

The Impact of Traditional Leadership for Sustainability in Cascaded Tank Villages: In Terms of the Bellankadawala Cascade System in Sri Lanka.

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Abstract

In this study, the principal researcher describes his current PhD research on socio-cultural aspect of traditional cascaded tank villages in Sri Lanka, which is the basis for this paper. Additionally, there is an examination of the traditional leadership system in cascaded tank villages based on the case of the Bellankadawala cascade system, as well as the socio-cultural impacts of this traditional leadership on the rural community. Further, it studied the informal rural governing system, social hierarchy, rituals, customs, beliefs, social norms, and practices in the community. It assesses the way they preserve traditional leadership systems with the formal government officials of the village. The research problem investigates the nature and socio-cultural consequences of traditional leadership with special reference to village headman (Gam Mahela), The Shaman who prepares rice for the Game Danaya Ritual (Muruthan Kapuwa), the chief shaman (Kapurala), In charge of paddy fields and tanks (Vel Vidane) in traditional cascaded tank communities. Those four traditional leaders were selected by considering their significant service to the villagers' socio-cultural and economic lives. This research is an investigation of the Grama Niladhari Division of 593-Kelawa (Bellankadawala) in the city of Anuradhapura based on 22 qualitative interviews performed with a purposefully selected sample of traditional leaders, informative villagers, and irrigation officials. Secondary data collecting was based on the related literature. The narrative analysis method was used to analyze the data for this study. Still, traditional leaders are doing a highlighted task in this community for the existence of the society and the agriculture. This leadership is very important for the peasants to maintain their farming activities, water management, collective activities, social existence, and peace of the society. The study concludes that traditional leadership lays the foundation for a traditional agricultural economy and social existence based on agriculture.

Keywords: *Traditional Leadership, Cascade Tank Villages, Rural, Community, Agriculture*

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Introduction

This research paper is based on one aspect of the principal researcher's ongoing PhD research on the socio-cultural aspects of Sri Lanka's traditional cascaded tank villages. It conducts a comprehensive anthropological examination of the traditional leadership system cascaded tank villages of Sri Lanka and its sociocultural impacts for rural communities. Prior to the beginning of the article, a cascade tank village system should be defined as follows.

‘A ‘cascade’ is defined as ‘a connected series of village irrigation tanks organized within a micro-(or meso-) catchment of the dry zone landscape, storing, conveying, and utilizing water from an ephemeral rivulet’ (Bandara, 2019).

The irrigation culture in Sri Lanka is defined by tanks and cascade systems. Traditional technical knowledge, administration, water management, and environmental protection systems, among other things, were added. As a result, the country's hydraulic civilization gradually enriched its socio-cultural characteristics (Jayatilleke et al, 2020).

The cascaded tank- village systems or *ellanga gammana* become very significant due to its unique technology, distribution, and service. In addition, it is endowed with a distinct intangible cultural heritage of its own. This system serves as a protective barrier against natural disasters such as floods and droughts. This system was also known as the symbol of sustainability in the ancient past because it provided water for food cultivation while also conserving the biodiversity of the surrounding environment. This system has assisted farmers in the Dry Zone to survive in isolation for several centuries, despite the fact that multiple socio-cultural and political crises have occurred on a number of occasions over history. As a result of it, the cascaded system in the dry zone was designated as a globally significant agricultural heritage on April 19, 2018, with the following designation:

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Sri Lankan agrarian system known as the *ellanga gammana* or Cascaded Tank-Village system in the Dry Zone has been designated as a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System (GIAHS) by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). The Cascaded Tank-Village System in Sri Lanka was recognized at the forum and ceremony and awarded at the International Forum and Award Ceremony for New GIAHS Sites held in Rome, Italy, the proposal to include the Cascaded Tank-Village System in Palugaswewa, in the Anuradhapura district, on the FAO list of GIAHS was submitted by the Ministry of Agriculture in 2018 (Pussegoda, 2019).

When considering village tanks, they can be considered as something that performs a significant task. The primary function of the village tank was to retain water and moisten the parched lowland plains in preparation for paddy farming. As a result, tank cascade systems were developed and constructed under difficult conditions with limited resources and conventional expertise. As a result, it was critical to manage the village tanks and their

community. As a result, there are several traditional leaders in tank communities to carry out this responsibility.

Historical background of the tank-based traditional leadership in the Rajarata kingdom. In 1944, prehistorian Clark emphasized the significance of water management and governance in human history. According to Clark, has always mirrored society's image, from prehistoric times to the present. This phrase also applies to the Sri Lankan dry zone's water management system (Clark, 1944).

According to grand theories on water and society, augmented by authors such as Wittfogel and anthropologist Steward state societies in Asia relied on the construction of large-scale irrigation works, which necessitated organized, forced labor and centralized bureaucratic management (Steward, 1955).

The water management system in Sri Lanka's arid zone must be recognized as a unique example, having grown in cooperation with both rulers and indigenous people. The abundance of inscriptions indicating private ownership provides clear support for this idea. In the present database, 48% of entries on irrigation ownership relate to private ownership, whereas only 28% refer to the rulers. Inscriptions from the early and late Brahmi periods frequently describe tanks and their owners, such as Parumaka (chief), Vapihamika or Vavihamika (proprietors of the tanks) (Abeywardana et al, 2018).

As evidenced by ownerships of irrigation elements, ownership trading, and hired labor, water management and governance in the Rajarata kingdom began and developed as a system. Before it became a centralized, bureaucratic structure, it was a community-based local system that governed by the kings. Leach noted in 1959 that huge tanks and their management could have been the bureaucratic works, but the small village tank systems most emphatically were not. Additionally, he points out that the entire system exhibited characteristics akin to those of European feudalism. Further, Leach asserted Sri Lanka's traditional water management system was characterized by "hydraulic oriental" feudalism. In comparison, Gunawardane depicts a system of patronage in which rulers and the local people share patronage (Abeywardana et al, 2018).

The village level administration of the small tanks was managed by a hereditary officer named Gamarala, a petty headman, at the beginning of British rule in Sri Lanka. According to early inscriptions, he was known as "proprietor of the tanks." In 1870, the British colonial administration introduced a headmen system that attempted to give this position recognized authority. Under the Village Committee system, it is known as Vel Vidane. Tanks in the village and the proper operation of the irrigation and cultivation areas were carried out under the direction of the Vel Vidane (Karunananda, 2006). Later, the centralized Irrigation Department was established to maintain massive irrigation works in the dry zone by the end of the 19th century (Alwis, 1986).

In Bellankadawala Cascaded Tank Village, researchers discovered that traditional leadership continues to play an important role in managing the traditional irrigation community, as well as its social, economic, and spiritual well-being.

Objective

To study the impact of traditional leadership on the continuing existence and management of the cascaded tank villages.

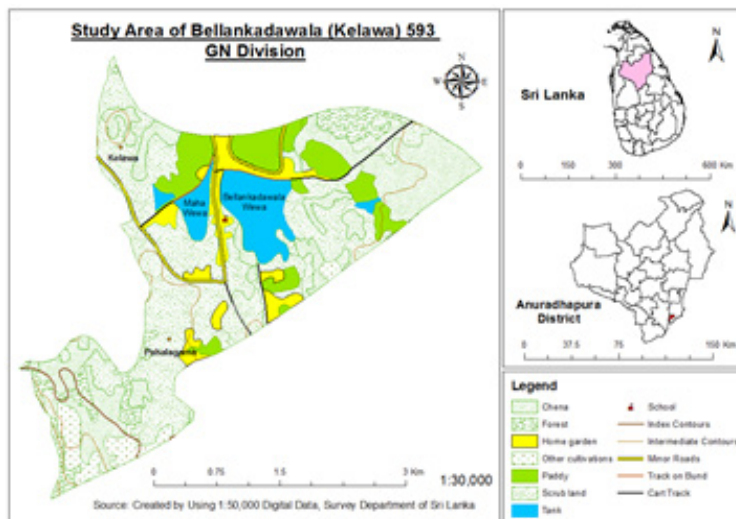
Research Problem

The research problem focuses on understanding the nature and socio-cultural consequences of traditional leadership with special reference to village headman (Gam Mahela), The Shaman who prepares rice for the Game Danaya Ritual (Muruthan Kapuwa), the chief shaman (Kapurala), In charge of paddy fields and tanks (Vel Vidane) in traditional cascaded tank communities. Those four traditional leaders were selected by considering their significant service to the villagers' socio-cultural and economic lives.

Methodology

Study Area

The study was conducted at Bellankadawala cascaded tank village system in Sri Lanka. This study area is at 593 Kelawa (GN Division) in the North Central Province, Palugaswewa Divisional Secretariat, Anuradhapura District. The geographic coordinates of the location are 8° 34' 0" North and 80° 24' 0" East (Maplandia 2019).



Map 01: North Central Province

Source - Maplandia 2019

Population

593- Kelawa GN Division was selected as the study area for this research which includes 404 households, and it is considered the population of the study.

Sample

The research sample was determined as 22 qualitative interviews performed with a purposefully selected sample of traditional leaders, informative villagers, and irrigation officials.

Collection of data

Written primary data, unwritten primary data, written secondary data, and unwritten secondary data were collected in this research. Primary data were collected by general observation and interview methods based on an interview guideline in this study, while secondary data were gathered from relevant publications and electronic resources.

Data Analysis

Narrative analysis

The collected data of the research were analyzed quantitatively. Qualitative data were prioritized in the analysis because this was a Cultural Anthropological study. The analysis was conducted through several major perspectives, including the traditional leadership system in cascaded tank villages and its socio-cultural consequences for rural populations. As a result, most data were gathered through discussions with respondents. As a result, narrative analysis was chosen as the analytical method of the research. While considering the aforementioned points, the emphasis was on the experiences provided by individuals in order to address the research problem.

Results and Discussion

According to the findings of the study, traditional village leaders perform significant duties for the village on social, economic, and spiritual levels, most notably through the village's annual alms giving (Game Danaya). Additionally, the socio-cultural impact of this traditional leadership on the rural community was recognized. In this context, the informal rural governing system, social hierarchy, rituals, customs, beliefs, social norms, and practices of the community always provide leadership for the villagers in achieving their life goals and overcoming daily challenges. Additionally, the mental stimulation provided by this traditional leadership system is extremely beneficial in terms of improving the labor force and mental stability for the agro-based economic system. Game Danaya, an alms-giving ceremony performed in the study area that has a high level of influence on empowering the traditional leadership in the village community.

The people who reside in this village think that the tank and the environment are protected by unseen forces that wander in the area. Thus, the villagers perform an almsgiving ritual called Game Danaya to express their gratitude to the supernatural powers that have aided them. They erect a temporary shrine in the area beyond the tank bund of Bellanakadawala ancient tank for this ritual. Additionally, the impact of established leadership on the traditional bureaucratic system can be observed in this task. Additionally, anyone entering the shrine area, including the forest, must abstain from impurity out of respect for the gods and the traditional leaders' authority. Along these, it can be seen that some traditional village leaders do a significant service by performing the duties associated with this ritual. They and their duties are easily identifiable as follows:

The Village Headman (Gam Mahela)

As the village headman (also known as the village chief), he or she holds considerable power in traditional tank communities, where this role holds great significance. A hereditary position is passed down from generation to generation, specially from father to son, and the power of this position is extremely powerful for two days, particularly during the Game Danaya Ritual, which is also known as the almsgiving ritual of the village. This traditional leadership continues to play an important role in maintaining social control in the village and enhancing a sense of collective consciousness among the villagers even their daily lives.

Ranage Ariyadasa, the village headman for the previous 15 years, is the inheritor of an acre of paddy land behind the Devalaya, which he is constructing temporarily while performing rituals for God Kataragama and God Kadawara. Milk rice is prepared from the previous season's paddy harvest and offered to the gods during the village alms giving ceremony. Villagers say that nothing can be done without the permission of the Gam Mahela or the village headman. Today, many people of the village refer to him as 'Gammahe', the one of the traditional names for the village's headman while only the most intimate call himself 'Rana'.

Since Rana's father relocated to Polonnaruwa, he inherited this traditional post from his elder brother. As a result of Rana's father demised, Rana inherited the Gam Mahela, or village headman position.

The village headman is currently instructing his children on how to perform this task, and in his pass away, his son will traditionally inherit this position and responsibility. Thus, his son should be able to remember and perform all rituals associated with the Game Danaya and his responsibilities as the next village headman.

However, in a radically altered social context such as today's, the activism of this traditional leadership or a subset of bureaucracy can be highlighted as a distinctive cultural feature.

The Shaman who prepares rice for the Game Danaya Ritual (Muruthan Kapuwa) Muruthan Kapuwa is the one who performs one of the main functions of the Game Danaya ritual and who is responsible for making the rice pot (Muruthan Haliya) for the deities during this ritual. His main duty during this ritual is to assist the chief shaman for performing rituals including the preparation of offerings (Yahan Ariima) for the gods.

Additionally, he makes vows for the gods for daily purposes, such as when someone is ill, facing calamities, agricultural or any other purpose, or when peasants travel outside of the hamlet. Those vows should be fulfilled especially during the village's annual alms-giving ritual, which usually takes place in August.

The Chief Shaman (Kapurala)

The chief shaman also plays a major role in the annual alms giving of ritual of the village. The chief shaman also plays a significant role in the village's annual alms giving ritual. He is responsible for pleading or praying for the gods, accepting offerings of devotees for the gods, making vows, and practically all other spiritual responsibilities associated with the ritual. Usually, he is brought in from another village in order to obtain the peasants' respect.

Furthermore, it can be seen that there are numerous responsible village-level traditional leaders who are making significant contributions to the continued existence of the village and its subsistence pattern. They can also be distinguished as follows:

Vel Vidane (In incharge of paddy fields and tanks)

In traditional cascaded tank villages, village agriculture and water management were handled by the Vel Vidane. The unique feature of the Bellankadawala cascaded tank village is that even today, the traditional leadership positions of Vel Vidane can be seen. This is a hereditary position that serves as the head of the village's tank. Each farmer pays the Vel Vidane a share of the harvest in exchange for his services. It is equal to one-quarter of the bushel of harvest. Vel Vidanes' primary responsibilities can be pointed out as follows:

This position's primary responsibilities include providing leadership and coordinating the tank's maintenance. A system called Pangu Katti was used to maintain the tank bund. Using a local measurement system, the Vel Vidane measured the tank bund and divided it into bamba or fathom units. A fathom foot is six feet long. Each farmer was assigned a portion of the bund to maintain in proportion to the size of their paddy land. Thus, Vel Vidane is in charge of commanding farmers to clean up the tank bund, remove termite nests, and repair damage from cattle herding. He also performed another duty by leading farmers and villagers to Katti Kapima. In this process, sediments from the tank are removed and used as a natural fertilizer in the paddy fields. The primary responsibility traditional position is to open and close the sluice gate as necessary. Further, he is known as the person who is responsible to release water from village tank to paddy fields

according to paddy field. When it comes to major agricultural events such as ploughing and harvesting, the Vel Vidane is the one who determines the dates. He is also the one who started all these activities associated with rituals and customs. Accordingly, Vel Vidane is contributing significantly to the continued existence of the villagers' agro-based life.

Conclusion

The importance of participatory management by traditional leaders for irrigation and water resources has been emphasized throughout the world. It is very important to maintain traditional leadership for the existence of the tank villages since it encourages community participation in irrigation management by implementing traditional approaches to irrigation management tasks. In this position, peasants become in charge of the operation and maintenance of the irrigation facilities. This community participation is also a very supportive approach to achieving a nation's sustainable development goals because it reduces the amount of intermediation required by the government in the irrigation sector of the rural economy. The spiritual connection with the tank and agricultural practices that are incorporated into the traditional way of life help to strengthen the bond between villagers and the tank system as well. Water management and agriculture systems used by indigenous people in cascaded tank villages are considered to be system knowledge that is heavily reliant on traditional leaders and knowledge. Even today, this traditional leadership system has coexisted with formal village government officials in order to address the social, cultural, economic, and spiritual needs of the peasants in a coordinated manner. Accordingly, it can be experienced that the traditional leadership in cascaded tank villages creates a very important combination of socio-cultural, environmental, and economic services for the benefit of mankind.

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