – Buddhist temple/school
parāvāc (Skt.) – the first word
parinibbāna (Sinh.) – Buddha's death and release
parivāram (Tm.) – the royal retinue, a name for a procession
pāśa (Skt.) – fetter
pattini (Tm.) – virgin bride
pattu (Sinh.) – plural form of pattuva
pattuva (Sinh.) – geo-political unit consisting of a number of villages
perahara (Sinh.) – festival procession and general name for a festival
pin (Sinh.) – merit
pirit (Sinh.) – chant of Buddhist texts (usually by monks)
pīṭham (Tm.) – pīṭha (Skt.) – 'seat', special site of a divine (commonly goddess) presence
Pitigal (Sinh.) – name of the korale in which Munneśvaram pattuva is situated
pongal (or ponkal) (Tm.) – milk rice cooked with dairy milk, sugar and possibly fruits and nuts
porapol (Sinh.) – fighting coconut and name for the coconut game which is also known as pol keliya
poṭṭu (Tm.) – decorative (and protective forehead mark made from black paste or kunkuma powder
pōya (Sinh.) – full moon day
pradakṣiṇa (Skt.) – temple circumambulation with the right side closest to the centre (i.e., clockwise)
prajā (Skt.) progeny
prakāśa (Skt.) – concept in Kashmiri Saivism that refers to the undifferentiated luminosity of immanent form (see also vimarsa)
pralaya (Skt.) – reabsorption
pratiṣṭhā (Skt.) – to stand firm, the firm ground of stability
pūjā (Sinh., Skt., Tm.) – generic and specific name for deity worship having associations of service and devotion
puruṣa (Skt.) – man
Puruṣa (Skt.) – the Cosmic Man and source of creation
Puṭam (Tm.) – Mercury
puvarasu (Sinh.) – type of tree used in the Munneśvaram festival 'Hunting Festival'
Radala (Sinh.) – aristocratic landowner caste
Rāhu (Sinh.,Tm.) – the Dragon's Head planet

ratha (Skt.) – chariot
Ravi (Sinh.) – Sun
rūpa (Skt.) – appearance, ontical form (in contrast to linga – 'sign')
śabda (Skt.) – sound
säda (Sinh.) – matted hair
Śaiva (Skt., Tm) – Śiva worship
śakta (Skt.) – energy, ability
śakti (Skt.) – energy, strength
Śakti (Skt.) – Goddess
salabam (Tm.) – pearl fishery
salābam (Sinh.) – anklet
Salābamapūra (Tm.) – 'The City of the Pearl Fishery', Tamil name of Chilaw
Salāgama (Sinh.) – caste traditionally associated with weaving and cinnamon peeling
ṣalava (Sinh.) – weaving hall, possible source of the name for Chilaw, Salawatta/Halawatta
saṁsāra (Sinh.) – this life
saṇḍanam kappu (Skt.) – sandalwood protection, name of a rite involving covering a deity statue, usually of Kālī, in cooling sandalwood paste
sangku (Tm.) – conch shell
Ṣani (Sinh., Tm.) – Saturn
Sārada (Skt.) – Autumn
Sārada Navarātri (Skt.) – The Autumn Nine Nights festival, the best known Navarātri festival in the year
sāsana (Sinh.) – Buddhist orthodoxy/orthopraxy
śāstra kārāya (Sinh.) – ritual specialist with knowledge of the sastra manuals, often associated with healing rites and sorcery
Satara Satipaṭhana Sutta (Sinh.) – Buddhist text on the nature of bodily decay; an iconographic feature of representations of the deity Aiyanayake
Sevvai (Tm.) – Mars
śikkhara (Skt.) – the crest or peak, the pinnacle of any shrine tower
Sikuru (Sinh.) – Venus
Silappadikāram (Tm.) – 'The Anklet', the famous story of the goddess Kannaki (Pattini)
śivaliṅga (Skt.) – the core Śaivite image of liṅga and yoni
Śivarātri (Skt.) – 'Śiva Night', special all night festival
Siyam Nikāya (Sinh.) – order of Buddhist monks founded in Kandy in the mid-eighteenth century following receipt of ordination in Thailand (Siam).
śoḍaśa subharcānam (Skt.) – the '16 Splendid Embellishments', the full and most complete puja rite performed during the annual festival
sōhon (Sinh) – cemetery
sthambana (Skt.) – 'paralysing', a type of sorcery
sthambamaṇḍapa (Skt.) – the temple (flag)pole hall
sudalai (Tm.) – cremation ground
sūniyam (Tm.) – zero, also the act of sorcery

Sūniyama (Sinh.) – major anti-sorcery rite
sūnyatā (Skt.) – emptiness
Sūryan (Tm.) – Sun
svastika yantra (Skt.) – the yantra design based on the svastika pattern of the special turning cross
tabla (Tm.) – double ended drum played by hand and short stick
taṁbili (Sinh.) – king coconut, a type of drinking coconut
tandava (Skt.) – Śiva's special dance
tantra (Skt.) – 'the warp, the propagating line', the principles and practices associated with specific types of ritual.
tattvas (Skt.) – principles derived from the elements
ther (Tm.) – temple chariot
thībam (Tm.) – camphor lamp
timiti (Tm.) – firewalking
tīrtha (Skt.) the ford or crossing, name for a temple, name of special bathing rite at end of festival
tīrtham (Tm.) – bathing rite at the end of temple festivals
tiruviḻā (Tm.) – festival procession and label for the festival as a whole
todpullu (Skt.) – special pointer stick made of woven kusa grass used in abhiseka rites.
triśūla (Tm.) – trident weapon and symbol of Śiva
tunbāge baṇḍārala (Sinh.) – the custodians of the three divisions, name for a class of guardian gods
tvagdośa (Skt.) – leprosy
ud-su (Skt.) – 'to stir up, agitate'
uḍupila (Sinh.) – upper team in the ritual games for Pattini
uḷvithi (Tm.) – inner road (of temple)
utsādana (Skt.) – 'overturning', a type of sorcery
utsa (Skt.) – flowering, blossoming, shooting
utsava (Skt.) – festival, blossoming.
utsavamūrti (Skt.) – festival image; name of the metal images normally taken on festival processions
uttāna (Skt.) – face upwards
vāhana (Skt.) – vehicle, term for the animal bearers of deities such as Nandi, the Bull, for Siva, the lion for Ambal, etc.
valampuri (Tm.) – special conch with clockwise turn
varam, varama (Sinh.) – warrant or boon granted by a deity to a devotee, usually associated with soothsaying and ordered trance
varam (Skt.) – boon or request
vas (Skt.) – an abode
Vasanta (Skt.) – Spring
vaṣya (Skt.) – 'influencing' a type of sorcery
vāstu (Skt.) – dwelling, foundation
vāstupuruṣamaṇḍala (Skt.) – the dwelling place of Puruṣa as a special magical design; the core of the temple foundation

väva (Sinh.) – irrigation tank
vel (Tm.) – spear weapon and symbol of Murugan
Veḷāḷa (Tm.) – cultivator caste
veḷivithi (Tm.) – outer road (of temple)
Veḷḷi (Tm.) – Venus
Vettaitiruviḻā (Tm.) – Hunting festival
vibhūti (Skt.) – the special ash of burnt cow-dung used by Śaivites
vidveṣaṇa (Skt.) – 'rendering hostile', a type of sorcery
vihara (Sinh.) – Buddhist temple consisting of deity shrines, relic shrines and resident monks
vimāna (Skt.) – the tower above the temple inner sanctum
vimarśa (Skt.) – 'critical juncture', the point of appearance. Key concept in Kashmiri Śaivism where it refers to self-awareness as a manifest aspect of pure consciousness. (See Padoux 1990).
vina (Sinh.) – a common name for secretive sorcery
Viyāḷam (Tm.) – Jupiter
yāga (Skt.) – sacrifice
yāga maṇḍapa (Skt.) – sacrifice hall in the temple used only during the festival
yāgasalai (Skt.) – alternative name of the yāga maṇḍapa, yāga ālāyam
yajamāna (Skt.) – the ritual sponsor, the sacrificer
yajana (or yajña) (Tm.) – sacrificer
yala (Sinh.) – main rice paddy harvest
yantra (Skt.), yantram (Tm.) – special design serving ritual purpose of binding the energy of deities to space
yaṭapila (Sinh.) – lower team in Pattini games
yoni (Skt.) – complement of the linga, the vagina
yuga (Skt.) – the age or epoch
yūpa (Skt.) – the pole or sacrificial stake to which the victim is tied

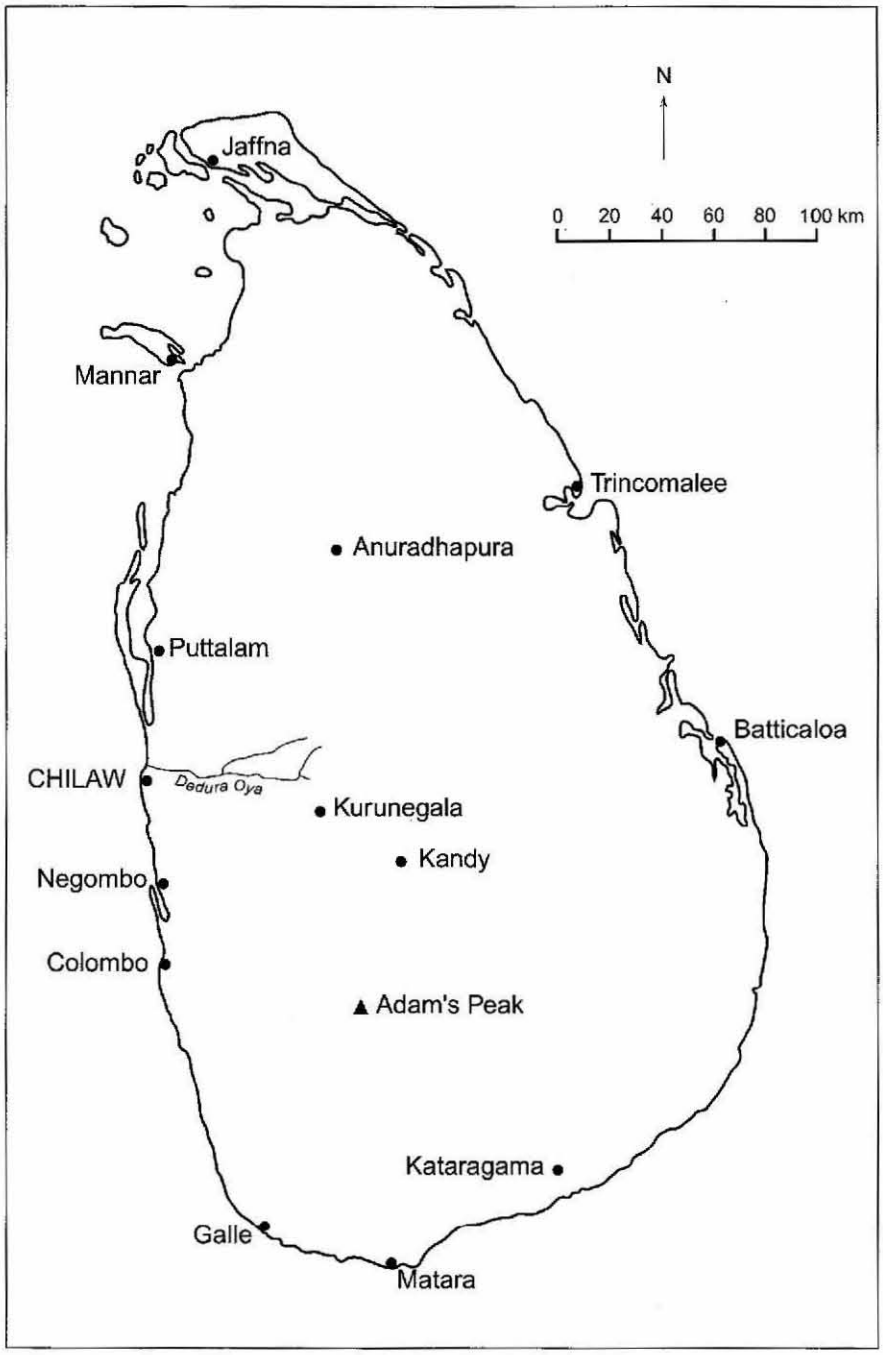

Figure 1.1 *Map of Sri Lanka*

Chapter 1

Worship, Difference and Marvellous Potentiality

When Jesuit missionaries were given the revenues associated with the Munnesvaram temple in 1605 by the Portuguese Captain General of what was then called Ceilao (later Ceylon), they were provided with a strong material base to pursue their work in their allotted mission area in the north-west of the island. Perhaps for that reason, the Jesuits applied themselves zealously to the redemption of the site, and in 1606 they completed the destruction of the temple which had begun with Portuguese soldiers six years earlier. To the horror of the Munnesvaram priests, the Jesuits set about the temple's main image with iron bars and later claimed their action to be yet another moment in the great Christian struggle against evil.

> The enemy of mankind, who had so long held his tyrannical sway from the idol, as from a citadel, has been put to the rout by this celestial standard. Formerly the wicked hell-hound had such complete mastery over the place, that nobody dared to pass by it even in broad daylight. Women, who dared to pass that way, were said to be obsessed by a demon, or hung up on trees, or were stripped of their clothes, or had some indecent freak played upon them. But now, after the erection of the Cross, wonderful to say, all these spectres and impurities have ceased altogether. The way is safe now, and people pass the spot unmolested, day and night, free from all fear.
>
> F. Cagnola S.J., *Jesuit Annual Letter*, Cochin, 5 December 1610[2]

The Jesuits' vivid description, notwithstanding the obvious missionary zeal that colours this account, provides a certain kind of understanding of Munnesvaram that resonates with, and indeed contributes to, certain contemporary orientations to the temples of the Munnesvaram complex. Unlike the Jesuits, for whom the activities at Munnesvaram were the work of the Devil, those who would see the contemporary temple in such terms would more likely blame it on the goddess

Kali, for her devotees regularly fall into trance, curse their enemies, and offer blood sacrifice.

sarily share the Jesuits' proselytising fantasy and desire. Indeed, many may well be *drawn* to Munnesvaram for what it might offer.

That is the point I wish to explore here. This book is concerned with how religious meaning and potency acquire their force in the production and reproduction of everyday worship. I examine the relation between the temple and its world in order to explore the interactive dynamism of a complex South Asian society and its techniques and expressions of social and cultural articulation. My focus is the temple complex of Munnesvaram, a predominantly Hindu cluster of five temples near the north-west coastal town of Chilaw, during the period from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. My discussion is intended to draw out general issues about Hindu temples and their place in south Indian and Sri Lankan society and history. In order to do so, I shall argue closely through my ethnography on the Munnesvaram temples to arrive at some general propositions about the historical importance of temples in South Asia.

Munnesvaram is a complex that draws (and repels) people for a variety of reasons, and it has done so for a very long time. For some, it draws them because it is regarded as the most powerful Kali temple in all Sri Lanka, for others it is because Munnesvaram is one of the most important Siva temples in Sri Lanka, and for still others, it is because the temple is their regional temple, a key element in their sense of regional religious and ethnic identity. Thus, while orientations to Munnesvaram and its significance vary widely, they all share the sense that Munnesvaram is a temple complex of great importance. The two principal temples – the Munnesvaram temple and the Bhadrakali temple – are the largest, best known, and most popular temples in the complex. Each temple is owned and run by a distinct group of Tamil Hindu priests, and each temple largely conforms to the aesthetic style and ritual practice of the south Indian Hindu and specifically Saivite temple.[3] The worshippers, though, are drawn from all over Sri Lanka and are predominantly Buddhist and Sinhalese – an ethnic community with a distinct language as well as other social and cultural differences to the Tamil. Despite such differences between Sinhalese and Tamil there are also significant areas of overlap, and one of the most notable of these is religious practice at the Munnesvaram temples. The following study explores how religious pluralism works in contemporary Sri Lanka and examines how a Hindu temple like Munnesvaram exists as an intense node of activity, a potent social field wherein complex configurations of divinity, sociality, polity and history are continually enacted.

My research at Munnesvaram commenced in 1985, amidst the often bloody conflict between Sinhalese and Tamils elsewhere in the island.[4] It was surprising, therefore, to find a religious site where Sinhala Buddhists worshipped alongside Tamil Saivites in Tamil Saivite temples. In fact, the proportion of Sinhalese worshipping at the Munnesvaram and Bhadrakali temples between 1985 and 1986 exceeded the proportion of the Sinhalese ethnic group in the population of the country (74% at the Census of 1981).[5] The question of the supposed boundedness of ethnic groups, a boundedness conditioned in the circumstances of hostility and vio-

lence, was raised repeatedly by this apparent unity of religious purpose at a single temple complex. I stress this apparent sense, however, for while at one moment the fluidity of social and religious categories appears to be asserted by a unity of purpose in temple worship at Munnesvaram, in the next moment the temples display the fragmentation of different and often competing, contesting and resistant interests.

Of course, such an identification of complexity beneath the surface appearance is not new to anthropological writing, but I am concerned with the manner in which the complexity behind the apparent unity of worship is not only an expression of contradiction and embedded social relations, but is central to the reproduction of religious power in the forceful aesthetic of ritual. I am interested in what is 'dramatic' or critical about Munnesvaram as an aspect of the temples' popularity.[6] The thesis I pursue is that the religious appeal of a complex like Munnesvaram continually emerges from the diversity of interests, ideas and practices (often antagonistic, such as those of the Jesuits) that the temple brings together and renders into a seemingly unified field, a field constantly in the condition of excess.

This is at no time more so than during the annual festival, a potent rite of renewal when the ritual condition of possibility floods the temple complex as a mass of worshipping humanity. This book is primarily about the annual festival, a month long event involving thousands of people from all over the country. Those who know temple festivals like Munnesvaram's know that their prime element is people, lots of them. I am interested in how these people shape the religious life of the temples and thus I am interested in the place that Munnesvaram holds in the religious imagination of contemporary Sri Lanka. I am concerned to show how the ritual complex of Munnesvaram establishes its condition of cosmic possibility.

Events marking the conclusion of Munnesvaram's main annual festival briefly illustrate the potency of the temple's dynamic. The events are associated with the festival climax, an event known in Tamil as the 'sacred bath' (*tirtham*)[7] and in Sinhala as the 'water cutting' (*diya käpima*) where a representation of the temple deity is taken to the River Dedura north of Chilaw and plunged under the waters amidst wild splashing and bathing by assembled worshippers. The statues of the deities are brought to the river in a procession from the temple and housed in a special octagonal pavilion built solely for the purpose. From the pavilion, one statue, the special guardian form of Siva known as Astara Devata, is carried to the river for the bath. This is followed with free food being given to the worshippers by a sponsoring patron. Many worshippers attend the bathing and the almsgiving that follows.

I attended my first festival in 1985 having already studied a number of Tamil temple festivals from the Eastern Province. The procession and bathing seemed to me to be following a predictable course until there was a sudden onset of trance and abandon in front of a *bo* tree near the pavilion entrance at the precise moment the statues were installed. A large part of the assembled crowd were affected, and while many were already familiar to me as trance specialists who regularly went into trance at Munnesvaram's Bhadrakali temple, the numbers, suddenness and context quite surprised me. When I asked what was going on, I was told that a powerful guardian (Sinh. *Kadavara*)[8] had manifested in the tree and was causing

dozens of people to go into trance. Others named different dangerous guardian gods, while still others claimed that all of the guardians were present, having been summoned by Siva to look over him and his consort while they were in the pavilion. The rush of lower order guardian deities into the space was, then, a direct result of the presence of the high deities inside the octagonal (lotus) pavilion.

Without being typical, trance behaviour is a key component of contemporary Tamil Saivite worship, but I am fairly certain all of the people involved that day at the river were Sinhala Buddhists (with possibly some Roman Catholics). Their participation in such worship is a feature of what has been labelled for a different but closely related religious context in Sri Lanka as '*bhakti* religiosity' (Obeyesekere 1978), or as evidence of 'Hinduizing trends' in contemporary Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhism (Gombrich 1988). The related context is the Saivite/Buddhist temple complex of Kataragama; the most important temple complex of its kind in all Sri Lanka and one that bears comparison with Munnesvaram in several respects that will be explored in the course of this work. However, where authors like Obeyesekere and Gombrich stress the contemporary nature of '*bhakti* religiosity' (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988) and thereby link it to processes of social transformation, specifically urbanisation, my interpretation is concerned with how a temple complex like Munnesvaram enables shifting forms of worship to take place. Importantly, the priests establish the conditions for the trance activity, but they do not expect it, nor do they really want it.

In 1994, nearly a decade after my first Munnesvaram festival, the spontaneous trance was even greater, with only a tiny few of the same people from 1985 (and 1986) present. The main difference, however, was that alongside the previously solitary *bo* tree there now stood a trident (weapon and symbol of Siva, especially in his guardian Bhairavar form) and a small cement structure housing a painted statue of Kali. A Tamil stonemason of Indian descent who lived and worked in Colombo had built the structure. Working for him on the day of the festival bathing rite was a Sinhala Buddhist deity priest who normally ran a small shrine to the Sinhala Buddhist sorcery deity Suniyam.[9] He described how he used this *bo* tree throughout the year for sacrifice and sorcery, bringing clients from different parts of the island for night-time rites. Nine cobras dwell in the tree, he added, and he made regular offerings to them. Cobras are often reported as residing in the *bo* trees adjacent to temples and are a sure indication of resident guardians, as well as being in some sorcery traditions the mystical agents of sorcerous attack. For there to be as many as nine of them suggests that the religious power of this particular site is very great. Moreover, the number nine generally relates to goddesses, the nine forms of energy that are expressions of the goddess. In this regard the *bo* tree and its shrines mirror the Munnesvaram complex as a whole, for at Munnesvaram, the Kali temple (which includes a *bo* tree with, I am told, a resident white cobra) is the site of trance and sorcery standing adjacent to the temple for the high god and his consort, just like the riverside *bo* tree stands adjacent to the deity pavilion.

The potency of the riverside *bo* tree stems from the deity pavilion and the festival bathing rite, which draw out a symbolic association of the site as an ambiguous juncture of land and water. Most importantly, the potency is expressed

in and through the wild trance behaviour that occurs when the statues are installed. Such behaviour contributes to the overall spectacle that is a vital component of the temples' significance. Most importantly, the spectacle feeds into the development of the *bo* tree site, a development that now includes a Kali shrine created, in effect, by the Munnesvaram deities and by the dynamic of religious practice, both Tamil Saivite and Sinhala Buddhist. For, while the sponsor of the Kali shrine is Tamil Saivite, the aesthetic style of his shrine with its painted statue is more routinely Sinhala Buddhist, and its priest on the day is also Sinhala Buddhist. Finally, this practice is both led by ritual specialists (Sinhala Buddhist and Tamil Saivite) as well as by non-specialist worshippers engaging in spontaneous unfettered activity without the complicity of the Munnesvaram temple priests.

Passing over the River Dedura and continuing a few kilometres north one finds a strangely designed Saivite temple dating from the early twentieth century. The Manuweriya shrine is adjacent to a coconut plantation and it was during the clearing of land for this plantation that an Indian Tamil 'discovered' a stone *sivalinga* image which he claimed to be the original *linga* brought by the god Hanuman from India when, according to the temple origin myth, Munnesvaram was first founded. The Tamil built the temple to house this 'marvel' and it became a popular place for worshippers to visit on their return to the Northern Province following the end of the festival. Through to the late 1970s the temple maintained a modest income and its own resident priest, largely because of the offerings made by northern Tamils at the end of the Munnesvaram festival. By the 1980s, however, the temple began to decline as the number of northern Tamil pilgrims diminished sharply due to the war. Sinhala Buddhist worshippers began to predominate at Munnesvaram, and they did not include the *linga* temple in their itineraries. As the *bo* tree shrine and its Kali worship developed the *linga* temple deteriorated. The two events are not completely concomitant but they do bear upon each other as expressions of a broader process affecting the Munnesvaram temples as a whole: a process shaping religious practice and ritual aesthetics that become instrumental themselves in furthering the process of change.[10]

Haskam or Marvellous Potentiality

When asked about the special place Munnesvaram holds in contemporary Sri Lanka, devotees would often explain that Munnesvaram has '*haskam*', a Sinhala word that describes extraordinary religious power. *Haskam* can be expressed as the miraculous appearance of a statue, the ease with which devotees fall into trance at a particular place, or, more commonly, as the effectiveness of prayers being answered by a deity at a special site for that deity. *Haskam* (or *anuhasa*) is a term about as easy to define as the places with which it is associated. For English-speaking informants the term that was most often substituted was 'power'. A person's reason for being at Munnesvaram was explained in terms of the power of the place, making Munnesvaram one of several sites in contemporary Sri Lanka renowned for its special power – sites that are identifiably Buddhist, Roman

Catholic, Hindu and in a few cases Muslim.[11] This book is largely an exploration of this power, which I shall term more specifically as 'potency' or 'potentiality' (from the common Latin root, *potens*) in order to indicate that my study examines power in a very broad sense and not simply in the more limited sense of 'command', where power is very simply the power over another.[12] Potentiality in my usage relates to the French term *puissance* in contrast to *pouvoir* where *pouvoir* (power, command) is an instantiation of *puissance* (a potential for existence).[13] The Sanskrit term related to the Sinhala word *haskam* is *ascarya* or 'miracle', and its Tamil equivalent is *accaryam*.[14] I prefer Reverend Winslow's (1984) translation of the Tamil – 'marvel' – because a site of *haskam* such as Munnesvaram is both a marvel (noun) and something at which worshippers marvel (verb). 'Miracle' does not convey such a dynamic interaction between the site as a site of the marvellous, a field of active power (Skt. *ksetra*), and the importance of the religious congregation in continually bringing this field of active power into existence and reproducing it through the force of their participation. The marvel of Munnesvaram is, therefore, both the site and the practice of worship. They are, together, the constituents of the temple aesthetic that this book explores. Crucially, the temple aesthetic is, in my analysis, the fundamental expression of divinity and not simply its representational signification.

In the broad approach I take to the aesthetic of Munnesvaram as both form and practice, I include as central to my argument the place of Munnesvaram in Sri Lankan history, politics and cultural heritage. The contemporary Munnesvaram temple is built on the site of a famous ancient Siva temple, a temple whose renown is recorded at least as far back as the tenth century of the Common Era (C.E.). Although I have no firm inscriptional evidence, the temple's fame most likely extends beyond this. Of such inscriptions, the most important is the one granting lands and revenues by the Sinhala Buddhist king Parakramabahu VI in the mid-fifteenth century. The inscribed stones were used when the temple was rebuilt in the 1870s following its destruction at the hands of Jesuit missionaries in 1606, and efforts to revive the temple in the 1670s and again in the 1750s, the period during which Munnesvaram was part of the Sinhala Buddhist kingdom of Kandy. The Parakramabahu VI inscription (reproduced from Pathmanathan's translation in Chapter 2) is important for several reasons, because, in addition to its place in the temple's built form, the inscription is central to the relationship between the temple and the Brahmin priests who effectively own the temple. It underpins the legal status of the temple and also that of its priests, and thus has a profound bearing on what kind of temple the Munnesvaram temple has become, and with that its place in contemporary Sri Lankan religious life.

In the following chapters I examine the Munnesvaram temples closely and offer an account of key features of the temples as aesthetic objects involving both design and rite. I stress the dynamism of which the bathing rite *bo* tree is one small vignette, and I stress the role of the broad body of worshippers as members of a public that is actively constitutive of this dynamism of both design and rite. To do this I begin with the social composition of the body of worshippers and I examine the nature of the physical location of the Munnesvaram complex in the religious

topography of the island. The social composition of worship raises the issue of the history of the temples. Through my account of this history I explain the unusual fact (for Sri Lanka) that both the Munnesvaram and Bhadrakali temples are owned and run by their Tamil Saivite priests. This is important because through their ownership the priests have remained instrumental in determining the nature and content of worship, and thereby lessened the excluding influence of major interest groups such as members of the Tamil Saivite middle class as well as the Sinhala Buddhist middle class. Both middle-class Tamils and Sinhalese have been significant throughout the twentieth century in separate religious revitalisation movements and associated ethnic politics. Both groups have been highly influential in the Munnesvaram complex, but have not been able to dominate in the way they have done at other temple complexes, because they have lacked executive power. This lacuna has created a space in which spontaneous peasant and working-class religious devotion spills forth and thereby shapes the religious aesthetic. The autonomy of the temple priests leaves the temples more open to a greater variety of interests and influences than would be the case were the temples to be managed by non-priestly trusts drawn largely from the middle class. Such trusts, which predominate in Sri Lanka as the main style of temple management, have become, in many instances, sites for the articulation of caste, class and ethnic cleavages that have profoundly influenced the religious field (Whitaker 1999). That the Munnesvaram and Bhadrakali temples lack such trusts has been immensely important for maintaining the social heterogeneity of the complex as a whole. Part of this heterogeneity is the temple complex's double existence of being both a regional temple (Tm. *desam kovil*) and a special pilgrimage (or as I shall show antipilgrimage) centre for relief from affliction. There is often a tension between these two existences, a tension that relates to the nature of social transformation in contemporary Sri Lanka, above all the transformation of regional agricultural social systems following the impact of plantation capitalism. What I wish to describe is how such a tension can feed the religious or marvellous potency of the temples, and how the ritual aesthetic of the temple creates the conditions for such potency to be continually re-expressed.

While lacking a lay trust means that Munnesvaram does not display the same kinds of local social dramas described for other south Indian temples,[15] this has not meant that the temples remain aloof from the social tensions affecting Sri Lanka. Apart from anything else the priests are Tamil while the majority of worshippers is Sinhalese. Moreover, the presence of two temples, one run by vegetarian Brahmins the other by non-vegetarian non-Brahmins, enables the complex to express in a refractive manner (and not simply reflect or represent) the activities of sections of Sri Lanka's landed and high caste strata who sponsor the Brahmins in contrast with the activities of sections of the entrepreneurial strata who sponsor the non-Brahmins. Thus, the temples condense and convey a social relation between sources of wealth and political authority that has been a major thread running through the history of Sri Lanka – a social relation between landed wealth and trade. Shaped in the circumstances of colonialism and postcolonial political economy, this relation powerfully informs contemporary ethnic tensions

and thus reveals certain Sri Lankan particularities. However, I suggest that forms of mediation between landed wealth and trade are central to the role of the south Indian temple in both society and history more generally. Munnesvaram is distinctive for its religious and ethnic blend. Indeed, it is highly unusual. What Munnesvaram reveals through its unique configuration, though, is a capacity of the temple to create the conditions of cosmic possibility through which the temple becomes many things to many people and becomes, as a result, an essential element in the articulation of difference in South Asian society and history. It does this primarily through its festivals, as these festivals enact a series of possibilities of the aesthetic order of the temple. What I analyse here is how these festivals achieve this and how they do so as specific enactments or practices of the temple as a monumental religious architecrure.

I state that the temples express in a refractive manner, rather than reflect or represent, in order to stress that temples do not simply reflect social relations whose reality lies elsewhere, rather they constitute nodal points in the articulation of these relations. While they are not the only grounds of interaction between social groups, they have had a central place in the history of South Asian (especially south Indian) civilisation. Munnesvaram offers a way of thinking about this. It does so because it is a broadly popular temple complex with a socially diverse patronage. Not all temples are so accessible, and for this Munnesvaram is remarkable. However, in being so open Munnesvaram reveals a possibility of the Indian temple – the dynamic process of both the creation of forces of social articulation and reproduction, and the capture or regulation of such forces that is never complete.

What I pursue in the following is an analysis of the Munnesvaram temple complex through which I develop general points about the south Indian temple. My primary aim is to convey a sense of the uniqueness of Munnesvaram – a Tamil Saivite temple with a predominantly Sinhala Buddhist patronage in a period of ethnic violence between Tamils and Sinhalese. I am also concerned to show how Munnesvaram survives and thrives in such a situation *as a Hindu temple*. In doing so I hope to shed light on the nature of the Hindu temple and to explore the marvellous potentiality of Hindu temples as remarkable human achievements.

The Polysemy of the Hindu Sacred in the Conditions of Violence

The anthropology of ritual and religion has long recognised the complexity of the relation between power and potentiality as an aspect of the sacred. Here, the sacred is not to be seen as something set apart and forbidden (Durkheim 1976: 47), but as the territorialising aspect of divinity. This is a less restricted notion of the sacred; a notion that is less dependent on a firm complementarity between sacred and profane, where the sacred is that from which the profane is set apart. Instead, the sacred is to be considered as the setting-apart, or process of becoming sacred, which can take the form of re-origination and the irruption into existence of a powerful assemblage of forces that are not not-profane. In this sense, the sacred is not cosmos where the profane is chaos. It is not limited by notions of order and disor-

der, but by a principle of becoming and, with that, immanence. As such, the sacred embraces all manner of transformations ranging from divine knowledge (as becoming one with a numinous divinity) to sacrifice as the core ritual event, and sorcery as the recreation of self and other via the emotions and the will. No one of these aspects is any more 'sacred' than the rest, although it must be noted that within the broad religious field
that some practices have greater legitimacy than other practices. The hierarchy of the temples and, with that, the hierarchy of the deities, conveys the sense of how certain features of the sacred *enable* and thus encompass other features. Like the temple deities installed in the lotus pavilion who generate the swarm of trance-inducing lesser deities, the higher expressions of the sacred bear the immanent potential of the other expressions. The interrelation of these features is inaccurately grasped by the terms of a complementarity of sacred/profane, cosmos/chaos or pure/impure, although such dyads certainly hint at aspects of the sacred (in Greek '*hieros*'). More accurate is the interrelation and movement between interiorising and exteriorising, as these terms hint at the spatial immanence so fundamental to the temple, as well as at the dynamic quality of the sacred otherwise inaccurately grasped in terms of a synchronic dichotomy.

The temple is, then, a territorialising machine. It develops its unique place in the contemporary Sri Lankan world through condensing various territorial orientations that range from nationalist and chauvinist to redemptive encounters with divinity and the pursuit of individual succour and regeneration. This book describes how the temples draw these orientations together (without necessarily forging a single moral community) and thereby revitalises itself in the world. In doing so, the book describes a vitally important aspect of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict. This is the coexistence and mutuality of the country's two dominant religions – Tamil Saivism and Sinhala Buddhism – interacting at a major centre of religious practice in the circumstances of hostility and violence between the two ethnic groups.

Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict is a sordid and bloody business that has shattered the lives of all Sri Lankans in one way or another.[16] At its heart lies the dispute over the sovereignty of the Sri Lankan State that was formed when the country gained independence from Britain in 1948. In the rise of majoritarian politics in the elections that followed, and the subsequent alienation of the Tamil population from hitherto excellent opportunities in the public sector, many Sri Lankan Tamils saw no future in their belonging to a Sinhalese-dominated state. At the same time, Tamil political parties began to exercise some leverage as the minority third party in the increasingly two-sided contests between the conservative United National Party (UNP) and the left-wing coalitions led by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). This leverage made the sovereignty issue critical, with the party in government having to negotiate with the Tamils while the party in opposition was free to drum up a chauvinist anti-government sentiment in order to win the next 'first past the post' election. It resulted in Tamils becoming a target of violent Sinhala chauvinism in riots that first broke out in 1958.[17] From the mid-1970s, Tamils began agitating for a separate state ('Eelam') along the boundaries of what they regarded as their traditional homelands in the north and east of the country. Tamils

perceived these homelands to be especially threatened by a major hydro-electric/irrigation scheme that involved resettling Sinhalese. The Tamil agitation provoked violent response by some Sinhalese, leading many agitators and others to pursue militancy in order to win separation. Jaffna in the north has experienced an aggressive government military response to this militancy since 1981, with periods of control by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. In addition to their standing army, the Tigers maintain cadres of guerrillas who engage in acts of terrorism mainly in Colombo. Their signal act is the suicide bomber, an assassin who kills by detonating the explosives strapped to his or her body. Several political and military leaders have been the targets of such bombers, including the ex-Prime Minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi. In addition, the Tigers have blown up buildings in central Colombo causing serious loss of life. Police and military checkpoints have been in place for so long in the city that trees are growing from the earthworks of their bunkers, and the roadblocks are adorned with advertising signs.

For the most part, the area around Munnesvaram has been spared from the excesses of the civil war, and many people involved in the temples look beyond the demarcations of ethnicity when interacting with priests and/or devotees. The region is ethnically ambiguous and the local dialect is a Sinhala-Tamil mixture. However, a large portion of the devotional population comes from outside and they come to Munnesvaram for its special power to influence people's lives. In the circumstances of violence the demand for this power increased considerably. This was especially so when the violence intensified during the late 1980s following the Indian government's military intervention, and the attempt by the Sinhalese People's Liberation Front (JVP) to topple the government. The insurgency was only defeated when the government of President Ranasinghe Premadasa resorted to similar terror tactics and began a systematic eradication of the JVP. Munnesvaram filled with the mothers of the 'disappeared' pleading with the goddesses, especially Bhadrakali, to help find and rescue their children. For thousands of mothers no help was forthcoming.

It has been the case, then, that during the time of my association with Munnesvaram the temples have prospered, with large numbers of Sinhalese, some Catholic but most Buddhist, attending to make their special requests to the goddesses. For someone born and raised in Australia, and of largely Irish Catholic ancestry, this situation always seemed odd. For I had grown up being told (for the most part half-heartedly) to pray for peace in Northern Ireland in a country where one can frequently observe exclusive Catholic and Protestant churches squared-off against each other, and family histories of couples ostracised for straddling the great divide. Ideas of religious practice, ethnic boundaries and identity, and the sacred or numinous as the critical feature of all religions, become problematic when applied to the Sri Lankan context. Where is the 'single moral community' that Durkheim saw as basic to a religion? At the same time, what preserves the dynamic interrelations in Sri Lanka? There is neither harmonious coexistence nor outright rupture, and temples like those at Munnesvaram offer an important perspective. Some might think that the plural worship offers a way out of the country's ethnic conflict, but unfortunately this hope is generated within a framework con-

ditioned by ideas of ethnic boundaries that are not appropriate to the Sri Lankan context. In these terms, the following study of Munnesvaram makes an important contribution to Sri Lanka's peace and reconciliation, if only to suggest that the significance of the Munnesvaram temples is tied to the intensity of conflict and the levels of human suffering.

Plan of the Book

The plan of the book is to proceed now to a consideration of the social composition of the worshipping patronage of the Munnesvaram temples and to explore aspects of the interplay of social factors in the practices of worship. Caste, class and ethnicity are manifested in the temple worship, and I explore different features of all of these social relations in order to demonstrate that worship is not reducible to any one of these. For example, all are elements of the relations between the priests of the Munnesvaram temple, who are Tamil Saivite Brahmins, and the villagers of the surrounding area who are mostly Sinhala Buddhists. Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict does, at times, pervade these relations, but in accordance with several social scientists writing on the conflict I argue that caste and class generate critical undercurrents which both minimise and promote ethnic hostility (Gunasinghe 1984; Jayawardena 1985; Roberts 1994; 1997bcd; Wickramasinghe 1995). I explore this general point through an examination of ownership disputes over the main Munnesvaram temple in the first quarter of the twentieth century and do so by situating the disputes in the burgeoning coconut plantation economy of the British period. This also enables me to introduce the two principal groups of priests – the Munnesvaram Brahmins and the non-Brahmins of the Bhadrakali temple.

In Chapter 3 I begin my examination of the religious world of the Munnesvaram temples by discussing the principal temple myths recounted to me by devotees. These myths concern the origin of the temples and/or the origin of certain deities in the temples. Comparative discussion of the myths reveals important characteristics of Munnesvaram in the sacred geography of the island, both Tamil Saivite and Sinhala Buddhist. It also reveals the close association that the Munnesvaram priests identify between the main Munnesvaram temple and kings.

The relationship between Munnesvaram and Sinhala Buddhist kings, evident in the temple origin myths mostly favoured by Sinhala Buddhists, informs the most prevalent types of religious practice at the temples. These are considered in Chapter 4 in order to convey what the contemporary significance of Munnesvaram is for its mainly Sinhala Buddhist patronage. The Munnesvaram temple is looked at for the importance of alleviatory rites, particularly the cooling rites performed for bad planetary influence. The Bhadrakali temple is examined for the importance of sorcery or cursing, alleviation from sorcery, suspected or real, the general protection from the fierce goddess and the role of trance and trance specialists in all of this. The place of Munnesvaram in contemporary Sri Lankan religion is thus revealed. This leads to a consideration of how Munnesvaram has been characterised as non-Buddhist in the terms of Sinhala Buddhist revitalisation. My discussion turns to

the relationship between the so-called 'worldly' (Sinh. *laukika*) and 'super-worldly' (*lokuttara*) in order to describe how Munnesvaram becomes redefined as a site of the worldly through the valorisation of Buddhist ideals.

Having done so, I turn more specifically from the practice of worship by devotees to the ritual world of the temple priests: the way the priests perceive the religious potency of their respective temples, and how they go about cultivating and maintaining this potency in the context of such a strong Sinhala Buddhist presence. Thus, in Chapter 5 I examine the aesthetics of the Munnesvaram temple as an architectural form and as a space for the obligatory and regular rites through which the form is rendered as a site for practice. I discuss the ground plan and positioning of statues, the material of the statues, and then in Chapter 6 the regular rites held daily, weekly, and monthly. This enables a contrast between the regular rites designed to maintain divine presence in the temples (*puja*), and the private devotional offerings made by individuals (*arccanai*) that serve to increase the presence of particular deities with particular actions. My point is that the priests enable the private offerings through their own ritual practice, but must then contend with the dynamic relationships of deities and devotees that ensue. Particularly important here is the ritual for the goddess, for, according to the priests, it is through the presence of *sakti* that Munnesvaram has its special power for alleviation. *Sakti* and the goddesses constitute divinity *in the world*, and part of their constitution stems from Sinhala Buddhist devotion and worship. In Chapter 7 I examine this presence of *sakti*, paying special attention to the *Sarada Navaratri* festival, a festival for the goddess which articulates the relationship between Ambal and Kali as the energy of action and practice in the world. The *Navaratri*, not unlike the three other *Navaratri* festivals Munnesvaram celebrates, is not a popular festival with Sinhala Buddhists. Instead, it is strongly marked by Tamil Saivite revitalisation themes, and by an orientation to women and to the household that is not suited to the idea of the Munnesvaram goddesses and the marginal quality of Munnesvaram for Sinhala Buddhists. Thus, the *Navaratri* is examined for the way it contributes to the cultural distinctness of Munnesvaram as a Tamil Saivite site, and also for the way in which the promotion of Tamil Saivite goddesses by Sinhala Buddhists reaches a point of celebration upon which it stops and retreats. Sinhala Buddhists worship and entreat Ambal and Kali, but there is a limit beyond which the worship stops, and that is where the Tamil Saivite worship of the goddesses is strongest – in the *Navaratri*, a rite especially of and for women and the household. What the *Navaratri* achieves, therefore, is a further marginalisation of Munnesvaram, one that contributes to its sense of potency.

The regular rites of the day, week and month, as well as the special rites for the goddesses, form a prelude to my discussion of the annual festival held around August/September. I commence my discussion in Chapter 8 in one of the villages of the Munnesvaram *pattuva* – the region around Munnesvaram, which comprised of some sixty-three villages at the point of the Jesuit conquest in the early seventeenth century. The pre-festival events in the village form the basis of the broader festival and reveal themes that the festival unfolds. Then I move to the festival proper, and in Chapters 9 and 10 offer a description of the festival events starting

from the different processions sponsored by the villages of the *patturva* and leading up to the special events and the embellishments to the festival since the 1920s. In doing this I explore the manner of the festival as constitutive of a field of religious and social possibility by which the Munnesvaram temples are rearticulated with their world.

Finally, having moved through a detailed presentation of the festival I return to the question of the relationship between the Hindu temple and its world, a world of complex social relations not simply reducible to a sense of a singular system. Temples and festivals, I argue, are vital elements in the dynamism of South Asian life. Their power is a pristine energy of cosmos and through it they create the potent realm of possibility. This, I argue, is what hierarchical encompassment and the sacred in the Indian context mean. It is a form of totalisation, but not in the sense in which Louis Dumont (1980) uses it as referring to a total and neatly arranged social whole; a sense for which Dumont has been roundly criticised (Inden 1990). What I hope to demonstrate through my focus on a major temple complex in contemporary Sri Lanka is how temples and festivals are vital to the formation and reformation of social wholes, and that these wholes do not exist as singular systems outside the temple festivals because they are continually being made in these very festivals. The festivals establish a dynamism that is unrestrained and overflows. That is their totality as that is their potentiality. It is, though, far from neat, ordered and systematic. Temples are, I argue, about power. They are concerned with the status of power and as such they develop understandings of power, status, kingship, sacrifice and transaction, as well as caste, ethnicity, class and gender. Above all, temples are about divinity, righteous action and demons. They confront the issue of action as the expression of the world, and even appear to capture it. However, in doing so they forge the possibilities of a grand excess – a riot of life the recognition of which is the temple's remarkable achievement.

Notes

1. The temple had been looted and damaged by the Portuguese before that in 1578. However, the attack had been part of an incursion into Sinhalese territory and not a fully-fledged conquest.
2. Translated by S.G. Perera S.J. in 1916 and reproduced with revisions by V. Perniola S.J. (1991: 304–305).
3. Sri Lankan Tamil Hinduism is more accurately called *Saivism*. Put simply, *Saivism* specifies the centrality of the god Siva, his consort and his children. Tamil Saivism is most profoundly influenced by the philosophy and doctrines of *Saiva Siddhanta*, by the *Agama* texts that elicit them and by temple worship. It differs in significant respects from other *Saivite* doctrines such as the Kashmiri, and so merits the label 'Tamil Saivism'. Notwithstanding the differences between Sri Lankan Tamil Saivism and that of south India (where, for example, the *Saiva/Vaisnava* (Visnu-centred) distinction obtains more strongly and there is a markedly greater presence of Brahmin castes) I shall use the label 'Tamil Saivism' throughout this book as a counterpart to the category 'Sinhala Buddhism'. I do so first and foremost because the main deities of the Munnesvaram complex are Siva, his consort(s) and his children, and because the temple worship of the principal temples is organised around the *Saivagama* texts, although it is not limited to these texts.
4. The first major riots against Tamils by the dominant Sinhalese occurred in 1958. In terms of spread and intensity these were eclipsed by the pogrom of July 1983. Militant Tamil separatism

has increasingly created a condition of civil war in the dominant Tamil areas of the north and east since 1981, but especially from the beginning of 1985. The Indian army participated as a 'Peace Keeping Force' in 1987 and 1988.

5. My source is my own sample of the temple patronage taken between April 1985 and April 1986. Buddhists constitute roughly 90% of the Sinhalese ethnic group, the majority of the remainder being Roman Catholic (6%). At Munnesvaram, the proportion of Buddhists to non-Buddhists amongst the Sinhalese is closer to 94%.
6. Victor Turner's classic study of the Ndembu (1996), for example, is one where the concepts of social drama and extended case method reveal the force of structural contradiction that lies beneath the surface appearance of crisis. In this regard Turner's study is exemplary. Its 'inside story' is not simply a journalistic scoop about what really happened, rather it is a powerful insight into the nature of the surface appearance of crisis as an irruption in the social field of otherwise embedded social relations whose reproduction proceeds in multiple taken-for-granted ways, including ritual contexts.
7. *Tirtham* refers specifically to a crossing point, a ford in the river, or a threshold. It is another name for the temple as a whole.
8. Where necessary I shall specify the language as Sinhala (Sinh.), Tamil (Tm.) and Sanskrit (Skt.).
9. This priest lives and works in Kuliyapitiya, about 30 km to the south-east of Chilaw, a town renowned as the symbolic centre for Suniyam in Sri Lanka – Kabällävа (Kapferer 1997a: 240).
10. By 1999 the Manuweriya temple had been renovated and restored under the guidance of an increasingly prominent Indian Tamil businessman who lived in Madampe south of Chilaw. He has been responsible for the renovation of a number of Tamil Saivite temples in the area.
11. The specific term in Sinhala for such divine power is *deva balaya*. The idea of *haskam* is associated with the power of the site. In that sense, *haskam* is an enabling condition of *balaya* but also a characteristic of a site at which *balaya* has been particularly active.
12. This is not to deny the importance of analysing power as command. In *Power and Religiosity in a Post-Colonial Setting*, R.L.Stirrat (1992) defines power simply as 'relations of domination' (p.9). Colonialism and postcolonial Buddhist nationalism are given as obvious examples, and set against a history of Roman Catholicism in Sri Lanka. Relevant to my work, Stirrat explores how attendance at special (*haskam*-filled) Catholic shrines enables the reintegration of fragmented individual experience in the circumstances of such power. However, simply ascribing power to relations of domination privileges ideas of fracture and reintegration without exploring the ontological grounds of power, and, through that, the hegemonic conditions of relations of dommation in contemporary Sri Lanka.
13. I draw this distinction from Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), in particular from the translator's notes by Brian Massumi (p.xvii).
14. *Anuhasa* (pl. *anuhas*) is translated in Clough's Sinhala–English dictionary (second edition 1892) as glory, splendour, dignity, merit.
15. Appadurai's (1981) study of a Madras temple, Fuller's (1984) study of the Madurai Minaksi temple, and Whitaker's (1999) study of the Mandur Kandaswamy temple all describe, in different ways, the internal dramas associated with temple management.
16. There is an extensive literature on the ethnic conflict, with the most insightful analyses being those of Tambiah (1986, 1996) and Kapferer (1988).
17. This period of the 1950s includes two other important features. The first of these is the celebrations of the 2,500-year anniversary of the Buddha's death and *parinibbana*. During these celebrations, the historical role of Sri Lanka as a Buddhist country that had protected the legacy of Buddhism was emphasised. The other feature is the first SLFP government that was elected in 1956 on the opportunist platform of making Sinhala the only official language within twenty-four hours of forming a government.