

# AN INVESTIGATION ON THE REPRESENTATION OF DEITY KATARAGAMA IN SRI LANKAN LOW-COUNTRY DANCE: ASSOCIATED WITH THE YAGA LITERATURE OF SHANTHIKARMA IN THE LOW COUNTRY

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## ABSTRACT

*Kartikēya, a god of Indian origin, is worshipped by Hindus in South India and Sri Lanka, Sinhala Buddhists, and in modern times by Christians and Muslims. The concept of Lord Skanda from Indian mythology has undergone a unique localization within the Sri Lankan cultural environment as 'Lord Kataragama.' This research explores the representation and distinct indigenization of Lord Skanda within the Low-Country Shanthikarma (ritual) literature of Sinhala Buddhist society. The primary objective is to identify and classify the literary sources related to the concept of Lord Kataragama found within the Yaga literature of the Low-Country tradition. This study is significant as it analyzes the Yaga literature and documents oral literature and rare manuscripts as a formal scholarly record. The central problem of this research is the localization of Lord Kataragama in Sri Lanka and the examination of his representation in the Yaga literature of the Low-Country Shanthikarma. This research has been conducted using a qualitative approach. Primary data were collected from interviews and participant observation, and secondary data were collected from library studies and research papers. This study specifically examines the god's warrior persona, the symbolism of his twelve weapons, and his role as a protector of the Buddhist Sasana. The research concludes that the Yaga literature is not simply a medium of devotion but a unique scholarly expression that combines local identity with universal divine concepts.*

**Keywords:** Deity Kataragama, Low-Country Dance, Yaga Literature, Representation, Shanthikarma

## 1 Introduction

The Low-Country dance tradition originated in the western and southern provinces of Sri Lanka. This dance tradition has spread under the three regional styles of Raigama, Bentara, and Matara. Many Shanthikarma have been developed in connection with the Low-Country dance tradition based on the beliefs and convictions of the people. These Shanthikarma are performed with the gods, demons, and the new planets as the main focus. In the study of Shanthikarma in Low-Country dance, the rituals, dance forms, singing styles, dramatic scenes, and Yaga literature are also crucial. From the Yaga literature, one can gain insight not only into the history of Shanthikarma, mythology, and Yaga literature but also into the fields of social anthropology.

The Low-Country Shanthikarma-related singing styles are known as Yaga literature. They may have been composed by various Shanthikarma experts or scholars at different times. This Yaga literature can be mainly divided into two main parts: prose literature and verse literature. Prose or verse fragments are used in Low-Country Shanthikarma in the form of rhythmic or metrical poetic narratives, some as non-metrical poetic compositions, and others in prose form.

Prose literature within this tradition refers to textual forms that incorporate elements such as hyperbole, imagery, and rhyme, and is written in sentence form. Sanna, Yadini, Kata-pahadiya, Yadeem, Sahali, Dahana, Patalaya, Tantraya, Alagu, Bandana, Murthu, Dhrishti, and Idirettu, which belong to the Low-Country Shanthikarma traditions, are part of prose literature. Furthermore, when the dialogue that occurs in Shanthikarma Pelapali is written down, it can be considered literary prose. Also, the stories of origin, such as the origins of gods and demons, ways of worship, and Ranga Madala, which are conveyed through verse, are identified as poetry. Quatrains, either with or without rhyme, Ashtaka, and Shloka written in Pali or Sanskrit are poetry. These vary in form and the styles in which they are sung.

Note on Prose Terms: Within this folk literature, Sanna functions as a literal interpretation, Yadini and Yadeem serve as invocatory prayers, Dahana signifies ritual incantations, and Idirettu represents formal confrontations or declarations addressed directly to the deities.

When studying the above-mentioned prose and poetry of the Low-Country Yaga literature, there is also literature that is connected with different gods. Among these, the Kataragama God, who is revered and worshipped by people regardless of religion or caste, holds a special place. The worship of 'Skanda-Kumara' or 'Murugan', which marks the origin of the Indian

Deva Puranas, is a religious concept that has a very strong and long history in the South Asian regional cultural flow. This concept of God has been particularly revered in the Tamil Hindu society of South India as well as in the Sinhala Buddhist society of Sri Lanka.

However, the fact that the concept of Skanda, which is considered a war god based on the 'Deva Purana' in Indian sources, has undergone a unique localization as Lord Kataragama in the Sri Lankan cultural environment is a matter of special academic attention. This localization process is not limited to religious beliefs alone but can be seen to be deeply rooted in local folklore and especially Low-Country sacrificial literature. The 'Yaga literature' associated with this pacification ritual is one of the main media that portrays the representation of Lord Kataragama in Sinhala Buddhist popular consciousness. Going beyond the information found in the Indian Deva Puranas, a Kataragama Deva Purana that is integrated with local identity and Buddhist philosophy has been developed in this literature. In it, Lord Kataragama is not only a worshipped object but is also depicted as a protector deity (Shasanarakshaka) of the Buddhist order and as a great and powerful warrior personality who carries twelve weapons.

This research focuses mainly on the representation of the Kataragama deity in various sources of ritual literature belonging to the Low-Country Shantikarma tradition and its diversity (Diversified Traditional Sources). In particular, the importance of documenting the information contained in oral poems, hymns, and rare palm-leaf manuscripts through a systematic scholarly analysis is of great importance. The ritual literature explores the warrior persona of the Kataragama deity, the symbolic meaning of the twelve weapons, and his religious mission.

## 2 Literature Review

### Indian and Classical Sources (The Transnational Foundation)

This study has conducted a literature review based on Indian and Sri Lankan literary sources. In the Chandogya Upanishad, a Vedic and pre-Puranic source, at the end of a philosophical dialogue between the sage Sanat Kumara and the sage Narada, the supremely wise preacher Sanat Kumara is introduced as Skanda. According to this source, Skanda is described as a supreme teacher and a great sage (Gambhirananda, 1997). Also, the Mahabharata contains a lengthy account of the birth and power of Skanda, the Vedic form of Lord Kataragama, and his rise to become the commander of the gods (Dutta, 2006). The birth and childhood of Kartikeya are mentioned in the thirty-seventh Sarga of the minor section of the Ramayana by the great poet Valmiki (Shastri, 1952).

Moreover, the Skanda Purana, a work of ancient and classical literature, is an important source describing the entire life story, adventures, and philosophical background of Lord Kataragama. The birth of Lord Kataragama, the killing of Surapadman and Tarakasura, as well as the relationship between South India and Sri Lanka, are mentioned here (Tagare, 1992). Furthermore, although the Bhagavad Gita does not directly mention the Kataragama God, important information about the Vedic form of Lord Kataragama can be found (Srimad Bhagavad Gita, 2014). The birth of Lord Kataragama and the destruction of the demon Tarakasura are described in the book Kumarasambhavam, written by the great poet Kalidasa in sublime poetic imagery and metaphors (Kalidasa, 1907). The Thirumurugatruppadei, a classical Tamil hymn by Nakkirar, describes the specific functions of the six faces and twelve arms of Lord Murugan, as well as the weapons he uses and their symbolism (Mudaliyar, 2004). The information about the Kataragama god contained in the above-mentioned sources, although not directly relevant to this study, was important for gaining a basic understanding of the representation of the god Skanda in Indian literature and society. This helped to build the theoretical foundation of this research.

However, the 'Poruladikaram' section of the Tholkappiyam, one of the oldest Tamil texts of the Sangam period, describes five geographical regions. It describes 'Seyon' or 'Murugan' as the red-colored god presiding over the mountainous/forest region called 'Kurinji.' This book provides an understanding of the Kataragama faith, as well as the geographical and anthropological background of the indigenous people who lived around the Kataragama mountain range in Sri Lanka (Thani Nayagam, 1966). According to this information, it is clear that South Indian literature contains some information about the Kataragama deity of Sri Lanka. Accordingly, although a basic understanding of the deity of Kataragama can be obtained, there is no mention of the Low-Country Yaga literature, which is the proposed subject of this study.

### Sri Lankan Context and the Research Gap

Furthermore, the importance of research and research gaps can be further identified by conducting a Sri Lankan literature review for the study. Obeyesekere (1977) points out from an anthropological perspective that the transformation and localization of the Indian Skanda-Kumara concept into the "Kataragama God" in the Sinhala Buddhist folk consciousness of Sri Lanka is not simply an embrace of an external deity, but rather a unique process that took place in accordance with Sri Lankan cultural identity and social needs. Indeed, the 'protective' function performed by the Kataragama deity in the Low-Country Yaga tradition, the worldly aspirations of freedom from disease and plagues using twelve weapons, is an embodiment

of the trends in ritual negotiation and appeasement that developed from Hindu religious restrictions and were adapted to suit Sinhala Buddhist traditions (Obeyesekere, 1978).

Complementing this, comparative studies conducted by Pathmanathan (2003) confirm the structural relationship between the South Indian Murugan cult and the Sri Lankan Kataragama cult. Specifically, the association between the Kataragama God and Princess Valli has been examined in Sri Lankan folklore and religion literature to show that the identity of the Kataragama God has been assigned a different local identity and tribal status contrary to the identity in India (Pathmanathan, 2003).

Whereas scholars like Kariyawasam (1986) and Raghavan (1967) have provided detailed accounts of the performance structures of these rites, their academic discourse on the subject was limited only to theatre and not a critical analysis of the literary text itself. Therefore, the extant literature on Lord Kataragama has been mainly anthropological and sociological in nature. However, the representation of Lord Kataragama specifically within Low-Country Yaga literature has not been systematically studied. Although general books contain raw Yaga verses, they do not explain how Lord Kataragama was localized in Sri Lanka based on that specific literature. According to the aforementioned literature review, it is clear that it is very important to study Lord Kataragama as represented in the Low-Country Shanthikarma Yaga literature, thereby identifying the knowledge gap in the world's academic literature.

### 3 Statement of the Research Problem

Based on the teachings of Hinduism through Indian literary works, Skanda-Kumara or Murugan is regarded as a war deity who kills demons. In the Sri Lankan socio-cultural milieu, this notion is subjected to a peculiar form of localization that fits the Sinhala-Buddhist folk perception of the belief. While there have been other academic endeavors carried out regarding the Kataragama belief through the anthropological and sociological perspectives, there has not yet been any systematic study of this localization based on poems, hymns, prayers, and rare palm-leaf texts within Yaga literature.

Accordingly, "How has the Skanda concept found in Indian Deva Puranas been recreated as Lord Kataragama, integrating with local identity and Buddhist philosophy in Low-Country Shanthikarma Yaga literature of Sri Lanka?" is the fundamental problem of this research.

### Objective of the Research

The main objective of this research is to identify the representation of Deity Kataragama in the Low-Country Shanthikarma Yaga literature of the Sinhala Buddhist community of Sri Lanka and the unique form in which he has been localized. Accordingly, the following sub-objectives are expected to be achieved:

1. To systematically identify and classify rare palm-leaf manuscripts and oral literary sources of prose and verse Yaga literature belonging to the Low-Country Shanthikarma tradition.
2. To study the portrayal of the heroic nature of Lord Kataragama in Yaga literature, the significance of the twelve weapons associated with him, and his role as a protecting god of the Buddhist doctrine.

### Research Hypothesis

The Low-Country Shanthikarma Yaga literature is not simply a medium for expressing devotion. It is assumed that the warlike 'Skanda' god concept from Indian literature, when introduced into Sri Lankan Low-Country Yaga literature, has undergone a unique scholarly and literary localization with a local identity, merging with the secular needs of Sri Lankan Buddhist culture to eradicate diseases and epidemics (ritualistic propitiation tendency) and the 'Shasanarakshaka' responsibility to protect Buddhism.

### Research Methodology

This research is based on a qualitative research approach and a cultural anthropological study pattern. Data collection and analysis have been carried out in several stages to investigate the representation of the Kataragama deity in the Low-Country Shanthikarma Yaga literature. The primary data required for this were obtained through field interviews and participant observation. That is, the data obtained from semi-structured interviews with fifteen expert Low-Country dance artists representing the dance styles of Matara, Raigama, and Bentara are important. Here, rare prose and poetry genres transmitted through oral tradition are presented in audio/visual form. Moreover, while observing the Shanthikarma, the use of the practical sacrificial literature sung there was noted.

Secondary data have been collected from rare palm-leaf manuscripts in private collections, Shanthikarma manuscripts, journals, and anthropological research books. The prose and poetry Yaga literature obtained from the field study has been transcribed, and it has been analyzed into a structural classification of prose and poetry, as mentioned in the introduction above.

In this research study, the collected data were analyzed using a multi-method framework consisting of textual and content analysis, thematic analysis, and comparative analysis. The structural division and taxonomic classification of the transcribed literature were executed based on formal literary genres as delineated in the framework. The vocabulary, similes, and metaphors contained in documented Yaga texts and oral poems are carefully analyzed through textual analysis. In particular, specific verses that illustrate the "warlike personality" of the God and the twelve-weapon symbolism have been identified through this. Furthermore, thematic analysis has been used to categorize themes according to common patterns emerging from the data. Furthermore, comparative analysis has been used to compare Indian sources and local Low-Country Yaga literature sources to scientifically confirm the way in which local identity is woven. This study is based on the Shasthriya theories of cultural localization and religious syncretism.

## 4 Results and Discussion

Based on the field study, semi-structured interviews with traditional exponents, and textual analysis of visual data and primary manuscripts, the representation and conceptual localization of Lord Kataragama within Low-Country Shanthikarma (ritual) Yaga literature are structurally analyzed under four core thematic dimensions.

### 4.1 Taxonomic Classification of Yaga Literature and the Localization of the Deity

An analytical review of Low-Country ritual texts reveals that the performance repertoire is bifurcated into two primary genres: Prose (Gadyas) and Verse (Padyas). Both genres serve as vital ethno-communicative devices used to adapt the transnational, Puranic 'Skanda-Kumara' concept into the indigenous socio-religious fabric of the Sinhala-Buddhist popular consciousness.

#### 4.1.1 Prose Literature (Gadya Sahithyaya)

In this folk tradition, prose denotes standard textual compositions characterized by deliberate hyperbole and structurally rhyming sentence flows, devoid of rigid end-rhymes. The primary prose genres associated with the Kataragama deity encompass:

##### 4.1.1.I Kannalavu:

They are long narratives recited by ritual priests in a very imploring manner. Beginning with the word "Pasvan Dahasakata" and ending with the blessing "Ayubo Veva," the Kannalavu describes in detail the body, miraculous deeds, and divine lineage of the god. Local literature clearly links his territorial sovereignty with the geography of Sri Lanka, making him the lord of the areas of Maha Kataragama, Kuda Kataragama, Leyla Duwa, Madam Duwa, Ruhunu Satpattuwa, and the holy Menik Ganga.

##### 4.1.1.II Sanna:

Sanna acts as a verbatim translation of the intricate Sanskrit or Pali verses to clear and descriptive Sinhala prose. The Kataragama Deva Sanna depicts him as a warrior who has many different aspects and has six faces (Shat Chakra Vaktra) and has conquered the pride of Asuras. He has a unique mythos in which he has won in the great war of Ravana, where, along with Lord Vishnu, he is given a sacrificial mandate (Varam), and he marries the tribal princess of the island, Valli Mata, who becomes the ruler of three domains of the island, i.e., Ruhunu, Maya, and Pihiti.

##### 4.1.1.III Yadini:

Composed in the rhythmic Vritta Gandhi style, these invocations invariably commence with the phrase "Sasiribara Mesirilaka". Texts such as the Kanda Kumara Yadinna and the Kala Pandam Yadinna invoke the terrifying yet magnificent persona of the deity-bearing twelve arms and riding his golden peacock vehicle to purge the patient (Athuraya) of afflictions, diseases, and planetary misfortunes.

##### 4.1.1.IV Kata-pahadiya:

These are spontaneous expositions made by the experts themselves during the Shanthikarma process. Primarily used in Bali Yaga (for Nine Planets) ceremonies, the artist says: "Let the great lord of Kataragama Kanda Kumara with six heads, twelve eyes, and twelve hands shed His divine eyes on this ritual and give long life". Despite differences in wording among different lineages, the ultimate purpose is always healing.

### 4.1.2 Verse Literature (Padya Sahithyaya):

Verse literature comprises rhymed or unrhymed quatrains, Pali or Sanskrit hymns (Ashtakas), and metered verses (Shlokas) sung to recount the birth myths of deities, methods of sacrificial worship, and the consecration of the Ranga Mandala (performance arena).

#### 4.1.2.I Shlokas:

Chanted primarily in Pali or Sanskrit, these serve as formal salutations to invite the divine presence into the Yahana. The Kataragama Deva Shlokas explicitly praise the deity as Kanda Deva Raja, riding the peacock vehicle and holding the supreme mandate for the protection of the Buddhist dispensation (Sri Ghana Sasana Sanrakshana) in the island of Lanka.

#### 4.1.2.II Mal Yahane Kavi:

Also known as Kolmura Kavi, these verses are chanted to invite the deities down to the flower altars. In the Bentara ritual tradition, these hymns accompany the Mal Asna dance, describing how the radiant lord, wielding the Chandra Chakra weapon, descends upon the performance arena to accept the offerings of light and flowers.

#### 4.1.2.III Saudam:

A unique genre shared across the traditional dance lineages, combining vocalization, drumming, and kinetic expression. The Kataragama Deva Saudama structurally captures the deity's martial grace through the verse: "Dholasadha neera ves avathara - Trishula udhara Kanda Kumara", translating his cosmic attributes into dynamic performance steps.

### 4.2 The Warrior Persona and the Symbolism of the Twelve Weapons

Within the Low-Country prose and verse texts, particularly the Deva Sanna and Mal Yahane Kavi, Lord Kataragama is cast as a supreme military commander. The literature catalogs a sophisticated arsenal of twelve weapons and symbolic objects held in his twelve hands:

The Divine Arsenal of Lord Kataragama (As recorded in Yaga Literature)

Golden Needle (Ran Katuva), Golden Shield (Ran Paliha), Golden Bow (Ran Dunna), Golden Arrow (Ran Eeya), Battle-Axe (Keteriya), The Konantha Weapon (Konantha Ayudhaya), Iron Mace (Yagadava), Elephant Goad (Ankusaya), Sweetmeat/Sweet Disc (Madhura Pettha), Trident (Trishula), Severed Head of an Asura (Asura Hisa), Battle Banner (Dhaja).

In the context of Sri Lankan folk rituals, this heavily armed martial persona undergoes an allegorical shift. It is re-contextualized not as an instrument of geopolitical warfare, but as an engine of "Ritualistic Therapeutic Warfare". The Puranic might that "crushed the pride of the Asuras" is channeled by the Low-Country Shanthikarma experts (Yakedura) to violently sever, bind, and eradicate the invisible forces of malice, demonic gazes (Dhrishti), and malevolent sorcery (Anavina/Kodivina) tormenting the patient.

### 4.3 The Shasanarakshaka Role and Religious Syncretism

Most important amongst the departures from traditional Indian literature (such as Kumarasambhavam and Skanda Purana) in the Low-Country Yaga tradition is the complete incorporation of the god in the Buddhist pantheon. Unlike other gods in the tradition, Lord Kataragama is constructed as the Guardian God of the Buddha's Dharma (Shasanarakshaka) that serves under the supremacy of the Buddha.

#### 4.3.1 The Status of a Future Buddha:

The Kataragama Deva Kannalavva explicitly elevates his spiritual trajectory by addressing him as "Pasvan dhasakata mathu Budu vana Deva Svaminvahanse" (The Divine Lord who shall attain supreme Buddhahood in the future).

#### 4.3.2 The Mandate of Protection:

The Shlokas institutionalize his terrestrial mission as the defender of the faith (Sri Ghana Sasana Sanrakshanya Lanka Dvipam), transforming a god of war into a custodian of peace and religious continuity.

#### 4.3.3 Sacred Geography:

The Kannalavva explicitly synthesizes the deity's domain with Buddhist holy sites, placing the worship of his shrines in tandem with the veneration of the "Kiri Vehera Vahanse."

Furthermore, esoterically dense incantations such as the Kanda Kumara Dahana open with the formula "Om Sri Buddha Loka Narayanne Sivami", while the Kanda Kumara Tantraya evokes the cosmic aura of the Buddha's relics ("Budu res kattu Sri Dhatu...") to empower the ritual threads and items. This structural syncretism legitimizes the act of deity worship for a Buddhist populace; the god derives his healing and protective potencies directly from the spiritual supremacy of the Triple Gem.

### 4.4 Ritualistic Propitiation, Sorcery, and Secular Mediation

Unlike the classical Indian Bhakti movement, where Murugan/Skanda is worshipped for transcendental liberation (Moksha), the Low-Country ritual literature positions Lord Kataragama as an active mediator of secular, worldly, and immediate human anxieties. The extensive corpus of specialized mantras—comprising Dahana, Patala, Dhrishti, Jeevama, Tantra, Bandhana, and Alagu—serves as pragmatic instruments to manage crisis.

**4.4.1 Binding and Counter-Sorcery:** The Kanda Kumara Bandhanaya ("Ahas kattu polava kattu derana kattu...") and the Kanda Kumara Patalaya are deployed to psychically bind wandering spirits, neutralize sorcery (Vina Kepuma), and establish a protective barrier around the domestic space of the patient.

**4.4.2 Psychological Mediation and Trance:** Invocations like the Kanda Kumara Dhrishtiya ("Om Harahara Sri Kumara Guru Vela...") and the Kandhasvami Peraluma ("Sighra Sighra Avesun Gini Gini...") use aggressive rhythmic soundscapes to invoke the deity's presence. This induces a therapeutic trance state within the performance arena, effectively purging the patient's psychosomatic trauma, anxieties, and culturally defined phobias.

Because traditional lore holds that Lord Kataragama conducted his divine affairs away from distracting sensory indulgences (Kamasukhallikanuyogayen Beharava), his mantras are structurally regarded as uniquely pure, potent, and swift in delivering secular relief.

## Conclusion

The critical analysis of the Low-Country Shanthikarma Yaga literature conclusively validates the research hypothesis. While the structural blueprints of the poetry, prose, and mantras maintain a linguistic and thematic affinity with South Asian Puranic traditions, the literary soul of the performance has undergone a profound localization. Across the traditional lineages of Matara, Bentara, and Raigama, the Yaga literature does not merely reflect blind devotion; it stands as a sophisticated scholarly and artistic expression. It successfully strips the classical Indian war god of his detached Puranic insularity, refashioning him into an intimately localized, compassionate Bodhisattva-like protector who wields his twelve weapons not to wage cosmic wars, but to safeguard the Buddhist Sasana and alleviate the day-to-day existential, physical, and psychological suffering of the Sri Lankan populace.

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