

# Customs and Traditions connected with Tank Culture\*

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Archaeological and literary evidence amply support the theory that the Aryan settlements in Sri Lanka which commenced during the pre-Christian era were confined to the dry zone areas of the country. A predominant feature of these settlements was the establishment of the village tank, which was the focal point of the village economy. The size of the tank indicated the economic stability of the village adjoining it and the tank was virtually the life blood of the villagers. The tank provided the water required for irrigating the paddy fields and served the other communal needs such as drinking, washing, bathing, etc.

In the island's chronicle, the Mahāvamsa, references available on the subject of construction of village tanks are scanty. There are a few interesting inscriptions which record the offering of the income of fields and the revenue from the water of the tanks to the Buddhist community. The construction of a tank was achieved by pooling labour resources available in the village and therefore the tank is the common property of all those who had a claim to the settlement. Henry Parker observes that "the first irrigation works may be these village tanks containing sheafs of water that covered 2 to 3 acres to 100 acres or more, the size depending on the amount of water supply, the requirements of the village and the formation of the ground." It is evident that there was a high concentration of village tanks in the dry zone areas of the north central province, southern, north-western (and the eastern part of) the northern provinces of the country. The dry zone covered about seventy percent of the total land area of the country.

From earliest times the kings considered it their duty and responsibility to construct major tanks and canals thereby assuring regular supply of water to the entire network of irrigation works which enabled the people to engage in their main occupation, paddy cultivation. Some of the records kept by

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the early British administrators who engaged themselves in the restoration of the irrigation works have left impressive accounts about the ancient irrigation system and the significance of the village tank in relation to the life of the community. Many a tribute has been paid to the engineering skill which went into the construction of major irrigation works; for instance Henry Parker, one of the pioneers in the restoration of some of our country's irrigation works, observes "as one whose duties permitted him to gain an intimate acquaintance with ancient works, I have never concealed my admiration of the engineering knowledge of the designers of the great irrigation schemes of Ceylon, and the skill with which they constructed the works".

The water-management activities performed by the tank builders, which included even the regulating and the measurement of water, appear to be unique.

"The sentiments, traditions and interests of the people of Ceylon are very closely bound up with this question of ancient irrigation," observes Brohier. An examination of the village settlements, customs and practices of the villagers connected with tank-fed irrigation would confirm this statement.

Dickson, the first Government Agent of the North Central Province, who was associated with the restoration of a large number of village tanks during his tenure of office commencing 1873, had been a keen observer of the settlement pattern of the villagers in this Province and the relationship of the tank to the households in the village. He had discussed how the tank (*vāva*) and the village (*gama*) were integrated and were considered as inseparable units. In support of this theory he had pointed out how the tank is practically identical with the village and how the villages were named after the tank. Names such as *Siyāmbalagahavāva* and *Divulgahavāva*, for instance, connoted the villages of *Siyāmbalagaha* and *Divulgaha* respectively. He had described the organisational pattern of the traditional rural set up in the following terms:-

"The whole province is composed of a number of small agricultural republics, each has its own tank with the field below it and the duty of maintaining the tank with its canals in repair, properly by custom devolves in the community, each member being bound to contribute its share of labour in proportion to the share in the field."

Each of these "agricultural republics" is called the *Purānagama*, meaning an ancient village, and it included a village tank, tract of paddy field below it and the *gamgoda* or the cluster of houses on the side of the field covered by fruit trees and the tank bund. The *gamgoda* is encircled by a strip of communal land called the *tisbambaya* which is usually 50 to 100 yards in width. Abutting

the *tisbaṁbaya* is the village forest. Every *purāṇagama* is linked to a village temple within its precincts or outside it. A *dēvālaya*, (shrine dedicated to a deity or deities) is a very common feature in each *gamgoḍa* and is located in close proximity to the village and its tank. These shrines are sited under a large tree with spreading foliage, usually a banyan. Ayyanāyaka is considered the guardian deity and is the most eminent of the deities whose blessings are invoked.

The paddy fields abutting a tank are classified according to their proximity to the tank, taking into account the quantity of water a tank could supply. In terms of this classification the tract nearest to the tank is called *upayapoṭa* or *mulpoṭa*. The second tract is termed *härenapoṭa* or *peralapoṭa*. The third tract is termed *asvāddumpoṭa*. Each of these tracts is further sub-divided to portions termed *ihaḷabāge* (upper division) *mādabāge*, (middle division) and *pahaḷabāge* (lower division). Crown lands sold to farmers are called *akkaraval* and the extents are reckoned on the basis of acres as opposed to traditional fields which are estimated by the sowing extent of native grain measures as *āmuṇu*, *pāla*, *kuriṇi*, etc.

It has been customary to designate two strips of paddy field at either end of each tract as *kurulupāḷuva* (lit. 'bird loss') - an allowance of extra land as compensation for damage by birds. Two larger strips at each end next to the *kurulupāḷuva* are called *ālapat*. These are the property of the *gamarāla*, the hereditary chief cultivator of the village. The portions in the centre of the *poṭa* are divided equally among the shareholders, the *paṅgukāra*. The *gamarāla* who is the hereditary chief, functions as the co-ordinator of the cultivation process and is responsible for fixing dates for the issue of water, clearing of jungle, repairing of fences, ploughing, sowing, care-taking, harvesting and even for invoking the blessings of the guardian deities. In all these activities the villagers display a sense of mutual understanding and co-operation, and their allegiance to customary law.

The quantity of water available in the tank is the factor that decides the extent of land to be cultivated. When the water in the tank is inadequate the villagers, by mutual consent, agree on the *betma* cultivation. Under this system the *paṅgukārayō* (shareholders) get water to cultivate a lesser extent decided in proportion to the share (*paṅgu*) each owns in the paddy land. This practice is observed only for one crop after the harvest of which matters revert to their original position. Each shareholder has, by custom, to contribute his share of labour for fencing, care-taking, repair of tank, etc.

There were, in all, three cultivation seasons—*maha*, *yala* and *māda*. The seasons are referred to as *piṭadaḍahasa*, *akalahasa* and *mādahasa* in the ancient inscriptions.

**PŪJĀ VEDILLA.** Villagers rejoice when the tank is filled with water after rains. However if there is a threat of a breach of the tank-bund, the intervention of the guardian deities is sought. The ritual performed for the purpose is interesting and is significant sociologically. The *kapurāla* of the village *dēvālaya* is summoned for this *pūjā*. He plants a stick at the centre point of the tank bund, ties a coin with a piece of clean rag, sings an invocation - *yādinna* - and fires a shot from that point to the water in the tank. This is called a *pūjā vedilla*. Strangely enough the villagers believe that whenever this ritual has been performed the calamity rids itself.

The *yādinna* itself is interesting in many respects especially on account of the names of deities mentioned and the manner in which their intervention is sought. Following is one such invocation used in Ināmaḷuva Kōralē of the Mātālē District:-

අවසර ආයුභෝවා, ආයුබෝවා, ආයුබෝවා මින්තේරියේ වැඩ ඉන්න හත් රජ්ජුරුවන් වහන්ස, අයියනා දෙව් ස්වාමීන්වහන්ස, හිඟුරක දෙව් ස්වාමීන් වහන්ස, කළුකඩ දෙව් ස්වාමීන් වහන්ස, කළු දේවතා ස්වාමීන් වහන්ස, අඩුක් ගන්නා දෙව් ස්වාමීන් වහන්ස, පනන් දේවතා දෙව් ස්වාමීන් වහන්ස, මහා බහිරව දෙව් ස්වාමීන් වහන්ස, කඩවර දෙව් ස්වාමීන් වහන්ස, තමුන් වහන්සේලා මින්තේරියේ දොළොස් දුවට බැල්ම ඇති සත්තානුභාවයක් වලංගු වෙනවා නියත නම් වැවේ අරමුදලට, ගමේ අරමුදලට වැඩ ඉන්නා මළුවට කිස් රියන් වැකඩ බැල්ම ඇති සත්තානුභාවයක් වලංගු වෙනවා නියත නම්, තමුන්නාන්සේලා මාවැව කෝට්ටුවැව් බන්දවාගෙන මුට්ටි මංගල්ලා කිරි ඉතුරුන් ඔප්පු ගන්නා සත්තානුභාවයක් වලංගු වෙනවා නියත නම්, තමුන්නාන්සේලා දේව සමාගමේ වැඩ හිටියත්, කතරගම කන්දේ වැඩ හිටියත් මේ කියන කන්තලව්ව දිව කන් ආහරණට වැටී වදාරලා දිව නෙත්වලට පෙනී වදාරලා මේ වැවේ කොටුවට ජලධාරා වැඩිවෙලා වැව් බැම්ම පළු වීමට යන සෙයින් තමුන්නාන්සේලා ගේ දේව කරුණාව දෙවා වදාරලා මේ ජලධාරාව වාන් දෙකින් භාසිනා කර වැව් බැම්ම ලෝදුල් පවුරක් එළවා සාමාන්ත තරකරන්ඩ තමුන්නාන්සේලාට වග සැළ කර සිටලත් මෙහි යම් යම් පළුදුක් උණා කීවොකින් රටේ ගමේ ඇත්තෝ ඔක්කල්ලා කරන්ට ගරිභා කරන්ට බලා සිටින නිසා ඔක්කල්ලාවකට ගරිභාවකට ඉඩක් නොතිබා තමුන්නාන්සේලා ගේ දේව කරුණාව දෙවා වදාරා මේ ජලධාරාව වාන් දෙකින් භාසිනා කර ලෝදුල් පවුරක් එළවා සාමාන්ත බැම්ම තරකරන්ඩ අවසර ආයුභෝවා ආයුබෝවා ආයුබෝවා වා.

The English rendering would be as follows:—

“Hail! Hail! Hail! Your Lordships the Seven Divine Kings who rule over Minnēriya, Your Lord God Ayyanā, Your Lord God of Hiṅguraka, Your Lord the God of Kaḷudākāḍa, Your Lord God Kaḷu Dēvatā, Your Lord God who accepts our offerings, Your Lord God Pannan Dēvatā, Your Lord God Mahā Bahirava, Your Lord God Kaḍavara, if it is true that your Lordships rule over and take care of Doḷosdūva of Minnēriya, if it is true that you rule over and take care of the treasure of the *vāva*, the treasure of the

village, the *vāḍainnā maḷuva* and the thirty cubit long *vākaḍa*, if it is true that Your Lordships accept offerings on the inauguration of small and large tanks, we entreat Your Lordships to be pleased to give ear to this entreaty; and if Your Lordships be present at the Assembly of Deities or at Kataragamkanda, we pray that it be heard by Your Lordships' divine ears and seen by Your Lordships' divine eyes. Since this *vāva* is too full with water and there looms the threat of the breach of the bund of the *vāva*, we entreat Your Lordships to turn your divine compassion on us and cause the surging waters to flow out through the two spill-ways and also be pleased to render the tank-bund as strong as if held forth with an iron net and, Your Lordships, we again entreat you to ensure the safety of the tank-bund by causing the excess water to flow out through the spill-ways. If some damage happened to the tank-bund inspite of our prayers, the villagers would be only too ready to ridicule and condemn Your Lordships."

The invocation is in the form of a re-affirmation of the powers of the guardian deities; such popular deities as the God of Minnēriya, Ayyanāyaka, Kaḷudēvatā (who is the guardian deity of the Śrī Mahā Bōdhi - the Sacred Bōdhi Tree), and Mahā Bahirava feature in the *yādinna*. They are the accredited custodians of the treasure of the tank, the village, the tank bund, etc. The deities are further committed to this onerous task of the protection of the tank bund, as a breach would affect their reputation, and would even subject these popular deities to general humiliation. In the *yādinna* already quoted specific reference occurs to the *mutti maṅgalyaya* and *kiri-itiravīma* as customary rituals associated with tank cultivation.

**MUTTI MAṅGALYAYA**—The *mutti maṅgalyaya* is a traditional religious rite held in honour of deities who preside over tanks. Ayyanā, the most eminent of them, occupies a very prominent place among the deities worshipped in the N.C.P., and is considered the patron deity of this territory. The devotees believe that Ayyanā is primarily concerned with assuring a full tank and a regular water supply to the paddy fields, thus guaranteeing a prosperous harvest and their own well being. The worship of Ayyanā was so popular that in almost every village in the N.C.P. there was a simple shrine for this deity often in the shade of a huge spreading tree.

Ievers in his Manual makes the following observation on this ritual called the *mutti maṅgalyaya*:

"Mutti Maṅgalya or, the Pot Ceremony to God Aiyānā. The God Aiyānā presides over tanks which are supposed to be under his special protection. When a tank fills and is about to spill the elders of the village, chiefly Gamaralas, proceed to the tank, and at the muttinamana tree a salute is

“offered” to the god by the firing of two guns. The chief Gamarala then steps forward and sends up a *yatika*, or an address, in which he announces to the god that the tank is being filled, and that cultivation will be begun, and that after the harvest is gathered the *Mulmangalya* will be performed. At the same time a few copper coins—one or two fanams in value—are wrapped up in a piece of rag daubed in saffron. The piece of rag with copper is then tied to a branch of the tree, closing the ceremony by commending the tank, village, its residents, and its cattle to the protection of the deity. This last ceremony is called *Pandurubandinawa*.”

The harvest is gathered. The villagers assemble, and appoint a day for the performance of the *mutti* ceremony. The nearest *anumätirāla* (the mouth-piece or (?) oracle of a god) is invited; the tom-tom beater and the dhobies (washermen) are noticed. The appointed day arrives, and the chief *gamarāla* directs that every shareholder of the village should contribute towards the *mutti* feast. Rice, coconut-oil cakes and ripe plantains, and betel and arecanuts are collected to be served to all that assemble. The meal being over, the *anumätirāla*, accompanied by the whole village, proceeds in procession with two new earthen pots to where the tree stands on the bund. A raised platform, overhung with cloth and built under the shade of the tree at an early hour of the evening, receives the betel offering. The pots, incensed and daubed with saffron, are now placed on the platform, or *yahana*. The *anumätirāla* sends up a *yätikāva*, or an address, to the deity and then begins to dance. Dancing and tom-tomming continue till dawn. At break of day the pots are carried up to the tree and hung on the stumps of two branches.

The deity through his *anumätirāla*, makes known that the offerings are accepted, and that the tank, the village with its inhabitants, both man and beast, are taken under his protection for a certain period—one, two, or three years, according to the pleasure of his divine majesty. The people return to the village, and the *anumätirāla* with them. The latter dances, and the tom-toms beat until the midday meal is ready. At noon this is partaken and the people disperse.

A somewhat similar ceremony is performed in case of an epidemic among men or beasts.

The term “Ayanar” is said to be Tamil, and the god’s real name is “*Kaiyanar*,” so called because he sprang from the hand (*kai*) of Viṣṇu. He is said to have fifty names, and under each appellation he is possessed of a different power.

This custom is performed in the traditional villages with certain modifications even in the present day. Although according to Ievers, Ayyanā appears to be the only deity who is invoked in the *mutṭi maṅgalyaya* it is evident from the customs followed in the N.C.P. that several other deities are invoked through this popular ritual. The *kapurāla* has taken the place of the *anumātirāla* and is often paid in cash for his services. After collecting the *yala* harvest and before preparing for the *maha* season villagers assemble in a house selected for the purpose. The *kapurāla* offers the *yātikā* throughout the night. On the following morning the villagers move to the shrine at the tank-bund to perform the *mutṭi maṅgalyaya*. This is followed by the *vāvē-rājakāriya* at which *kiri- itirilla* (boiling of milk) forms the major event. Ayyanā Deyiyo, Kambili Deyiyo, Pudurāssa Deyiyo, Ilandāri Deyiyo and Kaḍugat Baṇḍāra are deities invoked at the *kiri- itirilla*. Thereafter the congregation partakes of the milk-rice cooked at the site. After the morning meal the villagers return to the venue of the all-night ritual to prepare and share the *maha dāne* (the big alms-giving). At the end of the day they disperse, thus concluding a series of traditional rituals - which are termed as *gamē rājakāriya*. These rituals indicate the rich village traditions which promote harmonious communal living.

In some villages *gamē rājakāriya* is performed in this elaborate manner once in three years. The annual event which is an abridged version of the larger ritual is sometimes referred to as *velē rājakāriya* the highlight of which is the *kiri- itirilla* (boiling of milk) which is followed by a community breakfast. This ritual, the villagers believe, ensures a prosperous harvest, health to the villagers and their herd and the general prosperity of the community.

The ancient customs connected with tank culture are still observable in the traditional villages of the dry zone; the practices however vary considerably in different parts of the country. With the commencement of the major colonization schemes and the introduction of new methods of cultivation even the time honoured customs have gone through many changes during the present period. It will be a very rewarding exercise to undertake sociological studies of these practices before they become completely extinct.