

## Muslim sign of the Sri Lankan deity concept; A Study of Beliefs Associated with God 'Gale Bandara'

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**Abstract:** In Sri Lanka, a culturally rich country, the concept of deities associated with folk religion is prevalent. It is common to see the Sinhalese, Tamil and Christian people perform rituals to deities rooted in their religions and to certain gods and goddesses worshipped locally. In Islam, the concept of 'gods' does not exist beyond the one supreme deity 'Allah'. Islam is strictly monotheistic, emphasizing the worship of a single, indivisible God, referred to as Allah in Arabic. However, a local deity named Gale Bandara, who is worshipped by Muslims in Sri Lanka and is believed to have Muslim origins, has joined the pantheon of gods in Sri Lanka. The aim of this research is to study the Muslim people's beliefs and folklore surrounding the Gale Bandara deity, who is also worshipped by Muslims despite their monotheistic religious background. The research question for this study is: What folk cultural factors influence the worship of the Gale Bandara deity by Muslim people with a monotheistic religious background? Data for this descriptive research conducted using qualitative data were gathered from primary sources, such as interviews and observations, and secondary sources, such as books. The basis for this research is the two historical Gale Bandara Devalas (Sinhala and Muslim) located in Kurunegala. Data were collected by selecting 20 data contributors under purposive sampling, including the Dewala's priests, devotees, and local people. The Sinhala version of Gale Bandara's legend emphasizes his royal lineage and tragic death, which ultimately leads to his deification. This version connects deeply with Sinhala Buddhist culture, portraying Gale Bandara as a protector deity with strong ties to the land and its people. In contrast, the Muslim version of the legend, while sharing some elements with the Sinhala narrative, emphasizes his Muslim heritage and the continuation of Islamic traditions through his veneration as a saint-like figure. The dual nature of Gale Bandara, rooted in both Sinhala and Muslim traditions, reflects a unique blend of cultural syncretism that transcends religious boundaries, offering a symbol of unity in a region often marked by religious and ethnic divisions. Although Muslims perform their worship in a monotheistic religious setting, it can be concluded from the research data that the Sri Lankan Muslim community has received influences from local worship practices, etc., prevalent in Sri Lankan society through cultural diffusion.

**Key words:** *Gale Bandara, deity concept, Muslim tradition, Beliefs, folklore*

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## Introduction

Gale Bandara is a revered deity in the Kurunegala district of Sri Lanka, recognized for its unique place within the religious and cultural landscape of the region. The worship of Gale Bandara is deeply intertwined with local beliefs, where legends and rituals have been passed down through generations. It appears that Buddhists and Muslims come together to worship a deity believed to be of part Sinhalese and part Muslim origin. It is a notable feature here that Muslims maintain a separate shine and Buddhists maintain a separate shine. Some highlight some degree of unity between Buddhists and Muslims in terms of religious traditions, while others point to stark differences or mistrust between followers of the two religious traditions (Silva, 2019) The idea of ‘gods’ other than Allah, the one supreme deity, is nonexistent in Islam. Islam emphasizes the worship of a single, indivisible God, known in Arabic as Allah, and is a purely monotheistic religion. This monotheism is stated specifically in the Qur’an in a number of verses, including. “Say, He is Allah, [who is] One. Allah, the Eternal Refuge. He neither begets nor is born, nor is there to Him any equivalent” (Surah Al-Ikhlās, 112:1-4). “Your God is one God. There is no deity [worthy of worship] except Him, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate” (Surah Al-Baqarah 2:163). Accordingly, it is clear that Islam strongly rejects the existence or worship of multiple gods and is based on the principle of ‘*Tawheed*’ (the oneness of God).

However, a local deity named Gale Bandara, who is worshipped by Muslims in Sri Lanka and is believed to have Muslim origins, has joined the pantheon of gods in Sri Lanka. The aim of this research is to study the beliefs and folklore surrounding the Gale Bandara god, who is also worshipped by Muslims with a monotheistic religious background. The research question is in this research, what folk cultural factors influence the worship of the God of Gale Bandara by Muslim people with a monotheistic religious background. The origin story of the Gale Bandara deity from Kurunegala is widely recognized among Sinhala Buddhists in the region. The local Muslim community has a different version of this origin story, which differs in some details from the Sinhalese legend. It is worth noting that a ruler named Waththimi, who is central to these stories, does not appear in early historical texts like the Mahawamsa or Dipawamsa but is mentioned only in later writings (Raheem, 2023).

It is necessary to examine the beliefs of the Muslim community and the Sinhalese people, who are worshipped by the monotheistic religious background, about this Gale Bandara deity. Also, the

Gale Bandara Devala in Kurunegala is unique in that it is the only Dewala built for the God of the Gale Bandara, who is worshipped by the Muslim community. The Gale Bandara Dewala, which is worshipped by the Sinhalese people, is also located close to the Dewala where the Muslim community worships. Accordingly, the beliefs and folklore elements that are considered intangible cultural heritage surrounding this have been studied from an anthropological perspective.

## **Materials and Methods**

This research has been done using the content analysis methodology that comes under the descriptive research category. The study takes an anthropological approach, collecting and analyzing data using qualitative research techniques. This is because qualitative data contribute more significantly to achieving the objectives of this research. The study was conducted using one of the anthropological approaches, observing beliefs and folk religious systems through ethnographic analysis, which falls under the cultural approach in anthropological studies. The research is based entirely on primary and 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. Data for this descriptive research conducted using qualitative data was gathered from primary sources, such as interviews and observations, and secondary sources, such as books. The basis for this research is the two historical Gale Bandara Dewalas (Sinhala and Muslim) located in Kurunegala. Data were collected by selecting 20 data contributors under purposive sampling, including the Dewala's priests, devotees, and local people. The total sample consisted of 20 data contributors, including the two priests of the two Dewalas, 12 devotees (6 from each Devala), and 6 local residents (3 from each Dewala). Semi-structured interviews and observation were used to collect data.

## **Results and Discussion**

Sinhala concepts of gods and goddesses, who do not occupy much space in Sri Lankan historical chronicles, but who performed many great social and religious services and sacrificed their lives for the nation of Sri Lanka, are found among the concepts of gods and goddesses. They are known as the '*Bandara deviyān*' (Gods of Bandara). It is generally accepted that there are currently sixty-seven '*Bandara Gods*'. Therefore, these Bandara Devas are known as the '*Baṇḍara devī haṭṭa hat kaṭṭuva*'. Since these Bandara Gods spread their power and blessings to various parts of Sri Lanka, a large number of them are also found in the Dewalas built in those parts. For example, the Henakada Biso Bandara Dewala in Gampola Botalapitiya, built for the Henakada Biso Bandara

God, the Aluth Nuwara Dewala built for the Dadimunda Bandara God and as well as the two Gale Bandara Dewalas in Kurunegala, built for the Gale Bandara and Wathhimi Bandara God, etc. This research is conducted on the Gale Bandara God or Wathhimi Bandara God belonging to the Bandara Sixty-seven Kattuwa. Some say that Gale Bandara God and Wathhimi Bandara God are one person, while others say that these two are two gods. However, a clear understanding of this can be gained by paying attention to the legends surrounding the God of Gale Bandara.

### **Sinhala Legend**

As with many Bandara cults, the legend of Gale Bandara is deeply rooted in local history. King Buveneka Bahu I, who ruled Kurunegala from 1272 to 1284, initially had no male heir to succeed him. The royal astrologer predicted that the king's first son would be born from a consort of a different faith. During one of his visits, the king encountered a beautiful Muslim woman in the village of Aswedduma. He secretly married her as a lesser consort (*yakada dōliya*), and she was later added to his harem (Welgama, 2020). Eventually, the Muslim consort gave birth to a baby boy, who was named Wathhimi Bandara, meaning 'the prince destined to acquire wealth.' The legend also suggests that Wathhimi was of royal lineage. For his safety, the prince was sent to Beruwala, where he was raised and educated as a Muslim by his maternal relatives. grew up as a Muslim in a Mohammadian environment. When Prince Wathhimi Bandara was still a teenager, his father went to war against another ruler and called the Wathhimi Bandara prince back to Kurunegala to manage the kingdom in his absence. The king then set out for war with his troops and on the same day his Sinhalese queen gave birth to a son. Before setting out for war, the king instructed his queens that if he was victorious, he would raise a white flag and send a signal, and if he was defeated, he would raise a black flag and send a message. After winning the war, the king sent a messenger to deliver the news to his wives. To play a joke on the queens, the king instructed the messenger to first raise the black flag and then immediately raise the white flag. However, the messenger got drunk on his way back and only raised the black flag, forgetting to switch to the white one. When the queens saw the black flag, they believed the king had been defeated, and in despair, all 20 queens, except the Muslim consort, jumped to their deaths from the '*Belumgala*' (The place where you can look around from the top of the mountain or rock) hill. The newborn prince, the rightful heir to the throne, was found by a washerwoman (Halulanda) who worked at the palace. She secretly took the child, along with a golden belt (*havadiya*) she found on the floor. Upon realizing the tragedy, the

messenger also jumped to his death from the top of *Belumgala*. When the king returned with his troops and saw what had happened, he, too, followed suit and ended his life.

With the kingdom now without a ruler, the Muslims of Aswedduma arranged for the teenage Wathhimi Bandara to be crowned as the successor to Buvenekabahu I. According to some versions of the legend, Wathhimi initially won over a group of Sinhala ministers by generously rewarding them, but this alliance was short-lived. Over time, the young king alienated the Sinhala Buddhist establishment through his actions. Having been raised in a Muslim environment, the new king increasingly favored Muslims, appointing them as his ministers, which displeased the Sinhala elite families. At this point, a *ranthâliya* (golden pot) began to float in the Kurunegala Lake (*Ranthaliya Wewa*), and despite repeated attempts, the king was unable to retrieve it. He enlisted ritual specialists, or '*kattadiyas*', from distant places like Matara, with the condition that they would be executed if they failed to recover the treasure. When these specialists failed, they were beheaded, leading the Sinhala elite to fear that the king was planning a gradual extermination of the Sinhalese, beginning with the *kattadiyas*. The Sinhalese were gripped with fear, and the Buddhist monks became deeply concerned about the future of the kingdom. Resenting the idea of being ruled by a non-Buddhist, the Buddhist monks devised a plan to assassinate the king. They decided to exploit the king's eagerness to obtain the floating treasure by suggesting that he organize a '*pirith*' chanting ceremony on the summit of Elephant Rock (Ethugala). The greedy king, unaware of their intentions, eagerly agreed to the proposal (Welgama, 2020).

A beautifully decorated pavilion was built on the rock for the chanting, with a special stand prepared for the king to participate, hoping to secure the hidden treasure. The ceremony began with the king as the chief guest. However, at midnight, as planned, the king was pulled down from the rock by a group of secret agents assigned to carry out the assassination. The legend continues, stating that after the king's assassination, he was immediately reborn as a demon. Filled with rage, the demon killed all those who had conspired against him. His violent actions caused widespread fear among the people. At this point, the God Kataragama intervened and met with the demon, offering to elevate him to the status of a deity on the condition that he would cease his violent behavior. The demon agreed, and a shrine was built in his honor. He was granted the authority (*varam*) to bless and assist those who sought his help. This powerful deity became known as *Gale Bandara Deviyo*, in recognition of his connection to rock.

## Muslim legend

The Muslim version of the legend differs in several details from the Sinhala version. In the Muslim story, a woman from an Arab country arrives in Sri Lanka with her son, searching for her husband, who had traveled to Sri Lanka for trade. Unable to find him, she eventually meets and marries the king in the village of Aswedduma, who later converts to Islam. After the king's death, her son ascends to the throne and rules the country under his mother's guidance. In this version, Wathhimi is portrayed as fully Muslim, rather than half-Muslim as in the Sinhala legend. After Wathhimi's violent death, a Muslim relative had a dream instructing them to bury the king's remains at a specific location, which was done according to Muslim rites, and a tomb was erected over his grave. Interestingly, this version of the legend was not passed down by Muslim priests associated with the Galebandara Muslim shrine but by Muslim elders connected to the shrine dedicated to Gale Bandara's mother.

## Literature associated with Gale Bandara Legend

The pair of *Puskola* books (palm leaf book) bearing the classification numbers 277594 and 277708 of the Peradeniya University Main Library contain the stories of Wathimi Bandara under different names. In the *Puskola* version numbered 277594, Wathimi's story is outlined in eleven poems. In the ninth verse, Wathimi uses the name 'Ethugal Bandara' for the deity, and mentions that there is a shrine in Ethugala (Kurunegala), led by a Muslim priest (Prasanga, 2020). The plot to assassinate Prince Wathhimi Bandara is articulated in the poem '*Gale Bandara Vitthi*' in the following manner: (Welgama, 2020)

*indajōti samaga kathā karagena siṭi aettō  
randa vamin gala mudunē vādaṭa paṭan gattō  
bānda pirit maṇḍappaya sun kam hæma dattō andama ehi  
balā mavita vūvō dænu mættō*

*us tuṅgavana e pirit maṇḍapē dakuṇu pasinā  
tos net niriṇḍuṭa hiṇḍagena pirit asana lesinā  
sun kamayen yutuva kuḍā geyakut tanavaminā  
as vasamin gæba mī kaḍa paṭakin raṇḍavaminā*

*ruvin siyal vāda nimakoṭa rajuhaṭa pavasaminā  
saṅgun hæṭa namak vāda mavāgena vit peraharinā paṭan  
gattu pirit dahasa asannaṭa men pæmiṇā  
lobin siṭiyē vat himi raja sun kam geyi asunā*

*cellū kala ekalē  
mælla nova giya udulē  
rælla mæti gollē  
tallu karapi egala pallē*

ඉන්දජෝති සමග කථා කරගෙන සිටි ඇත්තෝ  
රන්ද වමින් ගල මුදුනේ වැඩට පටන් ගත්තෝ  
බැන්ද පිරිත් මණ්ඩපය සුන් කම් හැම දත්තෝ  
අන්දම එහි බලා මවිත වූවෝ දැනු මැත්තෝ

උස් තුඟුවන එ පිරිත් මණ්ඩපේ දකුණු පසිනා  
තොස් තෙත් නිරිදුට හිඳගෙන පිරිත් අසන ලෙසිනා  
සුන් කමයෙන් යුතුව කුඩා ගෙයකුත් තනවමිනා  
අස් වසමින් ගැබ මී කඩ පටකින් රදවමිනා

රුවින් සියල් වැඩ නිමකොට රජුහට පවසමිනා  
සඟුන් හැට නමක් වැඩ මවාගෙන විත් පෙරහරිනා  
පටන් ගත්තු පිරිත් දහස අසන්නට මෙන් පැමිණා  
ලොබින් සිටියේ වත් හිමි රජ සුන් කම් ගෙයි අසුනා

ඇල්ලු කල එකලේ  
මැල්ල නොව ගිය උදුලේ  
රැල්ල මැති ගොල්ලේ  
තල්ලු කරපි එගල පල්ලේ

*sit lesa rajahaṭa mæti kaḷa varaden  
atvuṇi gala desa iṇṭa bæri va den  
Wathhimi kumarā mæruṇi korōden  
mat uṇi nagaraya leḍa sãdīmen*

*kelē varada mæti vathimi kumarūṭa  
balē pāti deviyek vī gala piṭa  
talē ehimi lesa næti teda pāvīṭa  
galē ebaṇḍara namaki edā siṭa (Welgama, 2020)*

සිත් ලෙස රජහට මැති කළ වරදෙන්  
අත්වුණ ගල දෙස ඉන්ට බැට්ව දෙන්  
වත් හිමි කුමරා මැරුණ කොරෝදෙන්  
මත් උණ නගරය ලෙඩ සැදීමෙන

කෙළේ වරද මැති වත්හිමි කුමරු ට  
බලේ පාති දෙවියෙක් වී ගල පිට  
තලේ එහිමි ලෙස නැති තෙද පාවිට  
ගලේ එබණ්ඩර නමකි එදා සිට

### Shrines of Gale Bandara Deity

After Wathimi Bandara was deified by the deity Kataragama, a shrine was built in his honor. He became known as *Gale Bandara Deviyo*, in recognition of his connection to the rock. The people of Kurunegala believe that after Wathimi Bandara shed his demonic form and became a deity, he occasionally rides a white horse on top of Ethugala rock. Gale Bandara is revered by both Sinhalese and Muslims. Today, there are two Gale Bandara shrines in Kurunegala town, one managed by a Sinhalese *kapurala* and the other by an Islamic priest. Despite their different management, both shrines are visited and worshipped by Sinhalese and Muslims alike. Legend also mentions the location of these two temples. That is, it is said that when Prince Wathimi fell to the ground, his head was separated from the trunk. The Muslims took the king's headless body and buried it in Watimi Road according to Muslim custom. It is considered as the Muslim shrine today. The Gale Bandara Devalaya operated by Sinhalese Kapurala lies close to the Ethkanda Rajamaha Viharaya on the Kurunegala-Kandy Road. This called as “Purana Gale Bandara Dewalaya”. Here there is statue of God Gale Bandara on a white horse. It is believed that this Dewala is located at the place where the intervention of God Kataragama tamed the devil.

The Sinhala Gale Bandara Dewlaya is situated on a small road beyond the Ethkadha Shrine. The path leading to the temple offers a serene and traditional atmosphere, reflective of its historical and spiritual significance. The Dewala complex consists of several small buildings. One building, painted in white, prominently displays the sign ‘Purana Gale Bandara Dewlaya’, indicating its historical importance. Another building is constructed using clay (*mati*), showcasing traditional architectural methods. When entrance, there is a striking statue of Gale Bandara sit on a white horse.



**Figure 01 – Sinhala Gale Bandara Dewlaya**  
 Source: <https://amazinglanka.com/wp/gale-bandara-devalaya>

This Muslim Gale Bandara Dewala is located on Vatimi Road which connects to the Athugala Rajamaha Viharaya road. This is similar to a mosque. It is painted green. It is believed that the tomb of the Wathhimi prince is located in this temple. There are no other idols here and only this grave is worshipped. This tomb is considered to be the place where Prince Wathhimi was buried according to Muslim custom after his death. At the middle of the shrine lies the tomb of Vahimi Bandara, the tomb is covered with a green cloth and enclosed within glass, adding a sense of reverence and protection. Surrounding the tomb are numerous green and gold cloths, signifying offerings made by the devotees. The area around the tomb is decorated with colorful flowers, symbolizing respect and devotion. According to the Islamic religion, the Bandara deity is considered a messenger (Awliya) of the god 'Allah', who is considered the only God (Liyanarachchi, 2024)



**Figure 02. Appearance of the Muslim Gale Bandara Devalaya from the Road and Tomb of Gale Bnadra**

Source: <https://images.app.goo.gl/Y63DEkerWKksmkVN9>,  
<https://images.app.goo.gl/cbMZ5p8piEXsJmob6>

In Sri Lanka, Sunni Islam has traditionally been the main practice among Muslims. This group has generally been accommodating in its religious practices, maintaining friendly relations with other religious and cultural groups. They also permit a range of practices, such as worship of Sufi saints, which has been observed for at least a couple of centuries (Herath & Rambukwella, 2015). For Muslims, Gale Bandara is recognized as an Awliyar, a type of saint in the Sufi tradition. There is also a shrine dedicated to Manamma, the mother of Wathhimi Bandara, in a nearby Muslim settlement called Teliagolla (Niwas et al., 2016). The Muslim Gale Bandara Dewlaya is a site of deep religious significance, blending Islamic influences with local cultural practices. Despite limited information from the caretakers, the visual and physical elements within the shrine reflect the devotion and reverence of its visitors, making it a unique and sacred space. However, there are differences in both the origin stories and the way these shrines are managed. The main difference that can be seen between this shrine is that idolatry cannot be seen in the Muslim church, while idolatry can be seen in the Sinhala shrine. And the Muslim shrine is built in the form of a mosque, while the Sinhala shrine is built in the form of a typical Sinhala Dewalaya.

The Gale Bandara shrine, located in the Kurunegala area, is a revered site that holds deep spiritual and cultural significance. The deity Gale Bandara is believed to have become divine after experiencing an unjust death, and as a result, he is seen as a symbol of justice, fairness, and protection. People from diverse religious backgrounds, including Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, and Muslims, visit the shrine to seek his assistance in various aspects of their lives.

One of the primary reasons for visiting the shrine is to seek protection from injustice. Many individuals who face unfair treatment in family disputes, land conflicts, and legal battles come to the shrine, believing that Gale Bandara intervenes on behalf of those seeking justice. Those involved in court cases, particularly related to family or property issues, frequently visit to pray for a favorable outcome.

Another common practice is seeking the deity's blessings after purchasing a new vehicle. It is customary for vehicle owners to visit the shrine and perform rituals such as tying a *panduru* (a coin wrapped in a cloth) to seek protection from accidents and ensure safe travels. This tradition highlights the community's trust in Gale Bandara's ability to safeguard their journeys.

The shrine also plays a significant role in the livelihoods of local residents. Business owners, daily wage earners, and farmers visit regularly to seek blessings for success and prosperity. They believe that the deity provides protection against financial loss, ensures a stable income, and guides them toward business growth and stability.

Additionally, people who pass by the shrine daily, such as couples, job seekers, and commuters, often stop to offer *panduru* as a gesture of respect and to seek safe passage and protection for their daily endeavors. This ritual has become a routine practice for many, reflecting their faith in the deity's power to safeguard their well-being.

What makes the Gale Bandara shrine unique is its ability to attract devotees from all religious backgrounds. Regardless of their faith, people visit the shrine to seek justice, protection, and blessings, emphasizing the deity's universal appeal. This interfaith devotion fosters a sense of community and unity, as people from different religious and cultural traditions come together to honor the deity. In addition to its religious significance, the shrine serves as a cultural and spiritual center, symbolizing hope, protection, and fairness for all who seek Gale Bandara's divine assistance.

## Conclusion

The tale of Gale Bandara in the Kurunegala district illustrates the complex interplay between religious traditions, cultural identity, and historical narratives in Sri Lanka. His worship highlights a rare intersection where both Buddhists and Muslims find common ground, despite the distinct differences in their religious practices and beliefs. The dual nature of Gale Bandara, rooted in both Sinhala and Muslim traditions, reflects a unique blend of cultural syncretism that transcends religious boundaries, offering a symbol of unity in a region often marked by religious and ethnic divisions.

The Sinhala version of Gale Bandara's legend emphasizes his royal lineage and tragic death, which ultimately leads to his deification. This version connects deeply with Sinhala Buddhist culture, portraying Gale Bandara as a protector deity with strong ties to the land and its people. In contrast, the Muslim version of the legend, while sharing some elements with the Sinhala narrative, emphasizes his Muslim heritage and the continuation of Islamic traditions through his veneration as a saint-like figure. The existence of separate shrines—one managed by Sinhalese and the other by Muslims—exemplifies both the shared reverence for the deity and the distinct ways in which each community honors him.

Generally, Muslims do not worship other gods. Flowers, lamps, betel leaves, and offerings are not used for religious ceremonies. However, these characteristics are seen in the Gale Bandara Muslim Dewala in Kurunegala.

Although Muslims perform their worship in a monotheistic religious setting, it can be concluded from the research data that the Sri Lankan Muslim community has received influences from local worship practices, etc., prevalent in Sri Lankan society through cultural diffusion.

The Gale Bandara deity serves as a cultural bridge, embodying the possibility of coexistence and mutual respect between different religious communities. However, the differences in origin stories, ritual practices, and shrine management also underscore the ongoing complexities in interfaith relations. While Gale Bandara's dual identity allows him to be a unifying figure, these disparities reflect the broader challenges of religious coexistence in Sri Lanka. Nonetheless, the continued worship of Gale Bandara by both Buddhists and Muslims signifies a shared cultural heritage that has the potential to foster greater understanding and cooperation between these communities.

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