

# Traditional Exchange - Labour in Hill Country Sri Lanka

## a study of the attam institution

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In most peasant societies reciprocal exchange of labour has traditionally been an important institution. Among the peasantry of Sri Lanka, reciprocal exchange-labour finds articulation in the *attam* institution. Curiously enough, the *attam* institution has received scant attention of social scientists. However, it is important to examine the underlying principles of the *attam* institution with a view to ascertaining the relevance of such principles in modern contexts. This necessity is all the more evident because the *attam* institution is subject to rapid disintegration. The present study is aimed at an identification of the *attam* principles with reference to Madulla—a village located in the Eastern hill country.<sup>1</sup> The selection of Madulla has been purposive. The rugged relief necessitates terraced cultivation of paddy. Terracing at higher levels results in narrow *liyaddas* (fields enclosed by bunds) which place a high premium on human labour. In Madulla the fact that animal or mechanical traction cannot be easily substituted for human labour has tended to delay the process of disintegration. Hence, the salient characteristics of the *attam* institution are still identifiable at Madulla.

### Definition

The term *attam* refers to reciprocal exchange of labour in irrigated paddy cultivation. As Gunasinghe states 'the crux of the system is balanced reciprocity as it consists of a series of voluntary contracts between sets of individuals which stipulate the duration, nature and the type of labour to be exchanged. Though the contract is never one between two groups or an individual and a group, it is not a fragmented pact between two individuals. It achieves social nature as various individuals are involved

1. Madulla lies in the Yatipalatha Korale of the Walapane Division. The village is located in the valley of the Madulla Oya and the surrounding relief shows an elevation varying from 1250' to 3000'. This region has until recently been an isolated and neglected part of the hill country.

with numerous others in contracts of exchange labour'.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it signifies a finely calculated and balanced system of economic relationships of a contractual nature. It is necessary to distinguish between the *attam* and *kaiyya* institutions. At times the two terms are mistakenly interchanged. *Kaiyya* has also been referred to as a component element of the *attam* institution. Thus Hewavitarane states that '*kaiyya* is the occasion on which labour is mutually exchanged and *attam*—the portions of labour contributed by each'.<sup>3</sup>

However, in regard to traditional systems of labour mobilization it is necessary to identify the *kaiyya* as a distinctly separate institution. It refers to communal mobilization of labour which may be used at the level of the individual or that of community. Thus it is possible for an individual to work his fields by mobilizing *kaiyya* labour. But it is a cardinal principle particularly at the level of the individual, that there should be justifiable grounds for the invocation of such labour. The operational exigencies arising for reasons beyond an individual's control (eg. sickness or ceremonies of the life cycle) illustrate the point. Hence, the *kaiyya* unlike *attam* is not regularly utilized. It is true enough that reciprocity is an essential characteristic of *kaiyya* but the interdependence arising out of *kaiyya* is more long-term oriented. The recipient of assistance is in debt to each individual member of the *kaiyya* until the debt is cancelled off in each case in similar circumstances at a later stage. Theoretically, the entire village community is mobilised for a *kaiyya*; but in practice this is not so. *Kaiyya* and *attam* both involve costs to the recipient. It is technically possible to limit a *kaiyya* to a specified number by resorting to personal invitations; at other times invitations are of a more general nature. The construction of a road or the digging of a community well are examples of the mobilization of *kaiyya* labour at the village level. Hence, at the village level 'communal labour mobilization is governed by a coincidence of interests held by different individuals'.<sup>4</sup>

### Determinants

Viewed in the historical perspective origins of the *attam* institution in Madulla was primarily determined by the relative absence of wage labour. All respondents interviewed at Madulla emphasized this fact. As Gunasinghe points out it is the 'labour-labour' principle which underlies the *attam*

2. N. Gunasinghe, (1976) 'Social Change and the Disintegration of a Traditional System of Exchange Labour in Kandyan Sri Lanka', *Economic Review* January: 5—8.
3. B. Hewavitarana, (1971) 'Non - Monetized Capital Formation in Ceylon: A Marga'. *Marga* 1:93 p,139.
4. N. Gunasinghe, (1976) op. cit.

system.<sup>5</sup> This in turn was determined by the fact that paddy cultivation was essentially for subsistence. Besides, in a labour intensive peasant system, the marginal surplus generated enters into an internalized exchanged system on the basis of 'generalized reciprocities' explained by Sahlins.<sup>6</sup> This situation is substantially true of Madulla even today. In a relative sense the paddy crop does not enter the market, and hence does not facilitate a 'labour-money' relationship. Indeed, the stresses to which the *attam* institution in Madulla is increasingly being subjected to is due to an overflow of a 'labour-money' relationship originating outside the 'sector'. This point is further elaborated in a later section.

The capital scarce-labour intensive technology associated with irrigated paddy cultivation in Madulla was another firm determinant of the *attam* institution. Production capital (buffaloes, ploughs and other implements) is limited in a subsistence oriented peasant system. *Attam* provided both the means of reciprocal exchange labour and of pooling production capital on a group basis. Hence, it enabled maximizing on the production capital available within the economic system.

The fact that irrigated paddy cultivation formed the basis of the subsistence economy of Madulla too contributed to the *attam* institution. In Madulla the variegated topography resulted in the dispersed location of the *yayas* (paddy fields). Further, the hilly terrain necessitated terraced paddy cultivation. Both factors necessitated a well regulated pattern of labour utilization; terraced cultivation in particular optimizes on the input of labour. *Attam*, therefore, enabled the easy mobilization of labour.

The pattern of land tenure was equally important. Land was held in small plots and such plots were widely dispersed within the *yaya*<sup>7</sup>. The wide dispersion of plots was necessitated by the differential fertility of the *yaya*; access to irrigation water was an equally significant factor. The fragmented ownership of land minimized the risk involved in *yaya* cultivation. The *yaya* operations necessitated movement among plots and distances involved were considerable. Further, there was the need to transfer the factors of production among the different plots. The dispersed ownership pattern also had implications at the level of economic relation-

5. N. Gunasinghe, (1976) Ibid

6. M.D. Sahlins, (1965) 'On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange' in M. Banton, (ed) *The Relevance of Models for Social Anthropology*, Tavistock.

7. The field work did not involve a statistical analysis of data relating to units of ownership and the extent of fragmentation. The dispersed and fragmented system of land tenure is prevalent even today for the same reasons; indeed, the tendency is for the increased incidence of fragmentation.

hips (e.g., in *yaya* 1, A's plot may be adjacent to B and C; but in *yaya* 2, A's immediate neighbours may be D and E). In effect, larger the number of *yayas* and wider the dispersion of land holdings the more complex is the network of economic relations which bound the individual. All this meant that at the operational level the network of relationships necessitated a collective co-operative approach to labour mobilization which found articulation in the *attam* institution.

### Functional Characteristics

The *attam* group is mobilized on a *yaya* basis; residential and kinship alignments further reinforce cohesion within the group. The important principle is that the selection of partners is not left to individual choice. The limits set by residential and kinship groupings also prevent the *attam* group being formed across caste barriers.

The functional characteristics of *attam* demonstrate that exchange-labour is precisely balanced both in terms of duration and task performance. Indeed the term *attama* is at times used to refer to 'units of labour'. Thus *waru-attama* refers to one half-day's labour and '*tispeya attama*' refers to one full-day's labour. For the exchanges to be even, the units of labour must be precisely balanced. If a person is called upon to provide more units of labour than he is bound to, such excess units of labour have to be compensated for by payment in either cash or kind. Cash payment is clearly a recent innovation; the traditional practice had always been for such payments to be made in kind. When the *attam* group performs *waru-attam* this does not involve the provision of meals by the recipient; in contrast, one full-day's *attam* entails a substantial expense on the recipient because the *ambula*<sup>8</sup> (noonmeal) has to be provided for in addition to at least two cups of tea per individual. The principle of balance involved in *attam* also necessitates that task performance too should be precisely weighted. The weighting is so significant an element that it recognizes the sexual division of labour; that is to say, some tasks (planting, weeding, transfer of paddy stalks to the threshing floor) are performed exclusively by women. The implication is that a unit of male labour cannot be equated to a unit of female labour. Hence in Madulla within the predominantly male oriented *attam* institution, female *attam* groups emerge. It should, however, be noted that the mobilization of labour on *attam* lines is made possible by the low-levels of specialization involved in the various operational tasks of irrigated paddy cultivation as demonstrated by the traditional methods obtained at Madulla.

8. It serves as an informal reward providing tacit compensation for the assistance rendered.

The contractual relationships entered into in *attam* are of an absolutely binding nature and cannot be easily shirked off. In the event a recipient of *attam* finds it difficult to reciprocate for reasons beyond his control (e. g. either sickness or death in the family) he is bound to send a substitute—usually another adult member of the family or pay the wage of a labourer employed for the purpose. Here again, the principle of balance is in operation; a unit of adult male labour cannot be substituted by a unit of female or child labour. Indeed, effective social controls exist to enforce the binding inherent in the contractual relationship. Thus any violation of this principle results in ‘avoidance’ and ‘taboos’ placed on such offending individuals. They may be referred to in the derogatory term ‘*attam-warawa*.’

The *attam* group does not have a formal leader; but informal leadership is recognized in the terms ‘*labana-aruwā*’ and ‘*gevena-aruwā*’. These refer to two informal leaders who occupy the two extremities of a row of workers and act as pace-setters. The two *aruwa* roles, therefore, operate in competition. The two *karuwa* roles provide assistance to the *aruwa*. This arrangement is schematically shown in figure 1. Apart from the terms used to designate the informal leadership roles there are no special terms to designate the other operational roles within the *attam* group. Hence the following construction of roles may be useful.<sup>9</sup>

- (a) initiator — an individual who enlists the support of the *attam* group.
- (b) *aruwa* — informal leader; *labana* (upper end) and *gevena* (lower end) refer to field positioning.
- (c) *karuwa* — assistant to *aruwa*.
- (d) participant — an individual who enters into a contractual relationship with other participants.
- (e) host participant — the initiator who works alongside the group and acts as host to the others.

Of these categories, roles ‘b’ and ‘c’ require a relatively higher degree of skill than the roles ‘d’ and ‘e’. Even though it is theoretically possible for each role to rotate within the group, technically the *aruwa* and *karuwa* roles tend to rest with the more skilled individuals within the group.

9. For a comparison see P. R. Goethals, (1967) ‘Rarak: A Swidden village of West Sumbawa’ in Koentjaraningrat (ed) *Village in Indonesia*, Cornell University Press.

### Significance

The functional significance of the *attam* institution is being eroded away in Madulla for reasons explained in the next section. However, the *attam* institution when in operation is important for several reasons. The experience at Madulla suggests that it enables the easy mobilization of labour in irrigated paddy cultivation. It regularizes the supply of labour because at the inception of the agricultural cycle the *attam* groups are formed on a *yaya* basis. In Madulla particular advantages are to be derived from the *attam* institution as it enables to meet the competing demands of agricultural operations between flow irrigated paddy and *hen* cultivation. This avoids competition and ensures complementarity between the two systems.

The collective-co-operative approach to irrigated paddy cultivation in Madulla is particularly significant from the point of view of cultural practices adopted in terraced paddy cultivation. Thus it is customary for the *agavata* fields (fields lying at lower elevations) to be ploughed first to ensure the supply of water and there is progression upwards to the *mulata* fields. (fields nearer to source of water supply). In *yala* the usual practice is for the fields to be cultivated in the reverse order and in rotation. The water issues to each tract is dependent on the volume of water in the supplying stream.<sup>10</sup> In regard to the preparation of the fields the narrower terraces are prepared by hoeing. This is essentially a matter of convenience in that the manoeuvrability of the buffalo drawn plough is greatly retarded in the narrower *liyaddas*. For the same reason, in such fields harrowing by buffaloes is dispensed with and the clods are trodden under-foot by men and levelled with the hoe. Hence, the significance of the *attam* institution as a means of providing the labour supply.

Another factor which contributes to the significance of *attam* is that it enables the optimization of the factors of production. It has previously been mentioned that the pooling of production capital is an important principle of the *attam* institution. The above mentioned cultural practices provide a rational approach to flow irrigated paddy cultivation; however, unless the factors of production are put into effective use it would not permit the systematic working of the *yaya*. Hence, a collective-co-operative approach to the utilization of the factors of production

10. This cultural practice is now abandoned as the *yala* paddy crop is a rarity and depends on the availability of water.

enable the successful sequential operation of the *yaya*. Thus it prevents the non-working of the *yaya* owing to the non-availability of production capital.

The *attam* institution is also important because of the interest and collective responsibility with which the agricultural operations are performed by individual members of the group. The 'roles' defined previously rotate within the group; hence, the need to share collective responsibility. There is further compulsion because the 'principle of balance' is extended to cover task performance as well i.e.. A' should pay sufficient attention to the performance of tasks relating to B's fields for B to reciprocate in the same manner. It should also be emphasized that the *aruwa* and *karuwa* roles provide for the maintenance of a normative level efficiency in task performance.

It is also significant that the *attam* institution allows for a collective-approach to farming within a tenurial framework based on individual ownership of land. This prevents an intensely individualistic approach to farming which is very desirable because overt competition for irrigation water is bound to strain the social cohesiveness of the group. Experience suggests that a weakening of group norms relating to irrigation water leads to misappropriation by individuals resulting in dissension and conflict. In fact, the ritual occasions of the peasantry relating to agriculture aim at resolving such disruptive tendencies within the group<sup>11</sup> Hence the *attam* institution minimized the potential and prevented the surfacing of such disruptive tendencies within the community.

### Disintegration

As pointed out earlier a tendency towards the gradual disintegration of the *attam* institution is increasingly noticeable in Madulla. A growing inequality in the pattern of land ownership as indicated by the high incidence of share-cropping is a causal factor contributing to this tendency. As the principles outlined above indicate 'balanced reciprocity' inherent in *attam* and relating to labour units and task performance can only be rationally worked out in a situation which provides for equality in the pattern of land ownership. This is because *attam* labour is recruited on a *yaya* basis and not on the basis of labour units. Now, given a situation where there is inequality in the pattern of land ownership the balancing of labour inputs in terms of labour units and task performance becomes

11. M. M. Karunanayake, (1979) 'Muttimangalaya: *Vidyodaya Journal of Arts, Science and Letters* (forthcoming).

problematic. This problem is further accentuated when there is joint ownership of paddy land. In such a situation the small holders find themselves in a disadvantageous position in resorting to *attam* labour; this has its corollary in the fact that those owning relatively larger extents are compelled to use wage labour. These changes have to be viewed in the contextual situation of a rapidly expanding cash nexus in Madulla. Within the past few years tobacco cultivation has gained in importance as a cash crop; the village entrepreneurial class in particular—because of the capital at its disposal has taken to it in a big way. This has affected the *attam* institution. Paddy land has become a saleable commodity and is increasingly being acquired by the new wealthy. Tobacco cultivation entails attractive wages. It has attacked at the very roots of the *attam* institution, because labour is attracted to work in tobacco farms. Thus the mobilization of *attam* groups on the 'labour-labour' principle becomes rather difficult. This tendency is further encouraged by the increased internal circulation of money in Madulla facilitated by a changing system of land use. Thus the *yala* paddy crop is now being replaced by vegetables for the market. Vegetable cultivation needs less water and ideally suits as a *yala* crop, further it fetches a sizable cash income.<sup>12</sup> The paddy crop itself is to some extent viewed as a cash crop with the increased floor price for paddy under the price guarantee.<sup>13</sup> Hence, the growing importance of wage labour in the Madulla peasant economy.

However, it should not be inferred that in Madulla the disintegration of the *attam* institution is complete. The institution is, in fact, throwing up defences to contain the process. Thus there is in Madulla a tendency for smaller *attam* groups to evolve; these may not be commissioned on a *yaya* basis. There is also a tendency for some tasks (for example, the harvesting and threshing operations) to be performed on an *attam* basis while still other tasks are performed on a wage basis. This in effect implies an integration of the 'labour-labour' and 'labour-money' principles. Similar adjustments in the *attam* institution have been recognized elsewhere. The *attam kontrattu* system referred to by Gunasinghe is a case in point.<sup>14</sup>

12. A more recent development is for the *yala* following of the *yaya*; instead emphasis is placed on tobacco especially as a hen crop. This is more in response to the drought hazard than to changing price levels.

13. The price guarantee has been most utilized in respect of paddy and attempts to ensure a fair price to the producer by framing a floor price. It is assured that the market price is steadied at or about the level set by the 'price guarantee'. At the time of the study the guaranteed price was Rs. 33/- per bushel—this has now been raised to Rs. 40/- per bushel.

14. N. Gunasinghe, (1970) op. cit.

### Implications for Modernization

The above discussion illustrates that the *attam* institution enabled a collective-co-operative approach to *yaya* operations. The disintegration of the system introduces a more individualistic and competitive approach which adversely affects production efficiency. The problems of water management in particular have been discussed by Chambers with reference to large scale irrigation works.<sup>15</sup> In Madulla the non-compliance with the *sirita* rules of irrigation is a further pointer in the same direction.<sup>16</sup> Hence, it is inevitable that agricultural modernization necessitates an approach which permits a group approach to farming. As pointed out by Gooneratne *et al* 'it enables to realize the advantages of large scale operations in a situation of small individual holdings'.<sup>17</sup> Besides the effective implementation of central agricultural policies at the farmers level is made easier by such an approach.

It is the thesis of this paper that 'group production' as referred to in the modern context should not be introduced in a contextual vacuum.<sup>18</sup> The author is of the view that any approach to group production could be placed in a local cultural context by a judicious transfer of the *attam* principles into new group production situations. The group production experiment at Beminiwatte (Kegalle District) carried out by the Agricultural Research and Training Institute laid particular emphasis on the corporate nature of the group in dealing with the several institutions servicing the peasant sector.<sup>19</sup> It is suggested here that further refinement of the concept of group production by defining the internal mechanics of the system in terms of the principles underlining *attam*, will ensure the successful adoption of group farming as a strategy for agricultural development at the village level. It is, therefore, useful to recapitulate on the principles with a view to their transferability.

- (a) the mobilization of the group on a *yaya* basis; where the *yaya* is too extensive to permit such mobilization several sub-groups may be formed. However, the group should be large enough to efficiently perform its corporate functions.

15. R. Chambers, (1976) 'On Substituting Political and Administrative will for Foreign Exchange' in S. W. R. de A Samarasinghe (ed) *Agriculture in the Peasant Sector of Sri Lanka*, Peradeniya, Ceylon Studies Seminar.

16. The non-adherence to the *mulata* principle mentioned above is a case in point. This tennency has been encouraged by the failure of the Cultivation Committee to carry out effectively its supervisory functions.

17. R. W. Gooneratne, et. al, (1977) 'Group Production : a case study'. Agrarian Research and Training Institute, Colombo.

18. R. W. Gooneratne, et. al, (1977) *Ibid.*

19. R. W Gooneratne, et. al, (1977) *Ibid.*

- (b) the collective-co-operative approach to agricultural operations without disturbing the existing tenurial arrangements.<sup>20</sup> It has, of course, to be stressed that in the traditional *attam* system the group functions at the level of efficiency of the least skilled member. Hence, it is necessary to upgrade the performance level of the entire group in the modern context. This is possible by effective servicing of the 'group' with reference to extension services and technical inputs. The possibilities arising from a group approach to farming has been demonstrated by Potter in his study of social and economic change in rural China.<sup>21</sup>
- (c) Work norms may be determined on the 'labour-labour' principle. Its applicability is particularly relevant as a means of realizing non-monetized capital.<sup>22</sup> The weighting attached to labour units and task performance is of relevance here.
- (d) The pooling of production capital is useful and should be encouraged in the group production context.
- (e) The informal leadership roles and the informal rewards system contained in the *attam* institution should be made use of.

### Conclusion

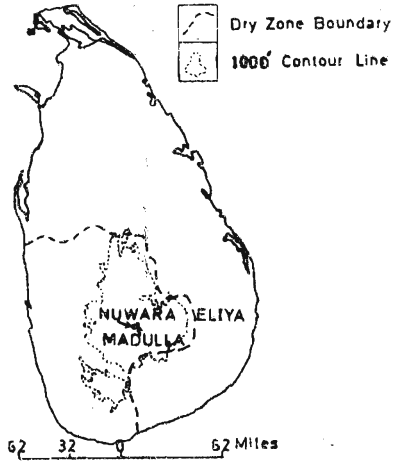
This study brings out that the *attam* institution contains a set of distinctly identifiable principles. These principles enable both the mobilization and the regularization of the supply of labour in a labour intensive system of peasant agriculture. It is also clear that the *attam* institution is subject to disintegration. However, it is useful to transfer the underlining principles of *attam* into new situations demanding a group approach to farming. This will contribute to a more efficient approach to group production while providing an acceptable contextual basis for its implementation.

20. However, when there is high inequality in land ownership, land reform should be a prelude to the application of group production techniques to farming, particularly if the *attam* principles are to be rationally utilised.

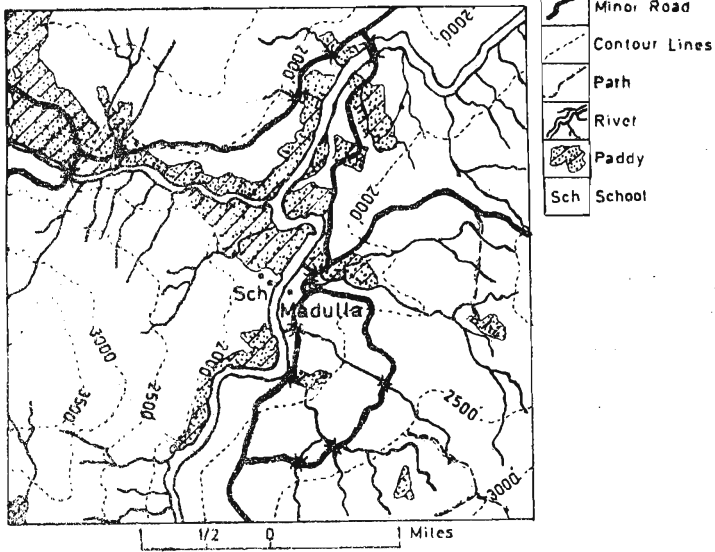
21. J. M., Potter, (1967) 'From Peasants to Rural Proletarians: Social and Economic Change in Rural Communist China' in Potter, J.M et.al *Peasant Society: a reader*.

22. B. Hewavitarane, (1971) op. cit.

### LOCATION



### MADULLA VILLAGE



### POSITIONING OF ROLES

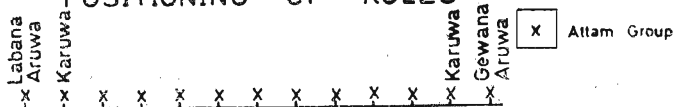


Fig. 1

Drafted by: G. F. De Alwis