The Cultural Dimension of some Agricultural Rituals in Sri Lanka

Prof. H.M.D.R. Herath

Department of Sociology, University of Peradeniya.

Introduction

Sri Lanka is a country with one of the oldest traditional agricultural civilisations in the Asian region. Its history exceeds more than two thousand years and was supported with a well-developed irrigation farming system and culturally-defined specific agricultural practices. From the Anuradhapura period, the Buddhist Central Value System (Herath, 1993) provided the necessary guidance and stability for agricultural production while ensuring sustainable development. Those practices were extended to different agricultural systems in different agro-ecological areas of Sri Lanka. Day-to-day lifestyles, rituals and religious practices, particularly in paddy cultivation, chena cultivation, as well as in upland cultivation were developed harmoniously, leading to social integration, food security and community strength. Those practices helped maintain bio-diversity in the country through conservation while it ensured maintenance of a balanced environmental system in the region in relation to both agricultural practices and environmental protection. Each and every aspect of agricultural practice was associated with Buddhist ethics and cultural values, and this enriched value system base provided guidelines to the leadership of the nation. According to that situation, both culture and agriculture were intertwined in formulating concepts that determined Sri Lankan lifestyle.

Most of the cultural practices and rituals were interconnected to the agricultural resource management practices in the country. If any researcher would analyse ritual idiom and the latent functions of those cultural practices, it may provide necessary understanding about the factors related to social integration, as well as how that economically viable, environmentally sustainable, and culturally adaptable agricultural system prevailed in the country. Furthermore, it may provide the necessary answers to the causes of agricultural problems existing at present as a consequence of the recent green revolution in Sri Lanka.

Objectives

The objectives of the following case studies were to investigate the cultural dimension of agricultural rituals with special reference to irrigation water management and traditional pest control methods in Sri Lanka.

The Research Method

The ritual activities described in this paper are performed mainly in the Dry Zone, Nuwarakalaviya and Kurunegala areas, particularly the components of rituals in Kurunegala and Anuradhapura Districts were closely observed and carefully studied. In Thamankaduwa area also, the same type of ritual activities are performed by the peasants. The researcher also visited all the locations, observed and carefully interviewed *Gamaralas, Anumathiralas* and villagers. In terms of their interpretation, structural features and ritual idiom and symbolic interpretation of the function were very similar except in a few regional differences. The basic characterisations are the same. In this study, focus group method was adopted.

Case Study I

KEM: Its Cultural Aspects and Role as a Strategy for Pest Control and Participatory Management

Introduction

Culturally-defined traditional ritual practices are still being used by some farmers in many parts of Sri Lanka. *Kem* is one of those practices. The word "*kem*" is probably derived from the Sanskrit word "Kshema", which denotes relief from difficulty. It also suggests an immediate solution to a problem in human life. All rituals represent some sort of religious belief to those who practise them, and may have some magical component. Furthermore, there may be some sort of scientifically valid reason of the ritual. In that sense, many, agricultural rituals in Sri Lanka are associated with one or more aspect of magical, religious, scientific or social significance, and they are closely inter-related to the lifestyle of the community. The practices of rituals present opportunities or signify an important social integration role among rural people.

***Kem* as a natural method of pest control**

During the last three or four decades, rice farmers have been using pesticides on their rice crops to control pests. However, a few farmers adopt only "*kem*" as a means of controlling 'rice pests'. They use *kem* since it is a natural

and inexpensive method that minimises cash expenses of farmers and hence it saves money while minimising environmental pollution and the destruction of other organisms. Also the natural enemies such as predators and parasites of rice pests are not affected by the use of *kem*. At present, due to escalation of prices of pesticides, there is a greater interest on *kem* methods to save the crops from pest damage.

The following description indicates how *kem* methods are practiced. Many rice farmers in Kuliyapitiya practice some *kem* methods, and one of them is presented below:

Ritualistic Method (*Kem*) called *Hirima Pideema*

In many dry zone areas, the farmers transplant rice seedlings to establish their rice crops. About one month after transplanting, the rice seedlings are affected by rice stem borers. The stem borers lay their egg masses on rice leaves and the larvae, on hatching, enter the stem and damage the inner portion. The affected tillers fail to produce a panicle that bear rice grains.

The traditional (*kem*) method used by the farmers to control this damage is called *Hirima Pideema*. *Hirima* refers to the 'sun' and '*pideema*' is worship. As soon as the presence of stem borer moths is observed in rice field, the news is transmitted to the other farmers. The leader of the village arranges to collect unboiled (raw) paddy from each household. Early on a Sunday morning, before 5.00 a.m. farmers gather and select a location for the ritual. They make a small "*pahan pela*". A *pahan pela* is constructed by the use of sticks and it is decorated with tender coconut leaves. The farmers pound the collected raw paddy and using coconut milk, milked rice prepared. The "*Kapurala*" chants the milked rice, and places it on a *mal bulath thattuwa* (where flowers and betel leaves are kept on a plate). The *mal bulath thattuwa* is kept in the *pahan pela* and all farmers pray to the sun god and ask him to prevent pest damage to their rice crop. Finally, each owner of a rice field gets some milked rice, which is made into small balls and they are thrown at random over the field. Then all the farmers clap together and go away. Once this ritual is performed, no human being visits the fields at least for three days. The milked rice attracts birds and as no human beings are around the birds freely move around in the field, and during this period they can feed on stem borer moths. The farmers believe that this ritual is a powerful spiritual influence in control the rice pests.

Functions of the ritual

i. Collective Action: The participation of all the farmers in a religious spirit, to prevent or eliminate a common problem, unifies the people. Any form of development programme should organise people, through participatory techniques, and get each one to contribute towards the achievement of a goal. In the adoption of this *kem* method, the collection of paddy from all rice farmers is a community approach to ensure participation. After collection of paddy, processing, cleaning and preparations of milked rice provides opportunity for team work. Thus, collective action to solve a common problem is ensured. In the name of a ritual spirit, the farmers perform their tasks collectively. This demands unanimous agreement, close relationships and the collective approval of the community. Furthermore, the opportunities for making individual contributions make goodwill and cooperation possible within the community.

ii. Latent functions: After enchanting the milked rice, the farmers carry small amounts of milked rice to distribute them in the field evenly. This attracts birds to spread out in the fields. The birds while looking for milked rice pick up and swallow stem borer moths. This is promotion of opportunities for natural pest control and it is ensured by broadcasting balls of milked rice.

After distribution of milked rice balls in the field, the farmers clap together. The noise made together can be heard far away and reaches the birds. After clapping the farmers refrain from visiting the field for three days. Thus, there is a period long enough for the birds to engage in hunting stem borer moths. This is a perfectly workable natural, biological pest control method.

If the farmers do not include a spiritual component, such a practice cannot be perpetuated adequately within a social system. If a few farmers were reluctant and did not cooperate, inevitably areas would remain to serve as breeding grounds for the stem borers. Thus, to ensure participation of each individual, the spiritual component (*Pahan Pela, Chanting*, etc.) becomes adequately attractive. Secondly, if a few farmers only were aware of the scientific aspects of this act, then the farmers may not act collectively, but practice them individually. In such an event, collective participation would be disrupted. Thus perhaps deliberately, the scientific basis for the ritual would have been not explained to people so that it could remain as just a ritualistic approach in a community.

Application of natural pest control methods

In 1988, in an action research programme, the researcher used traditional methods to revive the spirit of participation among, people in a community. In this project, the researcher's objectives were to identify:

i. the role of participatory rural development approaches to motivate people for the process of common decision making.

ii. how the natural pest control methods are being utilised and supported by various means, including those rituals associated with defined traditions, and

iii. those practices that help reduce expenditure in purchasing pesticides.

This study revealed that during the last two years, the farmers in Kuliyapitiya and Anuradhapura areas have been using natural pest control methods with very encouraging results.

Case Study II

Festival of Ploughing (*Vap Magula*): A Traditional Ceremony Associated with Ploughing and its Role in Irrigation Management and Social Integration

Introduction

Festival of ploughing (*Vap Magula*) (Premarathne, 1990) is a collectively-performed paddy land ploughing ceremony, that had been practised by Sri Lankan farmers throughout several centuries, since virtually all the paddy land-owing families participated in *Vap Magula*; this ceremony is a culturally developed pattern of social integration, water management, in an atmosphere of mutual help, and co-operation, leading to harmonious relationships.

Vap Magula has a festival function; but manifest functions and latent functions are very exciting and meaningful and they can be effectively used to elicit people's co-operation in present-day rural development programmes.

***Vap Magula* as a cultural festival**

In the traditional Sinhalese society, rice production, was the primary and the most important agricultural production activity, while its success was determined by adequate and proper irrigation. A well-developed inland water tanks system connected with extensive canal networks provided irrigation water for rice farming. There were a large number of dams across the main rivers and streams to divert water to the farming localities. To make the best use of available water resources and to ensure judicious water management, the rules at that time, the Sinhalese Kings, used strategic means. The kings took leadership in ensuring seasonal festivals, and they were started on auspicious days. The festivals were organised by divisional-level chieftains in all parts of the country. At the village level, the local leaders organised the festivals. All the activities of the festivals were planned, and the astrologers, farmers, priests, local leaders, musicians, singers, had to perform certain activities, and this ensured interaction, co-operation, harmony and a team spirit.

In ancient Sri Lanka, a village was established adjoining a reservoir and tracts of paddy fields irrigated by it. Since every village had a substantial extent of paddy land, a *Vap Magula* festival was organised and conducted in every village. The auspicious date and time is prescribed by the village astrologer and the village leaders and the farmers get together to work out the details and assign, delegate or accept responsibility for tasks. The main tasks are to get down all the trained buffaloes, ploughs, ropes, sticks, yokes and other required tools. At least two days before *Vap Magula*, irrigation water is diverted to paddy fields by the water controller assisted by the farmers and the bunds are sealed to retain the water let into the fields. The food for the people and animals is estimated and prepared to be served on the *Vap Magula* day. Early in the morning of the *Vap Magula*, the buffaloes and ploughs are brought to the field, harnessed and kept ready to start work on time.

Very early on the morning of *Vap Magula* day, festival food, such as, milked rice, oil cakes, and other traditionally-accepted delicious food is prepared, to be served to all those attending the festival. Before the auspicious time, all the farmers accompanied by members of their families assemble close to the paddy field.

The leader of the village, or the most respected individual, will lead religious functions, before the (*Nekata*) auspicious time. In the meanwhile, experienced farmers harness ploughs to the buffaloes and be in readiness to start work after the leader starts ploughing, at the auspicious movement. Soon after religious activities, the plough men, are served with milked rice and oil cakes. The leader will get into the paddy field and drive the first two buffalo units to which probably the best plough in the village is harnessed. After the leader starts ploughing, the other plough-men will start work. Sometimes, there will be about 25 buffalo units working in the field, and perhaps more. Once the work is started, the plough men keep on doing their work, and after a while, others experienced in ploughing, take charge of the plough, allowing those who worked for a while to rest and enjoy some food.

If any farmer is unable to attend the festival due to illness or any other problem, his/her field will also be ploughed, as a gesture of good will.

On the *Vap Magula* day, lunch is normally prepared collectively by women and the food thus prepared is called "*Muthettuwa*". Muthettuwa will be carefully packed and carried to the field before noon. At lunch time, the animals are led to a shady place where they are given food and

water. People enjoy their lunch, and after a few minutes rest, they start ploughing once again till evening. In the evening, the draft animals are bathed and taken to the shed or paddocks. In some villages, dinner is also prepared collective and the whole group enjoys the dinner. If all the fields had not been ploughed, they continue to work on the following days, till every field has been ploughed.

Vap Magula symbolises the beginning of the farming operations for the season. It brings the people together and provides opportunities for offering and receiving help. This spirit pervades the festival throughout and the farmers will continue to help each other, till every individual has transported the processed harvest to dwelling.

Latent functions of the festival

The *Vap Magula* is a means of pooling resources for a common purpose. The buffalo owners provide their trained buffaloes; each and every plough in the village is available and people use their energy to ensure that every field (*Liyadda*) is prepared for the season. The walking in mud under the hot sun mellows down to a tolerable level and may even be made fun. The plough man who was working under the hot sun is relieved of work by another individual who takes charge of the plough, to allow the tired one to rest for a while. Sociologically, *Vap Magula* is a significant event since it contributes to social integration, and creates a spirit of cooperation in the younger generations: it is a matter of pride for one to be able to plough well, and perhaps as well as be an experienced plough man. Thus, it is a stimulant that motivates the relatively younger individuals to master the art of ploughing and prove his competence, to be seen by those around. The psychological stimulus and drive offered by *Vap Magula*, is an incentive, since it is an opportunity to display one's skills.

Social integration and caste relations

Most Sri Lankan villagers have multi-caste relationships. Even at present, in the rural areas, caste norms and values are important, within the central value system. In normal day-to-day life, caste relations serve certain functions on certain occasions, such as in marriage, puberty and funerals. Furthermore, the people do not associate themselves in exchanging food or eating together. Still there are factions due to caste relations. But on Vap Magula day, even the low-caste individuals can enjoy themselves. They become audience, listening to chanting of poems and songs by those of the superior "*Goigama*" caste; and they also become guests, receiving food and drinks.

Thus, *Vap Magula* offers opportunities to unify the village. Furthermore, the peasants discuss their labour exchange plans for the season while sharing food and drink together. It can be said that the ploughing ceremony (*Vap Magula*) promotes social integration in a multi-caste village.

Impact on water management practices

The *Vap Magula* provides an orientation in handling the management of previous irrigation water, the life blood of a hydraulic society. If different farmers were to start ploughing on different days of individual choice, canal losses and associated leakages of water would be enormous. However, if all the farmers were to plough, harrow and level all the fields together, losses and wastage of irrigation water could be minimised. This collective land preparation activity ensures that water losses are less than 25%, which is a substantial saving. Often, in land preparation for growing of rice crop, second ploughing is done about two weeks after the first ploughing, and throughout the period between these two ploughing the soil has to be kept saturated with water. Then an aerobic decomposition of organic matter takes place, leading to the formation of ammonium nitrogenous compounds that are relatively more stable in the wet soil and easily absorbed by the rice plant. If the first ploughing has been completed in the shortest possible time, it synchronises extremely well with the secondary land preparation activities. Thus, *Vap Magula* is a very valuable means of promoting the most efficient use of available water.

***Vap Magula* promotes collective farming**

Thirdly, *Vap Magula* provides an opportunity to strengthen collective action in farming. Since it brings people and farming resources together and facilitates greater interaction, the farmers tend to discuss and arrive at collective decisions. For example, the farmers decided on growing a single rice variety, and those who have seed paddy in excess of their needs, offer the extra amount available, to neighbours who may need it.

Thus in a single *yaya* (tract of paddy), farmers tend to grow a single variety of paddy. This ensures uniformity in growth duration, and thus, flowering and maturity are synchronised facilitating collective harvesting, threshing and processing grain. The other activities, such as, sowing nurseries, transplanting, manuring and irrigation are also synchronised on a uniform schedule of activities.

Cultivation of a single variety within the narrowest length of time period ensures uniform growth and virtually identical growth stages

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(such as tillering) and this minimised crop failures due to pest and diseases. Since weeding and filling vacancies are also done within a restricted time period, and again in a collective manner, the farmers can ensure a fairly uniform stand of the crop, which helps obtain a better yield.

Vap Magula sets in motion a trend for neighbour farmers to undertake collective decision making. *Vap Magula* is often decided at a "kanna meeting", where farmers discuss the activities for the forthcoming season. A well-conducted *Vap Magula* enables pleasant memories, and this induces farmers to attend the next *kanna* meeting, so that the *Vap Magula* of the next season could also be successfully conducted.

The impact of *nekata* (Auspicious time)

In the traditional Sri Lanka society, people considered the auspicious time as the most important point of time to start work. Once work is started at an auspicious time, people concentrate their energies on finishing the work. Particularly peasants who depend on agriculture, a mechanism to control procrastination and ensuring a strong motivation are critical needs. This vital ingredient is furnished by the *Vap Magula* ceremony.

Application of *Vap Magula* in rural development

In 1978, a movement called "National Heritage" was to create a re-awakening in the agricultural sector. In a dry-zone colonisation scheme, Minipe, I served as the sociologist in this project and interpreted the value of *Vap Magula* in terms of the sociological approach. This interpretation provided a new vision for the project and the farmers involved themselves in the water management system in this project, entirely on a voluntary basis. The participating farmers were able to reap good harvests with the least wastage of irrigation water and their profits improved. As a result of the initial success, community participation became the dominant feature in farming activities.

Subsequently, several rural development programmes started using the principles and approaches of the *Vap Magul* festival. Furthermore, in colonisation schemes such as Gal Oya, Mahaweli and some others, the community participatory method was used to design rural development programmes.

Conclusion

The majority of cultural festivals and ceremonies have multiple meanings that can be surfaced, examined and used. These meaningful factors do not exist in isolation, or as a superficial sociological phenomenon. They are complex and the complexity is due to scientific, religious, social and magical factors intertwined and mixed into single event.

Our responsibility and role should be to identify the principles and lessons contained in them, to identify their manifest or latent functions, to assess their implications for the present and future development needs of the societies.

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