



Nāgānanda Journal of Cultural Anthropology (NJCA) 2023, Vol. 01 (01)

Article History: Received 27 October 2023 | Accepted 08 December 2023

Issue Published Online: 02 January 2024

ISSN No: ISSN 3030-7252

A medical anthropological study of the ‘Gon pita perahera’ festival of Navagamuwa Pattini Dewalaya for the cattle epidemics

Abhayasundere, P.N.^{1*}, Srishan, G.A.A.N.², Jayasiri, A.A.J.³, and Shaveeniya, T.P.P.⁴

^{1,3,4}Department of Anthropology, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka.

²Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka.

praneeth@sjp.ac.lk

ABSTRACT

It has been a tradition among the Sri Lankan people since ancient times to make offerings to Goddess Pattini to seek blessings for good health. Navagamuwa Pattini Dewala is known as a miraculous dewala with historical stories about Goddess Pattini. The ‘*Gon pita Perahera*’ festival at Navagamuwa Pattini Dewalaya is the focus of this study’s medical anthropological investigation, which explores the complex interactions between cultural practices, conventional healing beliefs, and community health views. What folk beliefs are associated with this ‘*Gon pita Perahera*’ festival performed for the Goddess Pattini to ward off epidemics? is the research problem in this research. The purpose of this research is to study the folk beliefs associated with this ‘*Gon pita Perahera*’, which is conducted to eliminate epidemic diseases that spread to cattle, from a medical anthropological approach. This research is a descriptive research based on secondary sources and conducted using qualitative data under library survey methodology. The ‘*Gon pita Perahera*’ held at Pattini Dewala in Navagamuwa is the only procession in Sri Lanka with the participation of cattle. This procession is held with the hope of getting the blessings of Goddess Pattini to ward off the epidemics spreading to cattle and protect the cattle. The special feature of this procession, which includes all the elements of a Sri Lankan traditional procession, is the participation of cattle decorated with colorful costumes. Correspondingly, in this procession, the deity ornaments of the Dewala are taken in the procession on the backs of cattle decorated like this. Locals refer to this procession as ‘*Gon pita Perahera*’ due to carrying these divine ornaments on the backs of cattle. The people of the village believe that by holding this procession annually, the cattle will be protected from hoof disease epidemics. This procession is expected to get the blessings of Goddess Pattini for the wealth of cattle. Accordingly, there appears to be a complex and dynamic relationship between cultural ceremonies, traditional medicine, and community health perceptions. It is a characteristic of cultured man that people turn to different rituals according to their beliefs in situations like epidemics. Accordingly, it is clear that through this festival, the people seek the blessings of Goddess Pattini to protect the cattle resources that help them earn their living from epidemics.

KEYWORDS: *Gonpita Perahera, Navagamuwa Pattini Dewalaya, Epidemics, Cattle*

Corresponding author: Abhayasundere, P.N., Email: praneeth@sjp.ac.lk

Introduction

The veneration of Goddess Pattini is widespread across Sri Lanka, with numerous Dewala dedicated to her. Among these, the Pattini Dewala in Navagamuwa stands out as the primary center of worship for Mother Pattini. Positioned within the precincts of the historic Sri Sugathabimbarama Ancient Temple, situated along the Avissawella Old Road in Colombo, this sacred site holds significant cultural and spiritual importance. Nestled in the Kelani River Valley, the Navagamuwa Siddha Paththini Devalaya, or Sathpaththini Devalaya, is a focal point for devotees seeking the benevolent presence of Goddess Pattini in their lives. This sacred place holds significance as a historical shrine amid archaeologically noteworthy sites. According to legend, its origins trace back to the early Anuradhapura period, near the Kelani River (Fernando, 2022). This research conducts a nuanced medical anthropological exploration of the '*Gon pita perahera*' festival held at Navagamuwa Pattini Dewalaya, delving into the intricate interplay between cultural practices, traditional healing beliefs, and community health perceptions. What folk beliefs are associated with this '*Gon pita Perahera*' festival performed for the Goddess Pattini to ward off epidemics? is the research problem in this research. The purpose of this research is to study the folk beliefs associated with this '*Gon pita Perahera*', which is conducted to eliminate epidemic diseases that spread to cattle, from a medical anthropological approach.

The annual '*Gammadu Puja*' and '*Esala perahera*' of Navagamuwa Pattini Dewala started with the cup planting, and the '*Kumbal perahera*', '*Mal perahera*', '*Pāvāda piṭa perahera*', '*Gon pita perahera*', '*Randōli perahera*', and '*Ath pita perahera*' tour the Navagamuwa village for seven days. At the end of the procession, there is a ritual of cutting water. After seven days, the '*Gini Madu*' (fire walking) festival is held as the grand occasion of the Esala festival. The next day, a '*Garāyaka*' dance is performed to remove the poison (Hemantha, 2015). The '*Gon pita perahera*' occupies a singular and noteworthy position within the cultural framework, principally owing to its exclusive characteristic as the sole procession incorporating the presence of Cattle. This distinctiveness affords the '*Gon pita perahera*' a unique standing, distinguishing it as an unparalleled manifestation within the broader array of traditional *perahera* events. The distinctive character of the Navagamuwa Siddha Pattini Dewala *perahera* is notably manifested through the ceremonial procession known as '*Gon pita perahera*'. It is not a mistake to name the Navagamuwa Siddha Pattini Dewala as the only unique place in the cultural and religious environment of Sri Lanka where this unique '*Gon pita perahera*' is held.

From a medical anthropological point of view, people in different parts of the world and in traditional medicine in different parts of the world perform different rituals for the prevention of different diseases. These rituals are performed based on the experiences and beliefs of the respective people. In this way, the strong belief held by the goddess Pattini among the people of Sri Lanka is that she blesses people to recover from diseases. For this reason, it seems that it is customary for the people of Sri Lanka to pray for the health of the goddess Pattini, not only for their illnesses but also for the health of their agricultural crops and the animals that help them for their livelihood. Accordingly, these '*Gon pita perahera*'

are held to pray that the cattle of the area will be protected from diseases such as hoof epidemic disease. Here, details have been given in detail about the Perahera festivals with the existing folklore associations.

Materials and Methods

This research has been done using the content analysis methodology that comes under the descriptive research category. The study takes a medical anthropological approach, collecting and analyzing data using qualitative research techniques. This is because qualitative data contribute more to the achievement of the objectives of this research. This research was conducted under one of the medical anthropological approaches, in which beliefs and folk medicine systems are observed through ethnographical analysis. that come under the cultural approach of medical anthropological studies. The research is based entirely on secondary sources. It also uses literature as a method of data collection and data from people who have studied the subject under library survey methodology.

Results and Discussion

The sacred tradition of '*Gon pita perahera*' unfolds annually in the sacred precincts of Navagamuwa Pattini Dewalaya in August. Spanning an impressive historical continuum of 1500 years, this cultural festival is meticulously organized to bestow divine blessings on the village, with special emphasis on the worship of Goddess Pattini (imagelinkglobal, n.d.). The Siddha Pattini Dewala procession in Navagamuwa starts with *Kuṃbal Perahara*. After that, there will be a *Mal perahera* and a *Pāvāda piṭa perahera*. No cows or elephants are involved in this flower procession and foot procession. Also, this *Mal perahera* and *Pāvāda piṭa perahera* are done only on the Nawagamuwa pattini Dewala premises. No coming out and touring the streets. Then there is a *Gon pita perahera*. This *Gon pita perahera* is held for three days. The *perahera* held on the last day is also known as '*Gonpita randōli perahera*'. Accordingly, with the *Gon pita randōli perahara*, this *perahera* festival starts touring the streets outside the Navagamuwa Pattini Dewala premises. The *Gon pita perahara*, which starts from the main *Wāhalkaḍa* (gateway) of Navagamuwa Rajamaha Viharaya, can appear as the route of this *perahara* to enter the road behind the temple that enters Vihara Mawatha along Sri Sumanatissa Mawatha and return to Nawagamuwa Pattini Dewalaya. After the *Gon pita perahara* ends, the elephant procession (*Ath pita perahera*) begins. The last *randōli perahera* with these elephants is second only to the Kandy *Dalada Perahara*. The uniqueness of the Siddha Pattini Dewala *Perahara* in Nawagamuwa is manifested in the *Gon pita perahara*. It is not a mistake to call the Siddha Pattini Dewala in Navagamu the only place marked as a *Gon pita perahara* in Sri Lanka.

There are many special rituals to prepare the Cattle that will participate in this *Gon pita perahara*. Cattle participating in this procession undergo festive embellishment, characterized by bathing these Cattle from the Kelani river, meticulous cleaning, adorning with garlands, the application of sheaths onto their horns, and the draping of a splendid

cloak. In particular, there are several criteria for selecting cattle to participate in this *Gon pita perahara*. If they are, the cattle participating in this *Gon pita perahara* should be cattle with long horns. Also, should be strong and fertile cattle. It is also said that if these cattle are white cattle, they are more suitable for this *Gon pita perahara*. For this reason, it is said that there are cattle owners in this area who breed white cattle only for this annual *Gon pita perahara* festival (Pushpakumara, 2016).



Figure 01: *Gon pita perahara* festival (Pushpakumara, 2016)



Figure 02: *Bathing the Cattle participating in the Gon pita perahara in the Kelani River.* (Niroshan, 2023)

God ornaments of Satara Maha Dewala are placed on each cattle that moves in the *Gon pita perahara*. Usually, around sixty to seventy cattle participate in this procession. Irrespective of the numerical variance, each bovine participant receives these ornaments. It should be noted here that only male animals are included in this *Gon pita perahara*, and female animals are avoided. Furthermore, the chief priest of the Vishnu Dewalaya rides on cattle carrying the deity ornaments of Good Vishnu during the annual *Gon pita perahara*. Strong white cattle adorned with a golden cloak is used for it. The priest carrying the divine ornaments on this bull moves in the procession under a canopy. In this way, this *Gon pita perahara* festival is held every year to seek protection from epidemics affecting cattle. There are legends and stories of the past that caused cattle to seek protection by holding a *Gon pita perahara* festival.



Figure 03 and 04: *How the ornaments of the gods are carried in procession on decorated Cattle.* (Niroshan, 2023)

In the historical context of Navagamuwa and Kaduwela, the primary means of livelihood was agriculture. During this era, cattle rearing played a central role in the agricultural landscape, performing multiple functions in cultivation, dairy commerce, and transportation facilitated by primitive carts. A symbol of the technological advancement of the era, these wagons represented the pinnacle of transportation. However, ancient chronicles describe a disaster that befell the region. That is, the spread of hoof epidemic disease decimated the cattle population. The epidemic-like nature of this disease created an existential crisis for the people of that era, preventing them from continuing their livelihoods. The once unprecedented loss of cattle had a knock-on effect, crippling both agriculture and the dairy industry. The lack of viable cattle for use in wagons is a major crisis. In this way, due to the hoof plague that affected the cattle in the area, the cattle resources of the area were destroyed. The livelihoods of the local people, which were mainly based on cattle, were destroyed.

After this persecution, the farming communities faced many unprecedented crises. In response, the villagers went to Navagamuwa Siddha Pattini Dewalaya and presented their grievances to Goddess Pattini. These villagers promised in front of the goddess Pattini that if the menace of the cattle sacrifice epidemic was removed, they would dedicate a god alms (*Dēva dānaya*) to God and carry the auspicious casket (*Sadhātuka karañḍuva*) and vestments and God ornaments (*Dēva vastra saha ābharāṇa*) on cattle. Eventually, the cattle population recovered in time, and the effects of the ordeal were alleviated. As a result, there was a collective initiative among the villagers, including the cattle owners, and an annual procession involving cattle was held as per the vow. This ritual involved the transport of the auspicious casket (*Sadhātuka karañḍuva*) and vestments and God ornaments (*Dēva vastra saha ābharāṇa*) to the cattle, and it took place annually, symbolizing an essential ritual practice of the community.

This same legend exists in this area in a slightly different form. that is, it says that Vanni deities who took care of Goddess Pattini and stood on behalf of Goddess Pattini gave cattle to the farmers in the area for the prosperity of farming activities. The Vanni gods instructed the farmers to make offerings to Goddess Pattini while improving their livelihoods by using the cattle thus given. Accordingly, over a period of time, the farmers of this area gathered and offered sacrifices to Goddess Pattini. It is said that after some time, the people of this area forgot to perform these sacrifices. It is said that due to this omission, the cattle in this area contracted a hoof-related epidemic disease and the cattle started dying. In this way, the economy of the villagers collapsed due to the death of cattle from an epidemic disease.

The helpless villagers gathered and discussed with the farmers about the cause of the death of the cattle and it is said that they understood that the cause of this disaster was the lack of traditional offerings to Goddess Pattini. Legend has it that a large-scale ritual festival was held and the cattle of the village were bathed in the Kelani River and purified by sprinkling turmeric liquid, and a procession was held with Goddess Pattini's clothes and ornaments on the backs of the cattle. It is said that he placed the ornaments of the gods on the cattle and

went in procession around the Nawagamuwa Pattini Dewalaya and asked for forgiveness from Goddess Pattini. After that, there is a belief among the villagers that the cattle survived the epidemic and lived healthy, and after that, this *Gon pita perahara* is held annually.

In the contemporary context, the rearing of cattle in the Nawagamuwa region and adjoining villages is mainly aimed at involving them in the *Gon pita perahara* festival. However, there has been a significant change from the historical use of cattle for agricultural work and carting. That is, cattle are hardly used for this. But, in an era when cattle rearing was rare, one can see the rearing of lakhs of valuable cattle imported from abroad for the *Gon pita perahara* of this area.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the month of Esala, particularly in August, is marked by vibrant processions in Sri Lanka, with the focal point being the procession of the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy. Temples and Dewala across the country join in with their own processions, showcasing cultural identity. Notably, the Nawagamuwa Siddha Pattini Dewala Perahera in August stands out for its unique '*Gon pita perahera*', involving cattle. This is the only procession with cattle participation, excluding elephants. There are various legends about the origin of this *Gon pita perahera*, and it is believed that the *Gon pita perahera* was started to seek the protection of Goddess Pattini to eradicate an epidemic disease that affected the cattle that helped in agriculture, milk production, and transportation at that time. Nowadays, this annual *Gon pita perahera* is held to offer the protection and prosperity blessings of Goddess Pattini to the villagers. Although there is less need for cattle for agricultural and transport purposes today relative to the past, dairy cattle-related production is still carried out in this area. Seeking the safety of those cattle is another purpose of conducting this procession nowadays. Also, there is a unique custom of rearing cattle for this annual procession among the villagers and the Nawagamuwa Pattini Dewalaya.

Despite the historical and cultural significance of this unique procession, locals as well as tourists seem to have overlooked its unique charm. Recognizing the intrinsic value of such cultural elements, similar to the fame of the Kandy Esala *Perahera* and the Gangarama *perahera*, emphasizes the need to actively promote and garner attention for the Esala Perahera at Nawagamuwa Sri Purana Satpatthini Dewalaya. This proactive stance is essential to unlocking the untapped potential of tourism. Strategies aimed at raising awareness and instilling a deeper appreciation of this cultural jewel should be implemented, recognizing its hidden appeal and contributing to the broader fabric of Sri Lanka's cultural heritage. Thus, concerted efforts are needed to increase the visibility and appreciation of this unique cultural event on both domestic and international platforms. Finally, it can be suggested that a proper program should be prepared to protect these intangible and tangible cultural heritages.

References

- Fernando, H. (2022). *Visit Sri Lanka: Heritage: Nawagamuwa Devale (Sri Sugathabimbaramaya)*. Angelfire.
<https://www.angelfire.com/planet/heritagesl2/nawagamuwa/nawagamuwa.htm>
- Imagelinkglobal, (n.d.). *The annual “Gonpita Perahera” or procession at Pattini Devalaya Temple in Navagamuwa, Colombo*. Imagelinkglobal ILG.
<https://imagelinkglobal.com/products/ILEA001650707/>
- Pushpakumara, M. A. (2016). *Annual “Gonpita Perahera” of the Nawagamuwa Sath Pattini Devale*. *The Sunday Times Sri Lanka*. <http://www.sundaytimes.lk/160911/funday-times/annual-gonpita-perahera-of-the-nawagamuwa-sath-pattini-devale-207967.html>
- Hemantha D. S. (2015, November 4). *LANKABHIMANEE: පන්තිනි දේවාලය - නවගමුව*. LANKABHIMANEE. http://lankabhimanee.blogspot.com/2015/11/blog-post_4.html
- Withanathantri, K.G., (2017, July 15). *The wonderful Gon pita perahera in Navagamuwa*. Yatagiyawa. http://yatagiyawa2017.blogspot.com/2017/07/blog-post_15.html
- Sugathadasa, H., & Niroshan, C. (2018, September 1). The sacred bulls adorning the Navagamuwa Gon pita perahera. *Silumina*.
<https://archives1.silumina.lk/2018/09/29/%E0%B7%83%E0%B7%92%E0%B6%AD%E0%B7%8A%E0%B6%B8%E0%B6%BD%E0%B7%8A->