

# EXORCISM AND THE ART OF HEALING IN CEYLON

BY

PAUL WIRZ

WITH 51 PLATES AND 55 TEXT FIGURES



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simply dried and applied without further preparation, either in the form of a decoction, or ground into powders for plasters or for internal use. Usually, the vedaṛāla himself gathers the herbs, roots, barks, etc. which he needs for his patients; but there is in addition a group of people, the so-called "*behēd badu kadā-kariya*", i.e. herbalists, whose business it also is. Among the bhikshu are likewise found some who occupy themselves with this. And then, finally, there are those whose profession it is the production and sale of various oils. These have already been mentioned earlier in this book.

As mentioned above, the number of remedies originating from the animal body is, if not theoretically, at all events practically, very much smaller. In most cases they are fats which have been extracted. Yet, it appears strange that poisonous effects are attributed to many of these animal fats. This superstition is, in particular, connected with the fat of snakes, especially with that of the dangerous viper (*polanga*), that of the perfectly harmless phyton (*pimbura*), and also with the fat of the big varan lizard (*kabragoya*) which is said to be produced best by the people of Mātara. Those who want to commit suicide or who want to remove their rivals often make use of these poisons. The death due to them is said to be a very terrible one; a person who has swallowed the venom is believed to swell up and hiss like a serpent or a varan lizard, and to die in violent convulsions. Since the varan lizard enjoys official protection on account of its feeding on snakes, its fat is not easy to procure, but it is thought still to be obtained in secret. The animal is cut up lengthwise and the fat taken out. Snakes are hung up, head down over a fire, and the liquid which runs out of the mouth is collected. What is obtained in this case is, of course, not actually the animal's fat or grease, but the decaying blood and the liquids of putrefaction. One can well imagine that they produce a poisonous effect when introduced into the stomach in considerable quantities.

Other animal fats, on the other hand, are valued as old approved medicines, just as in our western pharmacology. Bears' fat (*valas-tēl*) is used against baldness and loss of hair, that of peacocks (*monāra-tēl*) cures sprained joints. The fat of tigers and leopards (*koti-tēl*) is a well-tried means of protection (*arakshava*) from the yakku and prēto. It is worn about the arm in a small metal case, such as is used for yantra. Pigs' fat too, is a similar preventative, and is smeared on the forehead or the arms when danger threatens from a kodivina. In the same way, houses and their inhabitants are protected by applying pigs' grease to the walls, the door, or the pillars of the veranda.

The meat of tigers and leopards is in high esteem as a remedy for asthma, while most Sinhalese avoid pork as being impure (*kili*).

An outstanding position is occupied by the so-called *kastūri*, a very valuable medicine, which is obtained from the glandular secretion of the musk-deer (*Moschus moschiferus*). It is very expensive and not easily acquired, so that only the rich have access to it. It is believed that a few drops of *kastūri*, administered to a dying person, may still bring him back to life. It is mixed with other remedies

and made into pills. A similar property is attributed to the horn of the Indian rhinoceros, which is also highly valued by Chinese physicians; it is powdered and then given to pregnant women when the delivery does not proceed easily (p. 247).

In certain cases, minerals and metals are also employed, just as in Chinese and Indian medicine. We have already mentioned mercury, and in addition there is gold, in the form of powder (also used in Tibetan medicine), which is prescribed for ailments of the heart and the lungs, and powdered precious stones, amber, corals, and even pearls, which find occasional application and which were also known to mediaeval pharmacy.

The number of remedies which are made from minerals or metals, is enormous; they are collectively called *sinduram-behēd*. Although each is in itself a medicine, they are mostly mixed or heated with other ingredients; this heating is often continued for hours or even days, until the mineral has, as they call it, been completely "burnt", i.e. until the metal has been converted into its oxide, or if cow-dung is a constituent of the mixture, into the nitrate.

Among the metals, mercury (*rasā-diya* = liquid metal) occupies the first place and is the basis for the production of numerous medicines.

Not every vedaṛāla, however, is familiar with the production and application of these *sinduram-behēd* which are a special branch of the Indian and Sinhalese medical science. They are, just like the above-mentioned *kastūri*, administered only in especially serious cases and when the otherwise customary remedies have proved of no avail.

Among the vegetable poisons, the fruit of the kaduru-tree (an Apocynaceae) must be mentioned as being the most important. This tree is very common in the lower regions. Suicides, particularly girls who face the birth of an illegitimate child, frequently make use of this fruit. Death is said to ensue within a few hours of eating even a single fruit of this plant.

There is a voluminous literature, dealing with medicines and therapeutic methods. Most of the works, however, are of Indian origin and written in Sanskrit, or else translated from the Sanskrit into Sinhalese<sup>1</sup>.

## THE CONCEPTION OF HOT AND COLD

The Sinhalese share with other peoples of the Indian cultural group the idea that all foods, especially vegetable ones, i.e. fruit and greens, are to be distinguished as hot or cold. Correctly speaking, there is a graduating scale, from very hot, moderately warm, neutral, moderately cool, to very cold kinds of food. Instead of hot and cold, we ought to speak of foods with a hot or cold action, or of heating and

<sup>1</sup> The following works may be listed: Rasarajasundara, Calcutta; Vaishiyaratnavali by Govinda Dasa, Calcutta; Charaka Sanhitta, Calcutta; Kasayasangraha, Calcutta. A comprehensive survey of Sinhalese medical science is also to be found in John Attygalle "*Materia Medica*", Colombo 1917, and Emanuel Roberts "*Vegetable Materia Medica*", Colombo 1931.

an unfavourable day for either of the partners. Following an old usage, a little bower (*porua*) of coloured paper is made on the wedding day, generally in one of the more spacious rooms of the house or else under a protective roof which has been constructed in the open air for the solemnities. In it, the young couple sit down. The brother of the girl's mother ties the right thumb of the bridegroom to the left one of the bride with a white thread and covers the pair with a white cloth. A few drops of yellow-root water are poured on to the joined hands from a little earthenware pot, while children of the family recite poems (*yāya mangalangata*). Then, a banquet is served for which, nowadays, a big wedding cake is baked, following the English custom.

On this day the second instalment of the dowry is paid to the father of the young man who generally at once passes part of it over to his newly married son. The brother of the girl's mother likewise receives a number of gifts from the bridegroom. The usual objects are a box for betel, a pair of areca-scissors, a tortoise-shell comb, a loincloth of fine wool, a silk towel, and some cash (about ten rupees).

On the third day after the wedding, the "showing of the blood-stained cloth" takes place. On that day, the parents of the newly-weds come together once more, and the wife of the wash-man is secretly ordered to inspect the bloody cloth. Without wasting a word about the matter, this woman puts a half-peeled banana in the middle of the table as a token that all is in order, i.e. that the defloration has occurred normally. If such a banana is not seen on the table, it means that no blood has been found on the cloth. Discussions ensue, and in former times the consequence was that the dowry had to be returned and the marriage was revoked. This is nowadays no longer possible; people therefore let the matter rest with their discussions and resign themselves to the fact. If everything has been found in order, the match-maker is now paid his reward by the two parties, the amount of which is determined by the financial circumstances of each family; in the other case, he foregoes the bridegroom's part.

#### PREGNANCY, BIRTH, AND BABY-CARE

It is regarded as a great disgrace if an unmarried girl becomes pregnant; this is called "horota bad vela", "clandestine pregnancy". The girl is well aware what she has to expect from her relations and the other villagers, and will try every possible means to stop her pregnancy at an early stage and procure an abortion (*andura*). There are a number of remedies known which may be successful when administered in time, but which will do considerable harm if applied too late or improperly. Among the inoffensive means are young unripe pineapples (*anasi-gēta*) and young pumpkins (*puhul-gēta*) which must be eaten raw; to the dangerous ones belong the manga-like fruit of a tree growing in the lowlands called *kaduru*, which produce an absolutely deadly effect when consumed in large quantities.

Now and then, an *edura* is consulted who knows the pertinent mantra. It occurs not infrequently in Ceylon that a girl who is expecting commits suicide by eating

the poisonous *kaduru*-fruit; for a girl with an illegitimate child certainly has no easy life. Wherever she goes, she will be exposed to disrepute and her child will for the whole of its life be branded because of its parents' guilt. Especially in this respect, the Sinhalese are very narrow-minded.

If difficulties occur during the delivery, the *edura* is called in order to utter mantra or to perform a little ceremony. He first tries to help by reciting appropriate mantra, or with the "*dēhi kepima*", or merely by administering holy water to the woman in labour (*vatura maturala bona* = water, charmed, drink). He may also draw a yantra on the leaf of an *alu-kehel-banana* (ash banana) and put it under her back, or anoint the woman's body with holy oil (*tēl maturala bada ganava* = oil, charmed, anoint the belly), or put a betel-leaf under a spell (*bulat kola maturala*) and place it on the woman's navel. If the child still does not appear soon, the *edura* tears the leaf in pieces and flings it on the floor at the feet of the woman. A piece of the horn of a rhinoceros (*kangavena anga*), powdered, dissolved in water, and put under a charm, yields a potion for women in labour which cannot fail to produce results, even if the child should be still-born. This remedy, however, is hard to procure and hence very expensive, so that only rich people can afford it.

In the case of a miscarriage, a coconut-flower is ground into a fine powder and soaked in water and then given to the woman to drink; it is believed to possess purifying qualities for pregnant women. Another purifying drink is the milk of a red coconut.

One of my informants gave me the following detailed statement:

When a pregnant woman feels that her time is near, she sends for the midwife (*dā-amma* or *minapu-amma*). This person helps to deliver the baby and lays it on a clean cloth; then she continues to lend assistance to the mother until the after-birth (*ved-amma*) has appeared. Should this be delayed, she stuffs a clump of hair into the mouth of the woman to produce nausea which is supposed to drive it out. Then, the umbilical cord (*pekani-vella*; *vella* also means creeping plant) is cut through with a knife or scissors so that the piece remaining attached to the child's body is long enough to come up to its nose. The midwife takes this part of the cord between her thumb and forefinger and strokes gently along it towards the child's navel. Then, she folds the ends of the cord and ties it tightly with a thread. The region around the navel is finally anointed with a mixture of coconut oil and of dried burnt and powdered *goraku*-fruit (*Garcinia combogia*). The afterbirth and the cut-off piece of the cord are buried in the ground at some distance from the house; the hole must be deep enough to prevent their being eaten by pigs, dogs, or varans, otherwise the child will cut his teeth very late.

The child is washed in clean lukewarm water and rubbed dry. Then a female relation or acquaintance expresses a little of her milk into a small bowl and a gold ornament is dipped or laid in it. A few drops of this milk, which is therefore called "*rankiri*", i.e. gold-milk, are now dropped into the baby's mouth and a few grains of boiled rice are pushed between its lips. A few hairs are cut from the new-born's