

# **From haunted houses to housed hauntings: ghosts, oracles, and kinship ambivalence in a Sri Lankan merchant family**

## **Abstract**

*“When sorrows come, they come not single spies. But in battalions!”*

*(Hamlet act 4, scene 5)*

This paper is oriented around moments of crises and kinship ambivalence within the home of a merchant family on the outskirts of a small town in central Sri Lanka. The problems explored play out in two registers. The first outlines relations between men that become problematic and result in disharmony at home and at work, while the second deals with a situation in which the house itself becomes the site of disorder and vulnerability. Bringing fractious relationships between men into conversation with an established literature on spirit possession in South Asia, explores how families manage (haunted) houses in a way which centres around the ritual authority *maha gedera*. In so doing, it makes a case for the mutual interplay of relationality between people, houses, and ghosts that haunt. At another level, the article offers a critical reflection on kinship’s agrarian history (and political death) in Sri Lanka and considers the stylistic predilection for interpretive narratives of possession in anthropology.

## **Key words**

Kinship; Possession; Sri Lanka; Merchants; Houses; Ghosts; Exorcism;

## **Introduction**

This paper is oriented around moments of crises and kinship ambivalence within the home of a merchant family. The events unfold in a village on the outskirts of a small town in Sri Lanka’s Central Province, but the context is an emerging semi-rural middle-class family. The household crises play out in two registers. The first deals with the intimate social relations within and between houses, while the second deals with a situation in which a house itself becomes the site of disorder and vulnerability. In the first section I outline a fairly mundane set of problems between the men in the family. These issues revolve around the organisation of work in the family businesses, which causes disorder between households. The second problem the family face involves a situation in which the parental home, referred to throughout as *maha gedara*

(*lit.* ‘the big house’, but understood here as a house of origin) becomes haunted by ghosts that have to be exorcised by an oracle.<sup>i</sup> Both sets of problems outlined deal with imbalance, disorder and vulnerability within and between family households and in particular male relations configured around the *maha gedara*.

In analysing problems between men that metaphorically haunt households, to locating and containing a super-natural haunting within a particular house, the paper brings fractious relationships between men into conversation with an established literature on spirit possession in South Asia. In particular, it explores how families manage (haunted) houses in a way which centres around the ritual authority *maha gedera*. Drawing on Klaus Hamberger’s recent call for a model of ‘topological kinship’, which draws attention to ‘the relationship between the abstract space of relational concepts and the concrete space material interactions’ (Hamberger 2018: 526 & 538), the paper presents these moments of crises together, and makes a case for the mutual interplay of relationality between people, houses, and ghosts that haunt. At another level, the article offers a critical reflection on kinships agrarian history in Sri Lanka and a stylistic predilection for interpretive narratives of possession in anthropology. Moving away from this, I suggest that it is analytically useful to see the house as part of the family.

In the UK, institutional thinking around kinship is haunted by other ghosts of the past, and other fractious relationships between men in the discipline, whom, poses an enduring presence from beyond the grave; I refer here specifically to Meyer Fortes and Edmund Leach.

Most of the writing on kinship in Sri Lanka comes from the 1960s and 1970s and concentrates on three themes: property (which was a continuation of the main colonial concern), descent (from classic structural-functional kinship studies in British anthropology, notably Radcliff-Brown), and marriage (the influence of Lévi-Stauss’s structuralism on Edmund Leach and Nur Yalman).<sup>ii</sup> The analyses that resulted were heavily skewed to arguments within the Cambridge department between Leach and Fortes: about the status of kinship as a ‘thing in itself’ (Fortes) versus kinship as an epiphenomenon of harder economic impulses (Leach), and about types of structural-functional organic systems, quite often at the expense of what may have actually been important in Sri Lanka itself.<sup>iii</sup> During this time, the nomenclature of kinship relations became overly technical. Concern with things like ‘complementary filiation’ and a mastery of kin-technicalities haunted Sri Lankan kinship further, possessing scholars such as Stanley Tambiah in the early years of his career at Cambridge (see Fuller 2015: 605). Tambiah’s prize-

winning essay, 'kinship fact and fiction' (1965) captured this genre of ethnographic analysis and theoretical comparison at its peak. Technical kinship remained relevant in Sri Lanka through agrarian studies, but the centrality of kinship, which had dominated anthropological studies in Sri Lanka in the mid-twentieth century, more-or-less evaporated after the 1983 riots in Colombo when Sri Lankan anthropology turned its attention toward politics, violence, ethnicity and nationalism.<sup>iv</sup>

Elsewhere, as anthropological studies moved away from theorising kinship in terms of a set of structured relationships built around notional systems of alliance and descent, 'the house' emerged as a salient category within kinship studies (Thomas 2002:430). Though the house is a well-recognised focal point within anthropological studies of kinship (Bloch 1995; Carsten, 1995, 2004; Carsten & Hugh-Jones, 1995; Hodder 1990; Wilson 1988; Strauss 1991), in Sri Lanka, ethnographic focus on the inner workings of homes was somewhat overshadowed by earlier work on kinship, which focussed on the social organisation of agricultural work and the production of economic and political systems in rural Sri Lanka (Leach 1960, 1961; Tambiah 1965; Yalman 1960, 1962, 1967).<sup>v</sup> Much of which, focussed on the unit of the family (*pawula*) and bilateral relationships that comprise it, rather, than the household (*gē*), which was thought to be of lesser sociological import.<sup>vi</sup>

The household has been re-examined as a significant site of analysis in Tom Widger's work on suicide (2012, 2015), in which he traces the association between causes of suicide and being able to uphold the expectations of certain kinship relations, specifically relationships between cross-cousins and male in-laws (*massina*) and particularly relationships maintained within a household (or, *gē*).<sup>vii</sup> The occurrence of suicide, Widger argues, can be mapped onto the failure of kinship relations supposed to be morally 'inevitable', i.e one should be able to rely on one's *massina* and those with whom one shares a home/*gē* (2012: 98,113). Though Widger emphasises cross-cousin disputes, his own evidence shows the biggest contributing factors to suicidal behaviour are disputes between husbands and wives, and then parents and children. Nevertheless, Widger's work is important here, as it brings the bounded yet permeable unit of the nuclear household into a network of relationships with other households and demonstrates the high stakes of household breakdown in the Sri Lankan context.<sup>viii</sup>

Much as the household was considered of marginal significance in the broader scheme of social structure in Sri Lanka, ghosts lay outside the interests of classical kinship studies in British

Social Anthropology. The exclusion of ghosts might be traced to Émile Durkheim's restricted focus of *the sacred* to ancestors, and his influence on Radcliff-Brown and Meyer Fortes. Ghosts link kinship to houses in complex ways. Within the home, ritual interaction with ghosts is described by Heonik Kwon as an 'alternative kinship practice', where ghosts are absorbed into the 'ordered community of kinship' (Kwon 2008: 103). For Kwon's informants, ghosts link kinship to houses through the imagined reciprocity of care, whereby, one appeases an unknown ghost in their home (with care) in the hope that their own lost family members will be appeased should they appear as ghosts in someone else's home. In Laura Bear's exposition of ghosts and Anglo-Indian genealogies, ghosts assert connections between generations in particular domestic locations, often emphasising some ancestral reminder to lineage (Bear 2007, Bear 2007a). While in Janet Carsten's volume, *Ghosts of Memory*, ghosts appear (for good or ill) in sites of 'kinship abundance', such as – though far from exclusively – homes (Carsten 2007). In so doing, ghosts act as a reminder of the fragility of kinship, but also, as a confirmation of relatedness and an often assuring vision for generative self-fashioning (Carsten 2007: 10-11).

In Sri Lanka, ghosts and demons are inclined to appear in unclaimed or ambiguous spaces in the human world. They are known to appear in riverbeds and roads that go nowhere; spaces that are thought to exist 'in between places' (Winslow 1984: 275). In moments of what Jack Goody referred to as 'fission' within the development life cycle of domestic groups (Goody 1958), a moment of separation almost always translated into spatial representation of resident arrangements (Fortes 1958:4), the house might be considered such an in-between space. It is in this context that we might be able to think of the house as both haunted and possessed by the ghosts. The hauntings, I show, fix kinship to space and present a scenario that requires a form of management, an exorcism, that reconstitutes an ideal form of kinship.

Exorcisms are healing rites. The exorcism ritual performed at the *maha gedara* dealt with a situation whereby the house itself, and not a particular individual, was possessed by malevolent spirits, in this case ghosts (*prēta*). While it is women who have often been the focus of anthropological studies concerning spirit possession (Ambos 2011; Brow 1996; Kapferer 1983; Nabokov 1997; Obeyesekere 1981; Stirrat 1977), it is a set of problematic relationships between the men in the family that form the backdrop for this particular ritual drama. In such a situation, where it is men who are suffering, it was the house itself that became vulnerable to malevolent forces and thus in need of the healing rite.

Where men have featured in the documentation of spirit possession, it has for the most part been in relation to violence, torture and trauma connected to the youth insurrections of the early 1970s and late 1980s, and the war between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) (see Perera 2001).<sup>ix</sup> When ghosts return to sites of torture, they are similarly returning to sites of injustice, imbalance and disorder.<sup>x</sup> Another theme which frames much of the earlier literature on exorcism and spirit possession in Sri Lanka and Southern India (Tamil Nadu in particular) is sex; notably, irresponsible sexual attraction, the control over women's sexual desire generally, and the imposition of power over young women in particular (Nabokov 1997; Stirrat 1992: 12-13; Obeyesekere 1981). In this regard, a distinct lack of sex and violence sets my relatively conservative account apart from other documentation of spirit possession in South Asia.

My point of access to the scene of the exorcism was not from following ritual specialists as they encounter numerous cases of spirit possession, as has been undertaken by many anthropologists of Sri Lanka over the decades (Kapferer 1979, 1983; Simpson 1985, 1997; Fleisher 1996; Ambos 2011). Nor was it from positioning myself at a popular shrine such as Kudegama (Stirrat 1992) or Kataragama (Obeyesekere 1981; Wirz 1954, Wirz and Pralle 1966), where instances of possession and ritual healing are common.<sup>xi</sup> Instead, my foray into spirit possession and haunted houses began with the back-story of a particular family. In this sense, the analysis I offer is more akin to the approach of James Brow in his documentation of spirit possession in Sri Lanka in the early 1980s (Brow 1996). Brow had become well immersed in the parochial affairs of his field site, Kukulewa, which was undergoing a 'struggle for community' for some time before demonic possession emerged as a medium through which people would articulate this struggle (Brow 1996). Similarly, I had been immersed in the day-to-day activities and dramas of this particular family for many years before the ghosts arrived in the garden. It is therefore with the affairs of the family that I shall begin the story.

## **Problem 1: men and work**

### **(Part one): father and son**

Like many patrilocal merchant sons, heir to numerous enterprises in the town, Namal lived and worked under the watchful-eye and controlling-hand of his father, Senuka. That his father

wouldn't let him start a business of his own, invest in some land, or take a loan to develop other land they owned, had been a recurring theme in conversations with Namal. His frustration at not being able to play a more independent role in building various businesses, was made all the more acute by his location in a bustling and expanding market town, where economic horizons appeared broad to an ambitious young man like Namal born to an established merchant family. Lamenting his situation: dependent on his father for land, work, capital and connections; Namal's frustrations intensified. No matter what he suggested, his father did not support his business and investment schemes and seemed to want everyone to work together in a large double-storied clothing store in the town. Much to Namal's dismay, his father would not even paint their family home and the fence that went around it. He perceived all of his father's efforts were going towards controlling him and his sisters' husbands, Ajith and Gimhan, at the clothing store.

Namal was concerned that because of his father's eagerness to control him and his in-laws, the status (*tattvaya*) of the family was going down in the eyes of their neighbours. At the same time, he saw people who he considered to be 'the same' as him in terms of class, education, land-holding and businesses, owning new cars and constructing lavish houses while his own house looked worn and in need of painting. Most of the men Namal compared his situation to managed stalls in the local wholesale market.<sup>xii</sup> Namal wanted to join his peers in the market rather than work in the clothing store with his in-laws. His father owned a vegetable stall that he obtained from the local Minister when the market opened in the late 1990s, but a manager was employed to run it.<sup>xiii</sup> What was more important for Namal than the improved income that might come with running the stall himself, was the opportunity for him to be an independent business man; to work in the market amongst his friends away from his father, to manage money, and to set up deals with the local farmers and traders. All of this would greatly increase his profile as a businessman in the town – as someone who knows people – and importantly build up his network of connections and influence through unions and traders' societies.

Order (and Namal's status) could seemingly be restored if his father allowed him to paint the house, buy a new car, let out or purchase a new piece of land, stop working in the clothing store and move to the market. As frustrated as Namal became, and as much as he would complain about his predicament to me, he would not confront his father once his idea had been shut down. Instead, he would express his displeasure with the situation by skipping work: going for long breaks and occasionally not returning at all. Namal's protest, albeit a relatively minor act

of resistance, managed to create a new set of problems that had larger ramifications across the households.

**(Part two): brothers-in-law**

All of Namal's ideas to develop the businesses had to be approved by his father. To make matters worse, Namal knew that he had a significantly better chance of getting an idea accepted by his father if it was negotiated by his elder sister, Lakshani. The problems faced by sons, such as Namal, who remain in the villages in which they were born and are subsequently dependent on their fathers, are only one side of the coin; the other side are the problems faced by men who move away from their own villages to reside in their wife's home after marriage. These men become the new sons of their wife's father and situated in a constellation of new relationships with other male kin. 'new men' (connected to the family through the marriage of daughters and sisters) become inextricably entwined - and often precariously positioned to negotiate their own interests - within a matrix of inter (and intra) generational tensions around what is deemed 'good' for the family.

Namal's younger sister married Ajith, while his elder sister, Lakshani married Gimhan. Both Gimhan and Ajith had uxori-local (*Binna*) marriages and both work in the clothing store owned by their father-in-law, Senuka. Gimhan and Ajith manage the store alongside their brother-in-law.<sup>xiv</sup>

As Namal did not want to work in the clothing store he would disappear for hours on end, leaving Ajith and Gimhan stuck there. Neither of the two brothers who married into the family uxori-locally would complain to Namal about his behaviour. Gimhan would not need to say anything directly to Namal, as his wife would scold her younger brother when her husband was overworked picking up the slack. However, Ajith's wife, Nethra, who is Namal's younger sister, could not rebuke Namal in the same way, and so Ajith became increasingly frustrated with the situation. His irritation at having to cover the work of his brother-in-law in addition to his own responsibilities, with no clear channel of protest, combined with living on the compound of the *maha gedera* in close proximity to Senuka the overbearing patriarch led Ajith to secretly apply for a job in Australia through a local broker.

The 'broker' was in fact a travel agent who marketed himself locally as a kind of 'international businessman' on account of his relative fluency in English and the fact that he had been employed for a short period of time in the Maldives and Qatar. He was a friend of the family and constantly tried to sell overseas trips to Singapore, Thailand, and Chennai to merchants. According to the broker, Ajith had inquired about obtaining overseas work and the broker thus set out preparing an application, claiming that he would be able to arrange a year's worth of work in Australia. Shortly after Ajith's application was underway, the broker came to our house and spoke with Lakshani, letting it slip that Ajith planned to migrate.

Lakshani swiftly brought the entire operation to a close by arranging with the broker to secretly withdraw the application. He left the house promising to deceive Ajith and would tell him that the application had simply been unsuccessful, thus keeping him with his family and at his work. For his help, the family would be indebted to the broker, as would Ajith, for (ostensibly) trying to help him.

Immediately after the broker left the house, Lakshani phoned her father. While Lakshani explained the dilemma and expressed her concerns and the need for her father to 'do something', she simultaneously outlined what was required to be done. This was a skill of diplomacy in which Lakshani was adept and it was for this reason that her younger brother, aware of her powers of persuasion over their father, would often make sure that he had her support when suggesting his business ideas. It was decided the situation would be best handled discreetly. The application was to be thwarted internally by the broker and Ajith was never to find out. By handling the situation this way, Ajith would not find out that Senuka and Lakshani (and I) knew about his attempts to migrate to Australia and the issue could be contained and not transform into a larger problem that could cause further disunity within the family. Handling the matter this way meant that Senuka would not have to scold Ajith, which would only compound the problem of his unhappiness.

The threat of Ajith's migration and inevitable separation from Nethra, their children, and his responsibilities at work, raised the family-alarm; any movements that might bring about his departure from the family fold were rapidly quashed. Ajith's potential departure, and the panic it induced, not only accentuated how necessary he is to the functioning of the family and the logistics of running the businesses but revealed a deeper panic about the state of the family itself and the importance of maintaining a harmonious balance between and within the various



households which constitute it. Ajith's threat to migrate from the family fold invoked a response in which separation from the family was implicitly problematic: the family *should* stay together. This was the acceptable order and Ajith's departure would be viewed as detrimental to the household, a failure, a source of imbalance within the family setup, and a sign of moral disorder.

Migration as the foundation of moral disorder is a theme which can be traced through Michelle Gamburd's ethnography of housewives who migrate from Sri Lanka to the Gulf for employment (Gamburd 2000). Here, gender expectations are a key part of how people in Sri Lanka perceive the issue of moral disorder in households. For Gamburd, absent mothers and wives are blamed for the ills that befall their families while they are abroad.<sup>xv</sup> While for the women documented by Sandya Hewamanne, their new-found economic potential gained from working away in Free Trade Zones forms the source of disorder. Both Gamburd (2000 and 2008) and Hewamanne (2011, 2016, 2019) address the issue of tensions within families (often expressed as concerns about moral order) arising from subtle - and sometimes not so subtle - transformations in gender roles, expectations, and power, provoked by transnational forces and possibilities vectoring in from beyond the household in rural Sri Lanka.

Among middle class families, migration and separation are often framed in terms of success and upward social mobility. Many families were quick to talk proudly about a relative living abroad, particularly if he or she were somewhere like Australia. Privately, the family would have felt a sense of loss and disorder at Ajith's unsanctioned departure. Publicly, however, the family may have cast Ajith's migration as a success story. For a son to leave his home and the village he grew up in to find work or marry is common and acceptable, but for a son-in-law to leave his post-marital residence, especially when his father-in-law is providing gainful employment, is not. It would not do for Ajith to migrate for work when there is plenty of work to be done in the businesses belonging to the family that he and his brother have married into.

The father, the son and the brother-in-law each had a different set of fairly mundane problems working and living together. The father wanted his son and sons-in-law, to work together under his supervision at the clothing store. The son (Namal) wanted to move to the market and be more independent, and the son-in-laws, particularly Ajith, became fed up with covering for Namal who was regularly absent from work in defiance of his father. These problems were never directly articulated between the men in the family: the two brothers did not confront

Namal or their father-in-law, nor did Namal openly defy his father. Instead, problems between men were often mediated in the short term through Lakshani, who – as Namal’s elder sister, Gimhan’s wife, and Senuka’s daughter – was a central figure in much of what went on. Problems that the men in the family were experiencing at work, which largely involved one another, found their way into the home and were rearticulated in terms of a threat to ‘the family’. Blocking the seepage of the issues between work and home is a problem inherent with owning and running a business with family members.

When the problems that were building up at work between the men leaked into the home they came under the management of Lakshani. Lakshani scolded her younger brother Namal for making her husband Gimhan late home, and she negotiated Namal’s business proposals with their father. Furthermore, when Ajith – having no other avenue of protest about being overworked – planned to migrate, Lakshani found a solution which would stop Ajith from migrating yet not further strain the relationship between Senuka and Ajith. Moreover, she found a solution which avoided any public recognition of the problem at hand.

## Problem 2: the haunting

Shortly after Ajith’s attempted migration was discreetly averted, his house, located on the same plot as the *maha gedera*, became haunted by two ghosts (*prēta*). The ghosts came in the form of two old men who were seen walking to and from the well behind the mango tree in the middle of the night. The ghosts moved things around in the kitchen, slammed the cupboard doors and on one occasion violently shook the roof waking the family in the middle of the night. At first Ajith’s family moved into the *maha gedara* but when their daughter started having nightmares the decision was made for Ajith and his family to move away from the family plot and stay with Gimhan and Lakshani who had built a large house nearer the town.

Namal’s family (and his father) remained at the *maha gedara* until there was another incident of ghostly activity, this time within the *maha gedara* itself (moving items around the house). Following this, Senuka went to Panampitiya - a small village about twenty kilometres further south - to find a known oracle and commission her services to exorcise the ghosts from the houses on the family plot. The Panampitiya oracle, referred to in Sinhala as *sāstra-kārayā* (henceforth, *sāstra*), was known to the family.<sup>xvi</sup>

The *sāstra* works to induce a state of possession (*āvēśaya*), usually by local gods or minor deities, to ascertain the problem of a given situation. In this state she can deliver the advice or commands of the gods or deities. A *sāstra* generally ‘cultivates possession’ rather than suffers being overcome by it (Ambos 2011:206) acting as a vehicle for gods and deities. The Panampitiya *sāstra* cultivates her possession while staring at a glass of water placed in front of a candle. Once the gods and deities would ‘look upon’ her she became able to mediate with spirits and the departed and confer other worldly knowledge.

On the night of the exorcism in the *maha gedara*, the Panampitiya *sāstra* became possessed by Dādimunda, a god often connected with sorcery practices and said to assist Kataragama, a god much higher in the Hindu-Buddhist cosmological order who may be turned to should Dādimunda fail to deal with the problem (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988:115). Seeking redress through appeals to the Hindu-Buddhist cosmological order is analogous in some respects to appeals made to local authorities in everyday politicking: one might start with an appeal to the village headman and if he is unable to help, a higher authority will be sought. Another such parallel has been drawn between appealing to the hierarchy of deities from the lower ranking to the higher, and appealing to secular judicial authorities (see Seneviratne 1978; Obeyesekere 1963; Holt 1991; cf. Fleisher 1996), ‘as one might gradually move for a retrial to a progressively higher court’ (Fleisher 1996:34).<sup>xvii</sup> As a minor god, Dādimunda is a likely candidate to be the first deity mobilised to address the haunting at the *maha gedara*.

All over Sri Lanka, people appeal to a variety of specialists, especially those who mediate with deities and demons such as the Panampitiya *sāstra*, to explain the particularity of misfortune and illness (Kapferer 1983: 15). The *sāstra* is not ‘possessed’ by Dādimunda in the same manner as those who are afflicted by spirit or demon possession – she is thought to enter a state described as *distiya* which is to be ‘under the gaze of the gods’.<sup>xviii</sup> The most common use of *distiya* refers to being in the malign eyesight of a demon.<sup>xix</sup> In the case of the Panampitiya *sāstra*, the state of *distiya* is more specifically *dēva distiya*, which refers to being in the benign eyesight of a god. In this state she can deliver the prophecies and communicate with departed ancestors or spirits.

The commissioning of the Panampitiya oracle, and the personalised nature of the ritual she was to undertake in the family home, reflects a broader trend reportedly taking place within healing rituals in Sri Lanka, whereby rituals have become less bound by textual form, and practitioners

have more flexibility as ‘cultural agents’ in the performance of the rituals (Fleisher 1996: 29; Simpson 1997; Ambos 2011). Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) have argued that the privatisation and flexibility of ritual healing practices (including exorcisms) has been a relatively recent occurrence and the result of urbanisation following the introduction of the open economy (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988: 121-122). Bob Simpson (1997) and Eva Ambos (2011) have both documented the decline of large-scale *yaktovil* healing rituals in the South, in favour of smaller less formalised ceremonies. Following a similar tack as Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988), Ambos locates the demand for private and specialised ceremonies (such as the exorcism at the *maha gedara*) as coming from urban middle-class adherents to so-called Protestant Buddhism (Ambos 2011:203). Bob Simpson suggests that larger ceremonies, such as the *yaktovils*, later studied by Ambos, have simply ‘moved beyond what private patrons can afford’ (Simpson 1997: 55) and have been otherwise replaced by different types of major public cultural pageants (Simpson 1997: 56).<sup>xx</sup>

Healing rituals have reportedly moved from the public realm of collectively organised spectacles to private affairs that take place within the home. As a result, so called ecstatic priests and priestesses such as the Panampitiya oracle, have become more common and central figures in such rituals. Scaling down the healing ritual may simply be a practical necessity if the rituals are brought inside the home; not everyone can accommodate a troop of Beravā caste drummers and dancers, and indeed doing so might be counterintuitive if clients wished to have the ritual performed discreetly. One might also venture, that summoning the *sāstra* in this instance also suggests an attempt to bring *distiya*, whether of gods or demons, under more private control because of an increased distrust of the public sphere: a distrust occasioned either by Sri Lanka’s chaotic contemporary politics and/or the intense forms of capitalist competition in which members of the *maha gedera*, and basically everyone in Sri Lanka, are so deeply engaged.

Regardless of what happens to the management and popularity of ritual in public spaces, homes, remain significant sites onto which the Sinhala-Buddhist cosmological order is imprinted. For the families I lived and worked with, it would be unlikely that they would only tackle a problem of health or ritual healing outside of the home and not supplement it with some sort of activity within the home. Although scholars such as Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988), Simpson (1997) and Ambos (2011) each speculate (and largely agree) about shifts in the practice itself, from community spectacle to family affair, none offer insight into the context

of the homes into which the rituals have seemingly moved. Nor does their analysis expand on the intimate social relations of those who live within the homes. Addressing this lacuna in the empirical knowledge of healing rites in Sri Lanka, I will discuss in detail what happened within the houses on the night of the exorcism and how the family understood the ritual and the curse.

## The Exorcism

The *sāstra* arrived at the *maha gedara* with her husband Kapu Mahataya. Kapu Mahataya was used by older generations as a shortened and slightly more informal name for a '*kapurāla*', the title given to a priest of the gods. Both the *kapurāla* (priest of the gods) and the *sāstra* (oracle) were referred to as ritual specialists (*ādurā*) and fit the bill of the type of 'ecstatic priestesses' discussed earlier. The *sāstra* and Kapu Mahataya had arrived at the *maha gedara* specifically to conduct an exorcism.<sup>xxi</sup> The English word 'exorcism', a word more commonly associated with Christian ritual (Ambos 2011:206; Kapferer 1991; Wirz 1954) was only used by Lakshani, who is an English teacher. The exorcism was referred to by the family in Sinhala as, *sāttuwa*, which means to treat, to deal with, or to look after an illness.

The word *prēta* derives from the Sanskrit *preta*, meaning 'departed'. There is a distinction between ghosts, malevolent spirits and dead ancestors on the one hand; and the deities and demons found within the various (Hindu-Buddhist religious) pantheons in Sri Lanka on the other. As Obeyesekere (1981) points out, deities (and demons) are 'named, supernatural beings occupying a certain position in the divine hierarchy. Spirits, by contrast, are a known *category*, but they are not known beings' (Obeyesekere 1981:115, italics his own). The crux of Obeyesekere's thesis suggests demons and deities are recognised beings with known characteristics. Therefore, the presence of a particular demon can be illustrative of the types of problems faced by those inflicted. To borrow from Obeyesekere's examples further: the presence of the demon Mahasona invariably suggests that the victim suffers from a conflict of aggression, whereas the presence of the demon Kalu Kumara (black prince), implies the patient is inflicted with 'disturbing sexual impulses' (Obeyesekere 1981: 121).

Demons, spirits, and ghosts are all associated with attachment to the world of humans after being banished by Buddha to a world of their own (*yaksha loka*) (Kapferer 1979: 2; see also Scott 1994:38).<sup>xxii</sup> In Sinhala cosmology, according to Goonaratne (1865), ghosts are the most miserable and helpless creatures who fostered cravings, desires, or aggression shortly before

death and who live beyond death only to suffer (Gooneratne 1865: 38ff).<sup>xxiii</sup> In Isabelle Nabokov's work on exorcism in South India, of the ghosts that returned and required exorcising, a significant number were the spirits of young men who had either suffered untimely deaths in accidents or had taken their own lives. Nabokov's spirits suffered in limbo in the world of humans - where they remained attached to unquenchable human desires (Nabokov 1997:299). Similarly, demons, spirits and the ghosts of the departed in Sri Lanka, suffer (*duka*) emotions that emerge from attachment to the human world: 'lust, pride, greed, cruelty, anger, pain, sorrow, violence, etc' (Kapferer 1979: 3). Although there is a distinction between malevolent spirits and known demons, both are characterised as being in opposition to Buddhist teachings. The family were adamant that the house was haunted by two ghosts, who appeared as two old men, and referred to them as either *yakko* (devils) or *prēta/prētayō* (ghost/s) interchangeably.<sup>xxiv</sup>

The ghosts that came to haunt the *maha gedara* were not the family's ancestors, nor were they associated with the land or the building. That the ghosts were unknown to the family and the land might suggest that the problem lay not with the ghosts and their attachment to the houses, but with the relationships within the family. An interpretation of this could be that the homes of the family of the *maha gedara* had in some way become vulnerable and fallen within the malign eyesight (*distiya*) of a spirit. This interpretation is appealing given the various tensions that were building up between the men in the family, one of whom was planning to leave the home before the house became haunted. However, that the ghosts arrived because of disharmony within the family is not an explanation that the family themselves would necessarily accept. Nor was it thought that the family might be becoming disordered as a result of the supernatural happenings. The family maintained that malevolent spirits can be sent to haunt houses or possess individuals or families whether those people are in a state of vulnerability or not. Nevertheless, the houses on the land of the *maha gedara* were afflicted by the ghosts and it was from within the *maha gedara* itself that the exorcism had to be performed. In the midst of the sons' ambivalence towards the family as a source of status and wealth, as well as the source of their subordination, the haunting, housed and contained as it was, reconstituted an ideal form of kinship *à la* Lévi-Strauss' *sociétés-à-maison*: restoring order to the corporate group and the family as a moral body, and orienting kinship analysis toward residence and 'interlinking alliances' (Lévi-Strauss, 1991: 435; see also Carsten & Hugh-Jones, 1995: 18).

The exorcism at the family home was organised around the tenets of Sinhala Buddhism; more specifically, ‘the opposition between Buddhist ideas and values and those ideas and values personified by demons’ (Kapferer 1979: 3). These oppositions were visibly enacted in particular parts of the two houses, whereby a kind of dual ceremony took place: one a ceremony and offering for Buddha and a benevolent god (*Dādimunda*), and the other for the malevolent ghosts. Moreover, each ceremony facilitated a performance of family harmony and cooperation that oriented around the *maha gedara*: reinforcing the *maha gedara* as the locus of authority, hierarchy, and harmony amongst a constellation of otherwise fragmented households. Here, the *maha gedara* played an important role in the resolution of family problems at a time when cooperation between the men at work transposed into problems within and between households.

We stood poised in the darkness of the main room of the *maha gedara* watching our oracle in trance. The air, thick with the smell of *sāmbraṇi*, held us silently in place. The oracle had become possessed and was ready to be questioned. Senuka began to ask her questions about the ghosts in Ajith’s house. From Senuka’s disappointingly brief interrogation of the oracle, we learnt that there were two ghosts haunting the houses and that they had been summoned by the neighbours with whom the family had apparently not been on good terms with. The neighbours had visited a place called Sinigama, located at the southwest coast of Sri Lanka (about 50 miles from Colombo). This explanation seemed to satisfy all, and the distance travelled by the neighbours who made the curse seemed to surprise no one, except me, who up until this point had no idea that the two households had not been on good terms.

Questioning the neighbours accused of cursing them was largely unnecessary, as what the ghost told the oracle may not have been true. It may not have been a ghost that spoke to the oracle at all. It could, for example, have been a demon pretending to be a ghost falsely claiming to have been sent by the neighbours. Demons are commonly thought to be ‘evasive and duplicitous creatures’ (Brow 1996:145). In other words, demons may lie to the oracles who converse with them, this means that whatever diagnosis is offered by the oracle can be challenged. Therefore, instances of spirit possession produce various interpretations of what is going on despite what the demon or spirit tells the *sāstra* and what the *sāstra* tells the relatives of the possessed in the *maha gedera*.

Putting a curse on somebody, although common and often perceived as necessary if not deserved, is generally considered to be inherently bad form. Furthermore, if you are observed dabbling in sorcery, you may find yourself the recipient of a curse put on by someone who suspects you of putting a curse on them.<sup>xxv</sup> Thus it is common, particularly among Buddhists in Sri Lanka, to travel a long distance from their village in order to place a curse on somebody without being recognised by anyone they know. Sinigama, the site of Obeyesekere's research into sorcery in the mid nineteen-seventies, houses a deity called *Devol Deviyo*, viewed locally as a major deity in the Sinhala Buddhist pantheon who has a reputation for 'being severe toward evil men' (Obeyesekere 1975: 18).<sup>xxvi</sup>

The house being haunted implies that the family have done harm to their neighbours for which *Devol Deviyo* is enacting justice. According to Obeyesekere's informants, if the claim were not *just*, the sorcery would not work (Obeyesekere 1975). However, such implications were unproblematic for the family who felt the curse had been put on them out of jealousy (*irisiyawa*) by the neighbour. While the curse and the imbalance that ensued was thought to have been motivated by the neighbour's jealousy over the status of the family belonging to the *maha gedara*, the problems between men in the family emerged because they felt they did not have the correct status themselves. Despite the fact that the curse had seemingly worked, as the ghosts were in the garden, the family's piety was not considered to be at stake. Although they recognised a cosmological order of powerful deities, these deities did not necessarily mete out justice. The way the family understood the world of curses and ensorcelment was like this: somebody can pay or make an offering for a curse to be put on another person undeservedly, just as somebody who deserves to be cursed can protect him or herself against a curse. Therefore, so called 'evil men' cannot be identified by virtue of the fact that they are suffering a curse or are being pestered by 'the departed'. Whether or not the family have upheld Buddhist principles is of no consequence in this context: malevolent spirits (like many government officials) do not respond to piety and virtue, what they respond to are offerings.

It was the houses on the *maha gedara* plot that had become haunted, therefore it was the *maha gedara* itself that became the site at which the exorcism took place. It was from within the *maha gedara*, and not Ajith's house, that the spirits conversed with the deity via the oracle. It was on the porch of the *maha gedara* that the *puja* for the gods was constructed and on the porch of Ajith's house that the offering to *Devol Deviyo* and the ghosts was made. The *maha gedara* was the platform from which appeals to the Buddhist order were made, and it was



around the *maha gedara* that the family rallied. Gathered inside the *maha gedara* for the part of the ritual where the *sāstra* became possessed and conversed with the ghosts, were the members of the afflicted households.

## After the ritual

In the days and weeks that followed the exorcism, several decisions were made and implemented which affected all of the households involved. Senuka allowed Namal to purchase a large piece of land near the town, on which he would begin to build a new house for himself and his family. Namal's new house was to be built behind Gimhan and Lakshani's; near the vegetable market where he was finally permitted to take over the management of the family stall. Another plot of land was also bought for Ajith to build a house. Since Namal obtained the transfer from the clothing store to the market stall he coveted so much, he became more reliable to work with for the remainder of his stint there; this made things easier between him, Gimhan and Ajith. When Namal was to leave completely, the two brothers could organise running the business between them and this proved a successful solution.

The various work-related issues that were causing disharmony between the men in the family were ironed out shortly after the exorcism. Moreover, Namal and his in-laws had been placated by Senuka's decisions, without any of them having to discuss the problems they were facing with one another. In the process of solving problems between and within the households of this particular business family, discretion was essential. Rather fittingly, there is a desirable element of discretion afforded by the arrival of a ghost that makes it a suitable medium through which family matters can be addressed. In the supernatural mediation there is a twist of the uncanny; rather than inviting chaos, the haunting (re)stabilises relations between kin that are beginning to feel disordered.

As spirit possession does not necessarily reveal what 'the problem' is or with whom it may lie, it offers a rather convenient ambiguity when it comes to addressing a problem, particularly a problem within a family. More importantly, incidences of spirit possession, or pronouncements made by the gods or spirits, can be challenged and interpreted in many different ways. Spirit possession is part of a broader strategy of living together, particularly in a situation where men do not seem to be able to talk openly about certain problems they might have with one another - specifically problems that involve disunity running the family businesses. This kind of

convenient ambiguity could be seen as a means of addressing sets of problems in a way that would not attribute blame, harbour resentment, and cause further disharmony or disunity for the family. Spirit possession can be interpreted as an idiom of displaced agency – “it’s not me who is doing or saying bad things, it’s an external third party who has temporarily taken me over”. In this case, the sorcery explanation transposes the same logic to the level of the house – it’s not problems internal to the house at issue here, it’s those bad neighbours and their trip to the sorcerer.

Relationships between men in a business family, particularly those between sons who live in the villages they were born and their fathers on whom they remain dependent, and men such as Ajith and Gimhan who have resided uxorilocally and have to work harmoniously with their male in-laws, are potentially delicate. There is necessity for a mechanism of interfamily conflict management that maintains a veil of ambiguity (if not secrecy) over what ‘the problem’ may be. Men, in this situation do not express potentially contentious issues with one another and the stakes of pushing cross-cousin ‘inevitable’ *massina* relationships to breaking point could not be higher (Widger 2012, 2015). To push the analysis slightly further, while this strategy of problem solving - whereby families avoid (where possible) openly discussing potentially fractious subjects - might be a trait generally recognisable among families in Sri Lanka (if not the world), this is a particularly salient strategy within merchant families in Sri Lanka who rely on each other to run their businesses. Moreover, in this case, they rely heavily on the daughters’ husbands (Gimhan and Ajith), who have moved to the town and play essential roles in running the family business.

## **Conclusion**

By putting the two sets of events together, I am not suggesting that the exorcism was *really* an idiom through which troubled relationships between men can be resolved. I am *not*, for example, suggesting that the ghosts at the *maha gedara* were the manifestation of Ajith’s frustration with his inferior position within the hierarchy of men in the family: unable to protest as he has married into a relatively prosperous business family and is reliant on his stern and controlling in-laws for employment. Or, that the ghost *really* being dealt with by the oracle is actually the ghost of hovering, disturbing, transnational pathways, that can destabilise expectations, hierarchies, and the moral kinship order within and between houses.

Not presenting a causal connection between the two problems outlined, runs somewhat against an historical stylistic predilection in the anthropology of possession genre, whereby authors often conclude by unveiling the sociological conditions that spur incidences of possession, and the function possession serves. Consider, for example, Fuller's argument that in India, 'women's possession episodes are also culturally tolerated opportunities to complain about female inferiority and subordination' (Fuller 1992:233); or, Nabokov's claim that the Tamil exorcism ritual known as 'making the *pēy* run away' is a response to 'a pervasive source of female distress' (Nabokov 1997:311). In general terms, however, my own account, as well as Fuller's and Nabokov's, tallies with Jonathan Spencer's reading of Obeyesekere (1981), that: 'possession' provides a possible source of authority which empowers people to restructure the unsatisfactory intersubjective world in which their symptoms became manifest' (Spencer 1997: 706). In this ghost story, the *maha gedera*, as an intersubjective house, is empowered by the ritual that follows possession.

By putting the two kinds of problems the family face, a haunted house and a comparatively mundane set of fractious relationships between the father, the son and the brothers-in-law together here, we see the *maha gedera* as both a generative space and a networked scheme of kinship. As Hamberger asserts, 'the logic of kinship as such can be understood as a logic of spatial construction' (see Hamberger 2018: 526-7), in which the space itself and the bodies that inhabit it are continually mutually constituted (see Allerton 2013). In each case described, the house is not a conduit for kinship relations, it is part of the family (both materially and as a conceptual social order). Therefore, the haunting of the house *is* the possession of the family, not a symbolic rending of the family's problems, because the house is *part of* the family.

What I want to bring to the foreground from the accounts presented here, is that both problems have in essence been concerns about houses, status, and kinship ambivalence. More specifically, they are problems about maintaining harmony through order and hierarchy within the family (as broadly conceived), once the children of a single *maha gedara* have married and split into individual households (*gē*). In the first instance, a conflict between the father and son emerges when their expectations in one another are not met: Senuka's reluctance to paint the house and Namal's worries of being perceived to be 'going down' in society as a result, combined with his desire to have more involvement with the business decisions (among other things) become points of contention and disorder at the *maha gedara*. Ajith and Nirmala's house, the other house on the *maha gedara* plot, falls into imbalance and disorder, when Ajith

threatens to migrate to Australia. Ajith's potential migration presents a situation that may cause various sorts of problems among all of the houses connected to the *maha gedara*. In the second situation outlined, the *maha gedara* becomes vulnerable to possession by a ghost, summoned, ostensibly, by a jealous neighbour. Seen in terms of Hindu-Buddhist cosmology and Sinhala-Buddhist understandings of spirit possession, the houses themselves could be thought of as being possessed. The *maha gedara* and the households connected to the *maha gedara* have fallen into a state of disorder and thus have become vulnerable (*tanikama*) to the malign eyesight of a demon – thus collapsing the material structure of the house with the logic of kin relations that constitute it (see Lévi-Strauss 1991).

The house was possessed by ghosts in this instance under a particular set of circumstance, notably, when the disorder between the households oriented around a fractious set of relationships between men. Furthermore, this is a family that comprises men who have moved there to reside with wives who are particularly strong willed. The two women, Lakshmi and Nethra, are sisters who have a close and supportive relationship; making them the type of women who are perhaps not likely candidates to become vulnerable to possession themselves. Men, of course, cannot *really* be seen to be possessed outside of ritual contexts.

The problems affecting the family were distinct yet connected by houses; so were the solutions. The solution to the haunting was an exorcism within the *maha gedara*, which itself facilitated a performance of family harmony and order that oriented around the *maha gedara*: presenting it as the locus of authority.<sup>xxvii</sup> The exorcism rallied the family around two important orders of authority: the tenets of Sinhala-Buddhism and the order and authority of the *maha gedara*. By re-establishing these orders, the family was able to exorcise the ghosts.

Thus, returning to the conceptual move the paper makes: from analysing issues between men that haunt households, to locating and containing the super-natural haunting within a particular house, which, in its management, reconstitutes an ideal form of kinship. The ultimate solution to the threat of Ajith's migration, and Namal's distress at living under the close control of his father, was to construct new houses. Marrying 'in' has always implied a power-down position within rural Sinhalese households. But, as also illustrated by Ajith, that structure of expectations is undercut by the possibility of migration. Hence, male relationships, as hierarchically organized in joint Sinhalese families, are also threatened by anxieties of global influence. Whilst a new house may placate a 'disempowered' man who has married in, it also

presents a house of one's own as part of the aspirational horizon of members of the emergent semi-rural middle-class in Sri Lanka. Both of the solutions facilitated the establishment of order among the family; an order which involved separating from the *maha gedara*, into nuclear units of individual conjugal households. In this process, a mutually acceptable resolution to problems that haunt houses requires work on social relationships, abstract kin expectations, and material structures alike.

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> *Maha gedara* has two meanings: it denotes the house of a wealthy or high-status person in the village who quite literally owns a big house, or, more significantly in this case, it refers to the parental home and the place of origin.

<sup>ii</sup> For a detailed reading of kinship in Sri Lanka centred on notions of alliance and descent see the work of Edmund Leach (1960, 1961), Nur Yalman (1960, 1962, 1967), S.J. Tambiah (1965), and Gananath Obeyesekere (1967).

<sup>iii</sup> Or, indeed, among the Kachin in Highland Burma (see Leach 1954). Fortes's chapter, *The Axiom of Amity In Kinship and the social order; the legacy of Lewis Henry Morgan* (Fortes 1970), in which Fortes dissects the minutiae of Leach's arguments, is probably the best example of an anthropological engagement that reveals more about academic institutions than it does about the places studied.

<sup>iv</sup> It should be noted of course, that kinship studies were declining in anthropology generally at this point.

<sup>v</sup> The work of Deborah Winslow (1980, 1984) and Roderick Stirrat (1988) respectively, offers a great deal of detailed and intimate empirical data on the inner workings of homes and stand as notable examples here. For more recent readings of households and homes in Sri Lanka, see Gamburd (2000, 2008); Jani de Silva (2005); Van Daele (2012). Similarly, there are important contributions from Sri Lanka that focus on the notion of 'home' and place, and on the Tamil idea of *ur* (see, Maunaguru 2010, 2019; Thiranagama 2005, 2007, 2011; Jegathesan 2019).

<sup>vi</sup> Stirrat's work differed here, as the term *Pavula* in Ambakandawila was never used to describe groups beyond the nuclear family (Stirrat 1988: 87).

<sup>vii</sup> I use the word household (*gē*) referring to what Tambiah terms a 'corporate family group' (Tambiah 1965), a married couple living outside the parental home, but the vernacular, *gē*, is also used to refer to the physical house itself.

<sup>viii</sup> Widger argues that 'problems leading females to self-harm appeared to be limited within the *gē*, problems experienced by males extended beyond its borders' (Widger 2012: 94) and usually involved other kin (Widger 2012: 96).

<sup>ix</sup> In India however, spirit possession among men has been documented under different kinds of circumstances (see Parry 1994: 234-237).

<sup>x</sup> Although rarely discussed by anthropologists, ghost stories are ubiquitous throughout Sri Lanka and feature in newspapers and popular television dramas.

<sup>xi</sup> One could add to this Deborah Winslow's mapping of the spatial distribution of deity worship, by visiting the Buddhist oil lamps housed in outdoor shelters and attended to routinely on *Kembura* days (Wednesday and Saturdays (Winslow 1984: 276).

<sup>xii</sup> For more on this particular market see, Heslop (2015, 2016, 2019).

<sup>xiii</sup> The stall manager was on a fixed salary and all of the profits from the stall accrued to Namal's father.

<sup>xiv</sup> A sister's husband can also be referred to as *Massina*.

<sup>xv</sup> Migration, dislocation, and abandonment are an important - although less acknowledged - backdrop to Laura Bear's discussion on ghost stories among Anglo-Indian families in Kharagpur (2007).

<sup>xvi</sup> The word *sāstra* refers to prophecies, which are delivered from the gods; the oracle is the passive vehicle of the *sāstras*. *Sāstra kārayā* refers to the oracle who is uttering (*maturanawā*) the prophecies. I refer to the oracle as *sāstra* throughout, but I am not unaware of the various nuances between the word *sāstra* as a prophecy and *sāstra* as a person or oracle who utters prophecies and conducts such rituals. Such an oracle can also be referred to as *māniyō* (priestess), but this word was seldom used by the family, therefore I have not used it here.

<sup>xvii</sup> According to Kapferer (1979) the hierarchy of 'supernaturals' and their relationship to humans runs thus: 'at the head of the pantheon is the Buddha, below the Buddha are deities and below these demons and ghosts. Human beings occupy an intermediate position, inferior to deities but superior to demons' (Kapferer 1979:5).

<sup>xviii</sup> In Sinhalese, the term *distiya* has a broad semantic range which falls within a larger Sinhala cultural understanding of eyesight. For a detailed overview of the importance of 'the look' in Sinhalese cosmology, mythology and everyday sociality, see Scott's chapter on, 'Malign Glances' (Scott 1994, and 1991).

<sup>xix</sup> The condition of vulnerability under which a demon might look upon someone is referred to as *tanikam dōsa*, often thought to be brought about by loneliness (*tanikama*).

<sup>xx</sup> I am sceptical as to whether or not larger ceremonies such as *yaktovil* have decreased because the cost of holding them has moved beyond what the villager can afford. I am inclined to think that this has somewhat more to do with what other things people choose to spend their money on: motorcycles, mobile phones, television sets, etc.

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<sup>xxi</sup> What happened at the *maha gedara* was referred to as an exorcism or healing (*sāttuwa*) and not a ‘light reading’ (*anjanamā*) which is a kind of divination that also involves water and limes. *Anjunamā* is more commonly what happens in Panampitiya.

<sup>xxii</sup> To paraphrase Scott (1994), the Buddha put an end to yakku (plural of yakka) being allowed to feast on human flesh with impunity and cast them out of the favoured island of Lanka, *dhamma dīpa*, in order to compassionately accommodate the yakka he allowed them to ‘look upon’ (*bālma*) the island and its inhabitants. Since then, ‘looking’ has constituted the medium of the malevolence of the yakku (Scott 1994:38; see also Scott 1991).

<sup>xxiii</sup> Cited from Yalman (1964: 139).

<sup>xxiv</sup> The word *bhūṭayā* is another word commonly used for ghost but was not used in this instance. I don’t know why.

<sup>xxv</sup> Sorcery must therefore be practised in secret. However, Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim sorcery shrines, such as those studied by Obeyesekere (1975), tend to be public spaces. Obeyesekere’s data from a study in the 1970s was collected from three shrines; a Buddhist shrine, a Hindu shrine, and a Muslim shrine. These were not religiously exclusive and the largest number of clients in Hindu and Muslim shrines were Sinhala Buddhists.

<sup>xxvi</sup> The use of the term, ‘Sinhala Buddhist pantheon’ here is deliberate. As pointed out by Obeyesekere (1963) and later Kapferer (1983) in Sri Lanka, the Buddhist pantheon, ‘is neither a Theravada Buddhist nor a specifically “animist” one, but a Sinhalese Buddhist Pantheon’ (Obeyesekere 1963:148 cf. Kapferer 1983:30)

<sup>xxvii</sup> However, although the category of ‘*maha gedara*’ is important and endures as a site of authority, the location of the *maha gedara* itself is mutable.