



**A STUDY ON SOCIOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF
'KOHOMBĀ YAK KANKĀRI SHĀNTHIKARMAYA'**

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ABSTRACT

'Shānthiya' mainly refers to mental relief or blessing and 'karmaya' refers to activity. By the true sense of the word, 'shānthikarma' is an accumulation of artistic activities which was held with the aim of blessings of communities. When considering Sri Lankan traditional culture, 'shānthikarma' performs a prominent place as an Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). There are various forms of 'shānthikarma' related to different geographical locations such as Upcountry (Kandyan), Lowcountry, and Sabaragamuwa provinces in Sri Lanka. 'Kohombā yak kankāri shānthikarmaya' is considered the culmination of the Upcountry dancing tradition of Sri Lanka. Accordingly, the main objective of this study was to analyze the 'Kohombā yak kankāri shānthikarmaya' based on the Sociological aspects. The importance of 'Kohombā yak kankāri shānthikarmaya' as a productive and protective magic (Abhichāra), Relationship between the concept of 'Kohombā' and Animism, the concept of Sacred and Profane based on 'Kohombā yak kankāri rituals, the importance of 'Kohombā yak kankāri shānthikarmaya' to maintain social solidarity, collectiveness, and stability of the society have been analyzed with Sociological perspectives in the article.

KEYWORDS: 'Kohombā yak kankāri shānthikarmaya', Productive magic, Protective Magic, Animism, Sacred and Profane.

01. Introduction

Religion, magic, and rituals are significant phenomena that can be identified in society from the history of human civilization. They imply a magnificent identity in the human behavior system associated with cultures. At the beginning of human civilization, humans shaped their behavioral patterns parallel to nature, and natural phenomena such as heavy rainfalls, storms, and thunder often created fear, uncertainty, and curiosity in the human mind. They attributed supernatural power to these natural phenomena that were beyond their control and Anthropologists showed that various rites and rituals were created as a result of this supernatural power ascriptive process. Belief systems that were initiated in primary societies gradually evolved into traditional societies with various changes and forms. Over human civilization, many communities have developed their own traditions, rituals, and methods related to different fields such as agriculture, medicine, irrigation systems, architecture, health, and education in harmony with local ecosystems and nature. When considering Sri Lankan traditional society, ‘*Shānthikarma*’ are unique behavioral patterns blended with various forms of beliefs, rites, and rituals that were performed in order to achieve various collective objectives related to their day-to-day lives such as protecting and enhancing the harvests, achieving prosperity, protecting from epidemics and expecting good health, and protecting from bad evils. According to *Tittapajjala Gurunnanse* (teacher), ‘*Shānthikarma*’ is a Sanskrit term, and ‘*Santi*’ (blessing), and ‘*Karma*’ (activity), infer the ‘blessing-invoking rite’. In Sinhala, this becomes ‘*set kam kirima*’, *Set* (blessing), *kam* (activity), *kirima* (doing) infer the ‘doing a blessing invoking rite’ (Walcott, 1978). ‘*Shānthikarma*’ which is related to the traditional agricultural Sinhalese society in Sri Lanka, can be categorized into basic three types. They are, ‘*Shānthikarma*’ that are held for Gods or deities, ‘*Shānthikarma*’ that are held for *Yakkha* (demons), ‘*Shānthikarma*’ that are held for *Nawa Graha* (nine planets) (Ananda Thero, 2011). Thus, ‘*Kohombā yak kankāri shānthikarmaya*’ is a unique cultural rite that is held for Gods in the Upcountry traditional dancing system. It is a ritualistic activity in connection with ‘*kohombā*’ God (Walcott, 1978). ‘*Shānthikarma*’ has not only aesthetic, dramatic, and traditional values but also, it has included social and psychological values for the well-being of a whole community. They were held as a collective activity with the active participation of villagers in a traditional Sinhalese society. But in modern society, ‘*Shānthikarma*’ is diminishing rapidly as a result of various socio-economic transformations, cultural diffusion, modernization, and globalization processes. On the other hand, there are very limited research studies have been carried out related to ‘*Shānthikarma*’ in Sri Lanka. Ronald H. Walcott has conducted an ethnomusicological study of ‘*Kohombā yak kankāri shānthikarmaya*’ for his PhD thesis in 1978. It was a comprehensive musical analysis of major items related to ‘*Kohombā yak kankāri shānthikarmaya*’ including invocations (*yātikā*), verses, *Yakkam*, *kata paha* (five epics), and other

rituals (Walcott, 1978). Ravindra Ransingha has studied on 'Dramatherophy in Sri Lanka' in 2019. It has analyzed drama therapeutic values of communal theaters in traditional Sri Lankan society including '*Kohombā yak kankāriya, Gam Maduwa, Devol Maduwa, Bali, Thovil, Jāthaka kathā*' (Stories from previous lives of Lord Buddha) and role-play (Ransingha, 2019). M. Nishanthi has done a study on indigenous knowledge specifically focused on '*Shānthikarma*' mentioned in Palm Leaf Manuscripts in Sri Lanka. It has identified *Shānthikarma* rituals mentioned in the Palm Leaf Manuscripts, special features of Palm Leaf Manuscripts, and revealed *yantra, mantra, and gurukam* based on observations (Nishanthi, 2019). A study of the importance of *Shānthikarma* as a soft power for country branding of Sri Lanka was done by W.M.G.N. Panampitiya and Rev. T. Dhammasara thero in 2019. It has studied the methods of using *Shānthikarma* to promote the identity of Sri Lanka in the field of tourism (Panampitiya and Dhammasara, 2019). A study on the influence of Bharat Muni's Natya Shastra in Sri Lankan rituals based on *Pahan Madu Shānthikarmaya* was conducted by Dr. G.D. Maddumage and I.A.K.C. Samarasinghe in 2019 (Maddumage and Samarasinghe, 2019). Some research studies have been carried out related to *Bali Shānthikarma* in Sri Lanka (Millagahathenna, 2018, Nissanka, 2018, Ruhiru, 2017, Janadasa, 2016). Thus, aesthetic, therapeutic, and communication values have been analyzed in previous research studies. However, there is a knowledge gap on the sociological aspects of *Shānthikarma* in Sri Lanka. Thus, the main objective of this study was to analyze sociological concepts and aspects included in '*Kohombā yak kankāri shānthikarmaya*'. Specific objectives were to identify sociological concepts included in the '*Kohombā yak kankāri shānthikarmaya*'. to identify traditional belief systems in Sinhalese society and to analyze the contribution of '*Kohombā yak kankāri shānthikarmaya*' to maintain the social solidarity and social integration in the traditional Sri Lankan rural society.

02. Methodology

This study was based on qualitative methodology, and the functional method was used for the study. According to the research objectives, secondary data were collected from relevant journal articles, research reports, textbooks, and other academic works based on the purposive sampling method. The relevant literature was used according to the purposes of the study. The data was analyzed by using the descriptive-analytical method.

03. Results and Discussion

Importance of ‘*Kohombā yak kankāri shānthikarmaya*’ as a Productive and Protective magic;

As James Frazer mentioned in his ‘The Golden Bough’ book, religion is a belief in powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and of human life (Rao, 2010). Thus, religion has a direct connection with supernatural powers and magic. Frazer introduced magic as the efforts to control nature by early man for their day-to-day survival and it is an elementary form of religion. Thus, it is a system of beliefs and activities that laid the foundation for the origin of the religious institution (Frazer, 1955). B. Malinowski defined magic as the use of supernatural means to try to obtain empirical ends. Thus, they are a range of practical acts that are carried out to achieve a desired result (Malinowski, 1948). According to Raymond Firth, there are two specific characteristics of magical activities. They have a specific practical objective to achieve, and magical activities are done by a man (Amarasekara, 2012). Anthropologists have presented different classifications of magic based on characteristics and objectives related to magical activities. Raymond Firth has classified magic into basic three types namely, Productive Magic, Protective Magic, and Destructive Magic (Firth, 1958). Productive magic refers to ritualistic activities that are performed with the intention of prosperity of livelihood activities such as agriculture, fishing, and animal husbandry (Kumara, 2008). Over the history of Sri Lanka, agriculture was the main livelihood activity including both paddy cultivation and *chena* cultivation (Shifting cultivation). When considering paddy cultivation, villagers in traditional Sinhalese society performed various ritualistic activities for the prosperity of their harvest based on paddy fields and threshing floors. ‘*Kohombā yak kankāri shānthikarmaya*’ is a major ritualistic performance related to Up-country in Sri Lanka that is held to protect the paddy field and harvest from natural disasters and spreading plant diseases, and expect prosperity of their harvests. Although traditional paddy cultivation in Sri Lanka was based on indigenous knowledge and harmony with nature, they faced unexpected natural disasters such as flooding, droughts, and plant diseases. Thus, traditional people believed that performing rituals for supernatural powers was a necessary condition to achieve prosperity in paddy cultivation. According to *Tittapajjala Gurunnanse*, *Kohombā* is the main deity of the ritual (Walcott, 1978). The relationship between ‘*Kohombā*’ God and agriculture has been analyzed by R.W. Ivers and C.P. Bell in their articles in 1980 and 1987 for the journals of the Royal Asiatic Society. There is a ritual among traditional paddy farmers in the up-country, that keeps a neem wood called ‘*Kohomba Lella*’ at the center of the threshing floor before threshing the harvest on behalf of *Kohombā* God (Dissanayaka, 2014). They believe to increase and prosper the harvest by performing this ritual. Thus, many scholars have mentioned

that the main objective of the '*Kohombā yak kankāri shānthikarmaya*' is the prosperity of their whole community (Walcott, 1978, Dissanayake, 2014, Ranasinghe, 2019). '*Kohombā yak kankāri shānthikarmaya*' is a combination of a variety of ritualistic performances and events. Some rituals are held three (3) months before the *kankāriya* day. '*Akyāla Wen Kireema*' is a main ritual that is done prior to the main performance. The *Akyāla* or *Agahas* (the first portion of the paddy harvest) is reserved on behalf of God for offering at the *kankāriya* day (Dissanayaka, 2014). That first portion of the harvest is considered sacred and is kept in a high place in the house. In the *Pol Bulate Yāma* ritual, people collect the necessary goods for the *kankāriya* from the village including the *Akyāla*. *Deviyan Vedamaveema* ritual; inviting the Gods to the *Malyahana* (flower altar) is done in the morning ceremony and then alms are offered to the Gods called *Murutan Pideema* or *Muruthen Mangalya* (<https://arts.pdn.ac.lk/afcp/kohombakankariya.php>). Thus, after reaping a good and healthy paddy harvest, people performed these kinds of rituals to express their gratitude towards Gods for giving them a good harvest this season and getting the blessings for prosperity of the next season. Thus, '*Kohombā yak kankāri shānthikarmaya*' can be identified as one of the main ritualistic performances that is held as productive magic in the traditional agricultural society in Sri Lanka.

From the Sociological perspective, protective magic can be simply defined as the rituals and activities that are performed to protect from diseases, epidemics, and harmful evil eyes. When considering the historical legend of '*Kohombā yak kankāri shānthikarmaya*', it had been performed for the first time to cure the *Divi Dosa* (the course inflicted by *Kuveni*) of King *Panduvasadeva* who was the successor of Vijaya. Scholars have defined *Divi Dosa* with various interpretations such as disease initiated due to forged vows, threat to the life and dream of a leopard, and trying to kill him (Epitawala, 1998). *Kohomba* (Neem) is a traditional herb that is used still to heal some communicable diseases such as smallpox, and chickenpox in Sri Lanka. Thus, some scholars including Premakumara Epitawela have mentioned that the ritualistic performances that were held to cure diseases in ancient times, may name '*Kohombā yak kankāri shānthikarmaya*' later (Epitawala, 1998). After considering all those facts, it is proved that '*Kohombā yak kankāri shānthikarmaya*' has been performed to cure diseases and to protect from epidemics from ancient times. Then, it can be identified as a major protective magic in traditional Sinhalese society.

As mentioned by Social Anthropologists such as James Frazer and Malinowski, ritualistic performances include supernatural belief systems and activities to control nature and get blessings from them to obtain practical objectives. Thus, it is clear that '*Kohombā yak kankāri shānthikarmaya*' is a significant ritualistic performance that is performed to obtain desired common objectives such as prosperity of their harvests,

protect paddy fields from harmful plants and insect diseases, to cure diseases, and prevent epidemic situation and well-being of the whole community.

The Concept of ‘Kohomba’ God:

The main deity of the ‘*Kohombā yak kankāri shānthikarmaya*’ is *Kohombā*. Details about *Kohombā* deity are included in *Kohombā Hella*, *Kolmura Kavi*, *Devāradhanava* (invitation to Gods), and *Yātikā* (Dissanayake, 2014). Thus, there are three (03) types of *Kohombā* Gods. They are, *Aluth Kohombā*, *Parana Kohombā* and *Maha Kohombā* (Epitawala, 1998). According to the *Mahā Yāthikāva*, *Aluth Kohombā* was the *manthrishvarayā* (responsible officer) of the *Welihela* region in *Balahelgala Kanda*. According to *Mahā Yāthikāva*, “....Pāyingamuven *Irugal Appuhāmi yana manthrishvarayā genvā nomara yak kara Irugal Bandāra yeyi vadārā Maha Kohombā kiyā nam thabā....*” (Dissanayake, 2014:58). Thus, it infers that *Irugal Bandāra* or *Maha Kohombā* was the *Pāyingamuve Irugal Appuhāmi*. According to *Mahā Yāthikāva*, *Parana Kohombā* was the *Abanvela Setti Appuhāmi* (Dissanayake, 2014). In that sense, they were officers related to different regions including *Welihela*, *Pāyingamuva*, and *Abanvela*. According to the concept of ‘Animism’ in Sociology and Anthropology, people who lived in indigenous societies, believed that there was a reincarnation after death and they attributed a living soul or supernatural power to inanimate objects or material world. According to E.B. Tylor, people believed that spirits could influence living people and their lives even after death and therefore they tended to perform various rituals to get blessings for survival and well-being as an individual or as a group (Amarasekara, 2009). According to the above facts mentioned in *Mahā Yāthikāva*, it is clear that people have attributed divinity to some elites after their deaths as *Aluth Kohombā*, *Parana Kohombā*, and *Maha Kohombā* and have performed ‘*Kohombā yak kankāri shānthikarmaya*’ combined with magnificent rituals to obtain blessings from supernatural powers.

The concept of Sacred and Profane:

According to Emile Durkheim, Religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden (Rao, 2010:413). Thus, religion gives a distinct demarcation between righteous and sinful deeds. As well as sacred and profane are vital conditions related to religion and magic. When considering ‘*Kohombā yak kankāri shānthikarmaya*’, it can be identified rituals and practices that are based on the concept of sacred. ‘*Ruk pe-kireema*’ is a sacred ritual of offering trees to Gods related to the *kankāriya*. The necessary things such as coconut flowers, *Gokkola* (coconut leaves), coconut, and banana leaves are taken from those demarcated sacred trees for the *kankāriya*. Before the ‘*Ruk pe-kireema*’, they spread turmeric water and incense, and demarcate the trees that are offered to Gods with

coconut leaves. Thereafter, villagers do not use that tree for any other purposes and are considered a sacred symbol until the *kankāriya* is performed. Villagers select a proper place for the *kankāriya* and plant a Jack branch in the selected place. It is called as '*Kapa situweema*' (Planting the *Kapa*). It is done at an auspicious time and also Jack tree is considered a symbol of prosperity in traditional society. '*Maduwa sekaseema*' (constructing the hut) is another ritual that is highly admired for its sacred principles. The first pillar of the hut is constructed at an auspicious time with *Magul Bera* (Auspicious Drum Playing). After constructing the hut for the '*Kohombā yak kankāri shānthikarmaya*', it is offered for Gods (*Madu pe-kireema*). Spreading turmeric water and incense, lighting oil lamps, and playing *Magul Bera* are done in the *Madu pe-kireema* ritual. In the '*Thota pe-kireema*' ritual, a well is dug and offered to Gods. It is used only for *kankāri* rituals including preparing *Deva Dāna* (Alms for Gods). Ornaments of the Gods are kept on a white cloth (*Sudu Piruvataya*) in the Altar (*Ābharana Vedamaveema*) as a morning ritual. White is a symbol of purity and sacred according to Sri Lankan Buddhist culture. Before that, bathing the ornaments of the Gods with lime and water is conducted by the *Yaksessa* (the chief dancer) (Dissanayake, 2014). It is called as *Nānumura Mangalya*. On the other hand, in the *kankāri* rituals, women are considered as *Kili* (Profane), and women are not allowed to enter the hut and perform customs of *kankāriya*. As sociologists mentioned, sacredness and profaneness are vital elements of religion, magic, and rituals. Thus, it is clear that purity, sacredness, and profane are highly considerable factors in the whole process of '*Kohombā yak kankāri shānthikarmaya*'.

Collectiveness and Social Solidarity

According to Emile Durkheim, Mechanical solidarity is a main characteristic of a traditional society. Mechanical solidarity is based on traditional values, customs, common objectives, collectiveness, and high social integrity (Rao, 2010). When considering '*Kohombā yak kankāri shānthikarmaya*', in the '*Pol Bulate Yāma*' ritual, everyone in the village contributes to the *kankāriya* by giving necessary things. And also, '*Kohombā yak kankāri shānthikarmaya*' is a collective activity that is performed to obtain common objectives such as prosperity, well-being, and protection from epidemics and communicable diseases. '*Kohombā yak kankāri shānthikarmaya*' is performed in a common place with open access to everyone, particularly on a threshing floor. Therefore, everyone in the village participates in this common ritualistic performance. Social integration is encouraged through social networking and healthy relationships that are fostered based on '*Kohombā yak kankāri shānthikarmaya*'. Participants of '*Kohombā yak kankāri shānthikarmaya*' seats on the floor with mats. It is inferred the perception of equality among villagers in traditional society regardless of their internal social stratifications. Thus, '*Kohombā yak kankāri shānthikarmaya*' is not only a creative activity with an artistic and aesthetic value but

also a ritualistic performance that enhances the collectiveness, well-being, and social solidarity of the whole community.

Conclusion and Future Recommendations

'*Kohombā yak kankāri shānthikarmaya*' is a unique heritage that is combined with various cultural values, belief systems, customs, rituals, creative and aesthetic performances. They reflect indigenous knowledge, livelihood activities, perceptions, and common aspirations of traditional communities. *Shānthikarma* is diminishing in modern society as a result of rapid social changing processes in social structure and functions. Therefore, it is vital to study unique indigenous cultural heritages including *Shānthikarma* in Sri Lanka. Some studies on ethnomusicological values, therapeutic values, and communicative and aesthetic values have been conducted by scholars, but there are very limited research studies related to the Sociological aspects of *Shānthikarma* field. According to the above findings, it is proven that '*Kohombā yak kankāri shānthikarmaya*' is a unique cultural heritage not only with indigenous and artistic values but also, reflects sociological aspects as productive and protective magic, traditional belief systems, cultural values and perceptions, collectiveness, social solidarity, and integrity in the traditional society in Sri Lanka. This study has been based on the Sociological aspects of '*Kohombā yak kankāri shānthikarmaya*' only. Sociological values of other indigenous performances such as other *Shānthikarma*, folk dance, and folk drama including *Sokari*, *Kolam*, *Nadagam*) can be investigated in future research studies.

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