

Unique religious and cultural practices as evident in the Kandyan village of Meemure

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Abstract

Sri Lanka is a country made up of diverse ethnoreligious and sociocultural groups. Certain minority groups among them have distinct religious practices and belief systems due to their isolation from mainstream society throughout history. Meemure, a village in the Central Province of Sri Lanka, is one such village that has a unique culture which is distinctly different in several aspects from mainstream cultural practices. The villagers of Meemure are believed to be descendants of King Ravana and his *Yaksha gothra*, or the Yaksha tribe. The principle deity, or *deviyo* of the village is Bandara deviyo, considered the grandfather of King Ravana. Many of their folktales are based on the stories of king Ravana. *Yakkama* and *Adukku* rituals are distinctive forms of religious worship among the Meemure villagers which were done according to the traditional knowledge for all the village deities. The main objective of this research was to find out and to describe unique religious and cultural practices including religious performances, rituals and belief systems as they are practised in Meemure. Members of the oldest families in Meemure were selected for a questionnaire survey. In-depth interviews were conducted with eight villagers who were knowledgeable about religious practices in order to obtain further information. The study found that the assimilation with the mainstream society particularly among the younger members of the families, and a tendency to reject traditional religious knowledge and belief system has had a pronounced effect on the valued traditional religious performances. Thus, these distinctive belief systems and performances are at risk of disappearing, therefore must be studied, documented and preserved for the future.

Key Words: *Adukku Pujawa*, Belief Systems, Meemure, Religious practices, *Yakkama*

Introduction

Meemure is situated in the Knuckles Mountain range in the Kandy District. It is located by the Meemure Oya surrounded by a ring of mountains (Forest Department, 2016). According to Ranaweera, villagers in this region have been living there for about 2500 years (Ranaweera, 2013, p 1). Thus the beginning of this specific community's culture goes back to prehistoric times (Karunaratna, 2013, p 39). The inhabitants of the village of Meemure are a unique group living isolated from mainstream society. Minimal assimilation with outsiders has ensured that their cultural characteristics remain distinct from other practices seen elsewhere in the region.

The name *Meemure* is said to have several origins. One belief is that it is derived from the fact that the village is abundant in mee trees (*Madhuca*

longifolia), which remains a reality even today (Forest Department, 2016). According to folklore, the honey, *mee* in Sinhala, that was collected from the Meemure area had been another reason behind the name *Meemure*. Another belief is that the terms *mih* + *mure*, meaning *protecting the earth*, have formed the name *Meemure*.

According to the villagers, the history of Meemure is based on myths and legends connected with the Laggala, or Lakgala mountain. Lakgala is a giant monolith-like projection situated a kilometre north of the Meemure village of a nearly 90 degree angle (Socio Environmental Foundation, 2006). In ancient times this rock was known as *Lanka Pabbatha* or *Lanka giri*. These names as well as Lakgala means *The Rock of Lanka*" in Sinhala (Ranasinghe, 1955). The inhabitants of Meemure even believe that the name '*Lanka*' is derived from the term *Lakgala* (Lokubandara, 1959, p. 8). According to the legend of Meemure, the Lakgala rock is considered the Kingdom of Lankapura, King Ravana's capital. They believe that Ravana had one of his abodes on its peak, surrounded by the Kingdom of Lankapura (Pillai, 1993). Lakgala was also used as a device like a sundial to calculate the time in his kingdom. It is also said that Ravana hid Princess Sita, the Queen of Rama near this rock. Moreover, the villagers of Meemure believe that Lakgala is the place where King Ravana flew his air chariot, the *Dhandumonara*, an ancient glider. The triangular shape of the rock is ideal for such an operation. The *Dhandumonaru* was his official plane which makes use of to travel and to capture capture Sita from India. In addition, Meemure villagers believe that this area is a *Yaksha* settlement in ancient times. Even today they believe in the *Yaksha* guardians of king Ravana that protect their village (Lokubandara, 1959). While there are much folklore related with this story it is also believed that Meemure and another villagers around the Lakgala Mountain are the inheritance of King Ravana's *Yaksha* tribe.

In addition to folk stories, the folksongs of Meemure have also described these incidences well. These songs are well known among the older generation in Meemure. Some are as follows.

*"Usata usata penuna mathala gala
Sathara paththa sassa wani Lakgala
Deviyange wimanakdo methane gala
Rama hata maga yedune lak gala"*

*"Satharas pokunu sadila atha laka muduna
Nawoth diyapathak thirihan wei kiyana
Ravana rajunge wasaya ethana
Sirilaka muduna bala saki kalunika pokuna"*

*"Liyagomuwa pera sita wev banda la
Sama saren ena paruwath binda la
Ravana udha madata wedi sera aseema la
Ilmasa andura Meemure laka dumbala"*

According to these verses, when Prince Rama was seeking the place that Princess Sita was hidden, the Lakgala mountain had shown him a path to her. The second verse also says that the Lakgala mountain is the kingdom of the King Ravana. The third verse states that the war between prince Rama and king Ravana had taken place in this region.

Meemure was known to be inhabited since the era of King Wimaladharmasuriya I (1542-1604). A Vedda named Beduruwa had followed bees to collect honey from Maraka, a village in Kandy District, to Meemure. Here he had discovered an area in which life was easy as it was full of natural resources. Thus he had requested the Meemure village from king and had settled in the village, hunting and collecting honey for the palace as well. Sometime afterwards, two men from the Poddalgoda village, also in the Kandy district named Herath Hami and Riti Hami had come upon the village while hunting. Again, seeing the rich natural resources in the Meemure area, they killed Beduruwa Vedda to own the land. Thereafter they had settled there with their families.

The culture that has been developed based on their interactions with the environment from ancient times was affected by the National Heritage and Wilderness Areas Act No. 3. In order to ensure the sustainability of the forest; the area above 1500m in the Knuckles Range were declared reserves in 1873 and was declared as a conservation forest in April 2000 (Forest Ordinance No 16 of 1907- last amendment in 2009). Consequently the villagers had to abandon their traditional *Chena* cultivation and to rely on paddy cultivation. Also in the year 2009 the Knuckles Range along with the Peak Wilderness forest area was declared a World Heritage Natural Site in 2009 (Forest Department, 2016). Therefore the close relationship between the knuckles reservation and the villagers around was broken down and consequently the traditional knowledge of their ancestors that had passed through generations and had made Meemure culturally unique began to disappear (Ranaweera, 2013, p 2).

According to the forestry policy approved by the government in 1995, all the forest areas must be managed in a sustainable manner respecting the traditional rights, cultural values and religious beliefs of the people living in and adjacent to forest areas (Forest Department, 2016). However, the relationship between the culture of Meemure villagers and their dependence on the environment was little understood. The declaration intended to ban *Chena* cultivation and other unsustainable activities totally (Wickramasinghe et al, N. D). However, the practices of *Chena* cultivation among the Meemure villages was totally dependent on traditional knowledge, and thus cannot be defined as an unsustainable activity. For instance, instead of using the same land for cultivation according to the practices of *chena* cultivation, the villagers of Meemure had a system of shifting the cultivation circularly, which, as a result, left the once cultivated land for about 10 years after each harvesting, which protected the fertility of the soil (Ananda et al, 2014).

Decisions regarding conservation are always made, giving emphasis to long standing benefits, welfare and wellbeing of the whole community.

However, conservation policies had an immediate and adverse effect on the income of the people who depended on the environment (Bandara, 2009, p 197). The Meemure villagers not only lost their income, but their culture and traditional life style has also been severely affected.

The religious practices of the villagers of Meemure are closely connected with the agricultural practices. Most of the rituals are performed after harvesting periods. The prohibition of the *Chena* cultivation has affected toward their whole cultural system and now only the older generation hold last link to the entire knowledge system. Thus these distinctive and valuable cultural traits must be studied and documented in order to preserve this knowledge, which will be especially important for decision making by governing bodies in the future. Thus the present study aimed to identify and describe valued religious and cultural practices including religious performances, rituals and belief systems in Meemure village before disappearing these from the hands of the older generation of the village.

Methodology

Study Area

The village of Meemure is located in the Central province, in the Kandy district, at N 07.43333⁰ and E 08.83333⁰. It belongs to the Ududumbara Divisional Secretariat and to Meemure Grama Niladari (GN) Division. Meemure is 229 km from Colombo, and it is 38 km to the closest town, Hunnasgiriya. Its isolation is indicated in the fact that there is only one form of public transport, a van that plys from Meemure to Hunnasgiriya at 5.00 am and back to Meemure from Hunnasgiriya at 1.00 pm.

The total population according to the census in 2011 in Meemure GN Division consists of 331 people belonging to 115 families (Primary data collection Report, 2011). All of them are Sinhalese by ethnicity and Buddhists by religion. The research was conducted from January 2014 to March 2015.

Sample Size

From the 115 families, 50 families were selected randomly as a sample for the questionnaire survey. One member from one family that was lived in Meemure for long time was selected. In depth interviews were also conducted with eight people who were knowledgeable about the Meemure village, culture and religious practices for further data collection. A focus group discussion was conducted with the group of 10 villagers of an age range from 35 to 67 in order to identify their religious beliefs and behaviours as well as to acquire information on their annual religious practices. Data gathered through questionnaire survey were analysed using SPSS data analysing package (16.0 for Windows).

Overview of practices and rituals

All the Meemure villagers are Buddhists. The majority claimed that they observed *sil* on *poya* day and *pansil* every day at home. They have deep faith in the Buddha and all the important work begins after lighting an oil lamp for the

Buddha. When a person goes out at night they chant *partita sutra* to protect themselves from ghosts or ancestral spirits that can harm them. Their main religious practices and rituals are linked with the deities as they believe their village was blessed and protected by deities. They believe that if someone says something negative about the village something bad will happen to him or her. Villagers have many examples for this. For example, they say that the village is far away from the town and one has to face many difficulties to reach Meemure: After reaching the village if someone says, "why did I come here? I wasted my time, there is nothing important to see..." She or he will surely get cursed.

According to the inhabitants of Meemure, king Ravana and his strongest *yaksha sena aihma* (souls of Yaksha armies) were there to protect the village. They have very strong fear of, and faith in the Lakgala Mountain where they believe the souls of these armies live. The belief in such supernatural beings has resulted in the development of specific religious practices and rituals among the villagers.

The villagers of Meemure believe in two main *devivaru* (deities). One is a *Gambara deviyo* (the deity who owns the village) called *Bandara deviyo* and *Kande deviyo*. According to their beliefs, *Pulathishi rishi* (the teacher of King Ravana and also said to be the grandfather of King Ravana) become *Bandara deviyo* later. *Kande Bandara deviyo* was a commander of *Katharamagama deviyo* when he was a human and later become a *deviyo* in Meemure. Others are considered *pariwara devivaru* (attendants). They are the *Kahatagaha kumbure aluth deviyo*, *Gange Bandara deviyo*, *Abutha ha thunbale deviyo* and the *Wanni bandara deva hath kattuwu* (Group of Deities).

In the Meemure village many of the *devivaru* and *yaksha pirivara* (groups of Yakshas) are considered supernatural beings who were once human, which is similar in many societies. *Kahatagaha kumbure aluth deviyo* was once a human and then has become a *deviyo* in the Meemure village. As a human, he was *Kahatagaha Kumbure Rala*, a headman who lived in the village who owned the *Kahatagaha* paddy field. According to the legend, when the harvesting season started he had invited the villagers to take part in the reaping of the harvest. However, the villagers had not participated in the harvest on that day. *Kahatagaha Kumbure Rala* was extremely disappointed by this, which led to his death some days later. There are many signs in every day experience that are associated with powerful people or loved ones, and even after his or her death those signs might create the feeling that the dead person is still somehow present. Meemure villagers too had experienced these signs after *Kahatagaha Kumbure Rala* died. As a result they have raised him to the status of a deity and had begun to worship him.

Other supernatural occurrences that the villagers of Meemure believe in appear after interventions of gods in human affairs. *Abutha saha thunbale deviyo* is one of the gods that intervene in human activities in Meemure, showing the path for the hunters to the games.

The deities were ranked according to the power they displayed and to the extent to which the deity has intervened in human affairs. In Meemure

Bandara deviyo occupies the highest position, as he is considered the most powerful deity. Second is the Kale deviyo and third is the Kahatagaha Kumbure Aluth Deviyo. Though other groups of deities were worshipped as secondary deities the main prayers and offerings go to these three main deities.

Yakkama Natuma – the weapon cleaning ritual

There is a temple dedicated to the *devivaru* named Kande devalaya in the middle of the village and beside the Meemure Oya. This temple is said to be older than 700 years. There are various kinds of weapons in this Kande devalaya that belong to the *deviyan*. Such as swords, bows, arrows, knives, shield. These weapons were offered by villagers to fulfil their vows that they had made in difficult periods. Those weapons have arranged in order to the rank that each *deviyo* has. The *Yakkama* is directly connected with their weapon cleaning ritual. The *Yakkama* is performed in the month of April.

Preparations for the *Yakkama* are made by the adults in the village. They collect money, rice and other requirements from all the families

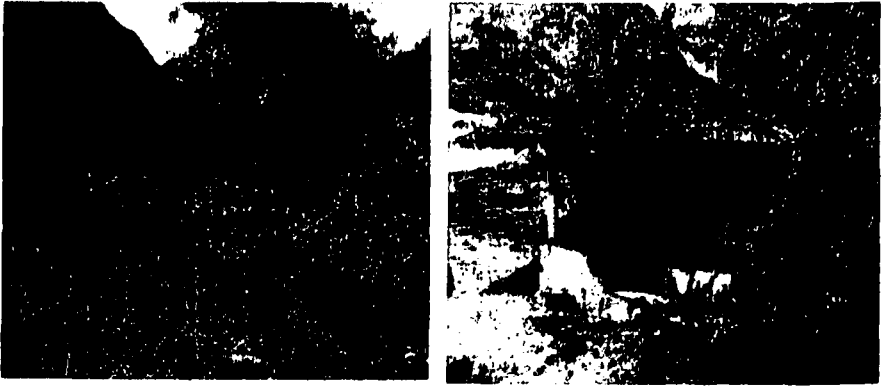


Figure 2: Kande devalaya in Meemure

for the ritual. They give sheaf of betel leaves to the *Kapurala*, a person who works in the temple of the deities) as an invitation for *Yakkama* ritual. Then *Kapurala* comes on the auspicious time with all the equipment and with other *Kapuralas* that have invited by him for the *Yakkama* ritual.

The *Yakkama* ritual starts with the *Thel ambulgame mangalyaya* or the anointing of oil ceremony during the *Sinhala aluth avurudda*, or the Sinhala New Year), which has a fixed, auspicious time. The *Yakkama* ritual begins at this time. First the *Kapurala* enters the Dewalaya and carries all the weapons to the Mee Oya for the *Nanumura mangalyaya*. The *Kapurala* continuously recites

propitiatory stanzas calling for protection and redress while cleaning the weapons. Then the Kapurala applies oil as well as Nanu, a herbal mixture, on the weapons and on the heads of the villagers. Cleaned weapons are brought back to the Dewalaya. Here, the Kapurala perform an act of a warrior fighting in the war, using all the weapons one by one to perform this act. Next he finishes the ritual by appealing for the protection of the villagers, their crops and their cattle. Villagers too fulfil their vows to deities that they have made during periods of ailments.

Adukku Pujawa - Offering of the first harvest to the deities

Another fundamental religious practice that *Meemure* villagers perform is "*Adukku pujawa*". *Adukku pujawa* is a ritual of thanksgiving for the past agricultural season and an offering to seek blessings for the new cultivation cycle ahead. The first portion of the harvest is set aside to be offered at the *Adukku pujawa*. After the *Yala* and *Maha* seasons five or six families prepare for the *Adukku pujawa*, and gather to one house on a preassigned day with all the requirements. There are two main rituals in the *Adukku pujawa* where the new harvest is offered to the deities in two places. One is in the house called "*Gedara Adukkuwa*" and other one is prepared in the nearest forest, called the "*Kale Adukkuwa*".

At first the *Kale Adukkuwa* is prepared for the *devivaru* only by men in the nearest forest. Thus all men wear white, also covering their heads and mouths with a white cloth, before they enter the nearest forest. They bring all the requirements such as rice, vegetables, pots, betel, arecanut flowers, pestle, mortar, spices, and knives in to the forest, and arrange a suitable place for the ritual. They make two fire places and keep pots of rice on the fire at the same time. These pots are left on the fire until the water is evaporated. They then offer one pot of rice first to *Bandara deviyo* and other pot of rice to *Kande deviyo*. *Kiri roti*, *hath maluwa* and a *kiri pani hodda* are prepared for the offering. Offerings kept on a *yahana*, or altar, made of sticks and decorated with betel and arecanut flowers.

For the *Adukku pujawa* they prepare *kiri roti* or *kiri kawum*. It is made with rice flour and coconut milk. This mixture is poured on to *roti kabala*, or the plate use to make *rotti*, to make *kiri roti*. *Kiripani hodda*, made with coconut milk and sugar, is made to eat with *kiri roti*. Small amount of ginger, pepper and garlic are added to it. *Hath maluwa* (a curry made of seven vegetables) is one of the common dishes they prepare on special occasions to eat with rice, *kiri roti*, *madu thalapa* and *kurakkan thalapa*. It is made with pumpkin, ash pumpkin, breadfruit, young jakfruit, ash plantain, melon and cucumber. These vegetables are mixed with spices and cooked in small amount of coconut milk. Only men were allowed to prepare *kiri roti*, *kiripani hodda* and the *hath maluwa*.

After their preparation the Kapurala offers rice, *kiri roti*, *kiripani hodda* and the *hath maluwa* to each *deviyo* such as *Bandara deviyo*, *Kande deviyo*, *Kahatagaha kumbure deviyo*, *Abutha saha thun bale deviyo*, *Mangara deviyo*, *Wannibandara deviyo* and other *devivaru* associated with them. Then

the Kapurala asks for the protection of the villagers, for their farming and for their cattle from the deities.

Afterwards, all those who participated in the ritual eat the rest of the food and go to their houses to prepare the *gedara adukkuwa*. *Gedara adukkuwa* is offered in the evening of the same day. It is also prepared by men. *Yahana* is made inside of the house. All the food that was prepared for the *Kale adukkuwa* is prepared in the house for *gedara adukkuwa*. The *Kapurala* offers this food for deities and request the protection for all the villagers and for their farming. Then all the men share the foods after the ritual. Females are not allowed to eat these foods. Food is prepared separately in another place in the house for them.

Conclusion

The traditional practices of Meemure were preserved among the older generation without change for centuries; the traditional knowledge their forefathers brought to the village has adapted to its natural environment have engendered their unique and rare culture.

Many cultures have undergone extensive changes in recent times. While some cultures have been able to adapt to changing circumstances, there is not much evidence of this in the village of Meemure. In many aspects the culture of Meemure is disappearing. Man made laws such as the prohibition of *Chena* cultivation in 1988 have also brought about sudden changes that have adversely affected the centuries-old practices. Since this ban, the villagers have depended solely on paddy cultivation, with the religious practices they performed for *Chena* cultivation now being performed after each paddy harvesting season. The traditional methods of the religious practices and the materials they use for the rituals have also had to change due to the transformation of the cultivation.

According to Lindstrom et al (2012), land usage pattern in the village of Meemure has remained unchanged with 84% forest cover in 1984 and 83% in 2003 (Lindstrom et al, 2012. p 685). Based on this result the prohibition of *Chena* cultivation in order to ensure the sustainability of the forest area cannot be justified as there has not been a difference in the forest coverage in the periods they practiced *chena* cultivations (1984-1988) and in the periods of time after its abandonment (1989- 2003).

Chena cultivation was the main subsistence of the people of Meemure. All the cultural traits including religious practices are linked with *Chena* cultivation. Furthermore, urbanization, globalization, cultural and social change have affected the villagers' belief systems. With the advancement of science and technology a transfer of experience from the natural to the supernatural can be observed. Thus the new generation begins to accept more natural phenomena than the supernatural. The younger members among the inhabitants of Meemure do not display much knowledge about their traditional religious and cultural practices or their history. They seem to prefer new technologies and evidence based phenomena.

The unique culture of Meemure is rapidly disappearing. As the older generation holds the last link to the storehouse of indigenous knowledge

systems, we are at risk of losing an entire cultural heritage very soon. Thus for now, cultural data must be gathered as much as possible from villages such as Meemure. New technology can be used for the preservation of their culture. Making documentaries is perhaps a will be one of the best options to fulfil this purpose. But we cannot capture for preservation in a museum or a lab all the manifestations and nuances of culture which is a dynamic, hugely variable phenomenon. As Gunawardena (2009) points out, preserving the communities as a living reservoir of culture is the best methods that can do for the protection of the cultures like Meemure.

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