

# The Tamil People and Santa Rosalia: Ruhunu Maha Kataragama Dewalaya to Mount Pellegrino

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**Abstract:** *During the XII century, in the Norman period, the '60s were characterized by a greater spread of saints and hermits. The period of William I called "the bad" is for the kingdom of Sicily a period marked by infighting and intolerance of the barony. This is the period where the hermit experience of Saint Rosalia to become consolidated in Palermo. Rosalia, after having left the comforts of the royal palace, decided to live in solitude on Mount Ercta, that is Mount Pellegrino. Today, the Tamil community live from Palermo, Hindu, please Saint Rosalia as hermit and ancestral protector of the mountain. This is not a phenomenon of "religious syncretism", but a real movement: the mother of Sri Lanka also inhabits mountain Monte Pellegrino as in Sri Lanka lives in Mount Kataragama – "Ruhunu Maha Kataragama Dewalaya". The rituals and pilgrimages to Her, you can see - deliver suffering and doubts, difficulties in relationships and desires, integrations and social disintegration. Prayers in Saint Rosalia are submitted in writing and delivered to the sanctuary on the mountain and on the whole are a testimony sometime anguished, some funny once more and moving feelings of not mediated and expressed in a private language (Tamil) that should not be able to be read by foreign eyes.*

**Keywords:** religious syncretism, sociology of religion, territory, Tamil, saint, sacred, sanctuary, pilgrims, pious

## 1. Introduction

From my ethnographic diary:

*To the winds begin to arrive devotees from obvious physical traits that characterize the group of the Tamil community, (do not ask where they came from, could also be of Sri Lankan origin, I stick to quietly observe their path) which are combined with those already present (men, women and children); the latter engage with the path of the wax candles, are switched on one by one starting from a flame which ignites the subsequent. Form a semicircle for the lighting of votive candles and then lined up in three form of a procession.*

*Palermo, 3 September 2015*

## 2. The Tamil people and Saint Rosalia

The devotion of the Tamils in Saint Rosalia begins with a miracle made a Tamil woman who was coming to the shrine on their knees crying for her child who was no longer awakened from a coma, but after the request wakes up and lives today. Another grace received was given to a couple who could not have children and who now has three children. It so happens that, among the Tamils there are girls who are named Rosalia as a sign of gratitude and that among the votive gifts they are photos of children Tamil and prayers written in Tamil.

It can be difficult to understand how a Hindu community can pray "Santuzza" (little saint – lovely or sweet nickname attributed to Her) who saved Palermo from the plague in 1624, but getting into the spirit of 'Hinduism, ethnic based religion that has incorporated gradually different cults, that their devotion is not so absurd. Hinduism for its theological structure opens easily to other religious events.

Highly diverse in its interior according to different regions and cultures in which it has developed, has an open religious landscape and sensitive to other cults. Tamils seek the relationship with the natural elements and exploit their

energy. So even on Mount Pellegrino, to the shrine of Saint Rosalia, they can sense a cosmic force.

The sanctuary on Mount Pellegrino is the place of union with their land, the space in which to live their hope for peace, liberation from war and death, the deepest feelings to their loved ones and the desire to bring together the dispersed families. Santuzza welcomes them and listens to them and their prayers are renewed waiting for the miracle.

The Tamil devotees are more and more numerous: about four thousand Tamil - Sri Lanka Indian, Hindu, to which the Holy seems pardon and answer prayers. The president of the Italian community of Tamils in Palermo Mr Metha designates the sanctuary of Saint Rosalia as a place for the geographical position and the highest part of Mount Pellegrino as a landmark that recalls and leads back to the temples left in Sri Lanka.

Tamils living in Palermo since the eighties have a place to practice their religion and celebrate their rites. Therefore, the sanctuary of Mount Pilgrim overlooking the sea became their temple and their holy Rosalia. Every Sunday throughout the year, at dawn, the Tamil families in their traditional clothes meet at the foot of the mountain to climb together, immersed in the festive atmosphere of those who go up to reach the holy. "Acchianano" – GET ON - with pace like light in silence, barefoot. There are also many children from large dark eyes. At the foot of Mount Pellegrino sanctuary head bowed continue its knees by the staircase that leads them to slowly cave lit a candle in the open air of the sacred place destined for votive candles, enter the grotto, transformed into a chapel and pray in front of the altar.

For the Tamil community natural elements such as water, air, earth and fire, they are manifestations of the divine on earth.

Saint Rosalia is for their manifestation of the divine on earth, the materialization of a cosmic energy. Holy is the sacrifice that goes beyond the land and that men cannot understand. Among the foreigners who live in Palermo, the Tamils have

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a particular history: they are refugees and political asylum have been trying to rebuild itself, little by little, a dignified and peaceful life. They meet on the premises of a school near Via Dante, where the afternoon volunteers take the time to teach children aged 3 to 13 years their traditions, language and culture.

During the night between 3rd and 4th September of each year we witness the pilgrimage to the shrine of Saint Rosalia on top of Mount Pellegrino. All night the devotees "acchianano" – (get on to the...MOUNTAIN PELLEGRINO) and also the Tamils - present not only in the long night but also steadily every Sunday throughout the year.

Tickets found in the Sanctuary they read the amorous pains, lack of social acceptance and ethnic problems: are sincere confessions because the writer does not expect to be read by others as by the mother of the Mother Mountain. They contain all of the pain, humanity passion of one who lives his life in a difficult land, but with which it does not renounce to deal precisely because that is the land in which you live should.

One of the demands expressed by the Tamil and deposited pilgrims to the shrine: *"Dear Saint Rosalia in our country I would like it to be peace forever. Here with me there is none. Then I would like a job and bless my children and my wife [...]"* *Mother of the Mountain I come to You, and bowed their heads before You and I fall at your feet asking you to solve my problems. I do not know if my relatives are fine. In our country the girls without mothers suffer. May I ask you something? But because you are not a mother? Excuse me if I asked you this thing. Answer my questions. Now I purify my heart and I hope not to get back my heart (Christmas 1995)".* [...] *"Mother Saint Rosalia, We have no children and are desperate. Now we have lost hope gives us a way to have children".* [...] *"Mother of the Mountain, I and this woman we love, please, do the two of us get married without the problems that gives us our family. Mother, lead Thou my beloved woman. Thank you. If you will do me this favour, I promise you that I will give food to the poor"*.

### 3. Figures



**Figure 1:** Mount Pellegrino - Sanctuary of Saint Rosalia



**Figure 2:** Saint Rosalia inside the Mountain



**Figure 3:** Tamil pilgrims - to and within the Santa Rosalia Sanctuary of Monte Pellegrino. (1990 – 2015).



**Figure 3:** Tamil pilgrims - to and within the Santa Rosalia Sanctuary of Monte Pellegrino. (1990 – 2015)

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**Author of Photos in this paper Mr. Antonio Ferrante (friend and a good photographer to the ethnographic field)**

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