

An anthropological study of ‘*Rathikāma Bali Yāgaya* (Bali ritual)’ in traditional folk medicine to treat infertility

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Abstract

Reproductive processes and the generation of posterity are important for the survival of organisms. As man became accustomed to civilized life, motherhood and fatherhood were considered noble and fortunate things. Accordingly, a married couple without children had to face various forms of social stigma. Because married people who do not have children are believed by people to be a symbol of unluck. Thus, infertility is recognized as a disease and there are various treatments for it. Traditional folk medicine in Sri Lanka also offers various treatments to cure infertility. Among them, the ‘Sabaragamuwa Rathikāma Bali ritual’ is performed for both men and women. The researchers aim to study this ‘Rathikāma Bali ritual’ for the curing of infertility in traditional folk medicine and the cultural value given to rituals in indigenous medicine. To achieve these objectives, a content analysis of qualitative data collected using secondary sources is performed here. To alleviate vaginal discharge and vaginitis related diseases in women, the Sabaragamuwa ‘Bali adura’ (Bali performer) conducts the Rathikāma Bali ritual. An idol is made using clay for this ritual. In this Rathikāma Bali statue, a woman with a naked upper body and with a ‘punkalasa’ (pot of prosperity) in her right hand and a ‘sewla’ (Cuckoo bird) in her left hand is moulded. When moulding the Bali statue, the woman’s figure is placed on the man’s lap. After the introduction of the Bali statue to the patient (baliya pāwā deema), the ‘Namaskārā’ and ‘Vēēdimālāwa’ (poems and prose) are recited. In this way, all the rites are performed and the Rathikāma Bali ritual is performed till dawn. They believe that looking at the Bali statue and listening to poetry and drinking local medicine until the next morning will cure the condition.

Keywords: Rathikāma, Bali ritual, folk medicine, infertility, traditional practices

Introduction

Reproductive function is one of the major factors on which the existence of a living organism on Earth depends. Cultural value has been added to human reproduction and childbirth since the beginning of human civilization. To give a better example of this, it can be pointed out that today almost all countries of the world consider “motherhood and fatherhood” as the most precious and noble things. From time immemorial, having children, and being a parent has been recognized as culturally superior as well as a cultural and social need. For that reason, in many societies around the world from time immemorial childless couples have been despised and marginalized. It is imperative that the person who is confined to a cultural framework archive the commonalities of that particular culture, otherwise the relevant society will be stigmatized. Thus, in a society where childbearing, motherhood and fatherhood are highly esteemed, if a couple is childless, they will suffer greatly. In many societies, women suffer more than men. Especially in the case of a traditional Sri Lankan married woman who does not have children, it can be seen that she is called ‘*Wanda gāni*’ (barren woman) or a ‘*Mūsala gāni*’ (unfortunate woman) and may not be allowed to participate in any good deeds. There is evidence that infertility treatments have participated in many parts of the world since ancient times. It is also evident from the Vedic literature that the general population during that time was familiar with the ideas of artificial insemination which involved the manual injection of semen into the reproductive tract of the women (Kalra et al., 2016). Enchantment mixtures (magic portions) created by the sages for the queens of childless kings to make them pregnant was a typical practice during 3500 BC – 500 AD (Sharma et al., 2018). The absence of children in a married couple can be simply referred to as infertility. The World Health Organization calls this condition a disease. There they explain infertility as follows: “Infertility is a disease of the reproductive system defined as the failure to achieve a clinical pregnancy after 12 months or more of regular unprotected sexual intercourse.” (World Health Organization, 2020). Various medical techniques are used around the world to cure this condition. This includes seeking the help of modern medicine and traditional medicine. Traditional medical

methods have been used in Sri Lanka since ancient times for infertility as well as for fetal care. This medical practice is called ‘*Desheeya Chikithsa*’ (indigenous therapy) or ‘*Sinhala Vedakama*’ (Sinhala medicine) (Uragoda, 1987). Traditional folk medicine in Sri Lanka uses four modalities of treatment to cure a disease. These include local medicine, food, social practices and rituals. All four of these treatment modalities are used in traditional folk medicine to cure infertility. This research focuses on the ‘*Bali Yāga*’ (performing bali rituals) under rituals. Traditional folk medicine uses various rituals to cure infertility and ‘*Bali Yāga*’ is a unique cultural feature. According to the belief of the Sinhalese people, some diseases are caused by the influence of bad planets (Leslie, 1977). Unlike other rituals performed by the ritual specialists, *bali* are virtually tailor-made for each individual case. Bali are always organized according to the patient’s (*āthurayā*) condition and the planetary forces most likely to impinge on his or her life. In other words, the size of the ritual is directly linked to the individuality of the patient and the misfortune suffered (Silva, 2000). If a person becomes ill due to these reasons, the traditional medical system also prescribes the treatment to be done for it. Among them, ‘*Bāra*’ (vows), ‘*Hāra*’ (making offerings), ‘*Bali*’ (performing bali rituals), and ‘*Thovil*’ (exorcism) are the major forms (Kusumarathne, 2005). It is specifically aimed at the evil eye, evil mouth, etc. and as well as to eliminate the dangers to mankind caused by planetary defects. Indigenous physicians knew that such defects were difficult to cure with medication alone. Therefore, they have taken steps to perform rituals such as *Bali rituals* for these ailments (Sedarman, 1964). In this research, the researchers have focused on the ‘*Rathikāma Baliya*’ which is being carried out exclusively in the Sabaragamuwa Province of Sri Lanka. The researchers aim to study this ‘*Rathikāma Bali* ritual’ for the curing of infertility in traditional folk medicine and the cultural value given to rituals in indigenous medicine. *Rathikāma Bali* ritual is unique in that they treat infertility of both men and women by eliminating mental conditions and giving other medications. These rituals are valued as an intangible cultural heritage of Sri Lanka as well as a valuable medical treatment.

Materials and Methods

This research has been done using the content analysis methodology that comes under the descriptive research category. Only qualitative data is used for this research. That is because qualitative data contribute more to the achievement of the research objectives. 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.

Results and Discussion

Sri Lanka is an island in the South Asian region. It is a well-known fact that in the last two thousand five hundred years of its history, Sri Lanka has been able to create a unique compendium of knowledge in the field of traditional medicine (Abeyrathne, 2019). There are hardly any records on the state of medicine in pre-historic times. One view is that any knowledge of medicine that the early inhabitants had was confined to an acquaintance with the empirical use of a few drugs, which they knew by experience to cure some of the ailments to which they were subject (Uragoda, 1987). In a multicultural country like Sri Lanka, there are many different medical practices (Jayasiri and Premaratne, 2011). Evidence has revealed that there was an inherited medical system in Sri Lankan society. It dates back to the time of King Ravana. The traditional medicine of Sri Lanka is known as the indigenous system of medicine that existed before the advent of Ayurveda (Uragoda, 1987). From time immemorial, having children has been considered a symbol of good luck in Sri Lankan culture. The woman with children was believed to be a symbol of fertility. With the influence of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, a Buddhist culture emerged. Motherhood and fatherhood were valued in that. The absence of children in such a cultural environment led to social stigma. Infertility can be caused by various diseases of a married couple. After identifying these diseases, those who are infertile receive various treatments to have children. Indigenous medical treatments are widely used here. Indigenous medicine uses four main therapies to cure disease. They include indigenous medicine, food, social practices, and witchcraft. Here, we can identify several *Bali* rituals that fall into the category of witchcraft. Among them, the

Rathikāma Bali ritual performed in the Sabaragamuwa Province is special. The main reason for this is that this ritual treats both men and women. Other *Bali* rituals made for infertility have been made exclusively for the female. Also, the *Rathikāma Bali* ritual is performed in secret. In the indigenous medical system, the patient's weakness is identified after diagnosis. Infertility is a condition that can affect both men and women. In indigenous medicine, the man or woman is treated with drugs and rituals after being examined by a traditional healer. Traditional folk medicine believes that diseases are caused by planetary errors. There are several ways to avoid the dangers posed by the Sun and the Moon and other planets. At the same time, performing rituals for deities associated with planets is considered to be a sacrificial system (Kumaratunga, 2006). Five major '*Graha Bali* (planetary *Bali*) ritual traditions can be identified in Sri Lanka. They are Kandyan, Low Country, Sabaragamuwa, Uva, and Nuwarakalaviya regional traditions (Kumarathunga, 2006). There are three main types of sacrificial offerings. These are the '*Mal Bali*', the '*Mati bali*' or '*Ambum Bali*', and the '*Thira bali*' or '*Kada Bali*'. The method of decorating in the form of offerings using banana leaves and barks, *gop* leaves, and flowers is called '*Mal Bali*', and the method of making large *Bali* statues using '*Thubas mati*' (clay) and painting on clay tablets is called '*Mati bali*' or '*Ambum Bali*'. The practice of painting on cloth and offering *baliya* is known as '*Thira Bali*' or '*Kada Bali*' (Kumaratunga, 2006). Various *Bali* rituals for the curing of infertility and the preservation of the womb can be found in traditional folk medicine. Of these *Bali* rituals, the *Rathikāma Bali* ritual is unique. To alleviate vaginal discharge and vaginitis related diseases in women, the Sabaragamuwa '*Bali adura*' (*Bali* performer) conducts the *Rathikāma Bali* ritual. The word '*Rathikāma*' is made up of the words '*Rathi*' and '*Kāma*'. '*Rathi*' means lust, love, *mewundama*, the consolation of the five senses (*Pancha indriyan*), and '*Kāma*' means desire. '*Rathikāma*' thus means 'excessive desire for intercourse' (Kumarathunga, 2006). For this ritual, a clay idol is made. Therefore, *Rathikāma baliya* belongs to the category of '*Ambum Bali*'. It is beautifully crafted and the main feature of this *Bali* ritual is the '*Bali rūpayā*' (*Bali* statue). The carving of the *Bali* statue is done following the rituals of obtaining clay and adjusting the colours. They are practised by *Bali* performers. In this *Rathikāma Bali* statue, a woman with a naked

upper body and with a ‘*punkalasa*’ (pot of prosperity) in her right hand and a ‘*sewla*’ (Cuckoo bird) in her left hand is moulded. When moulding the *Bali* statue, the woman’s figure is placed on the man’s lap. *Rathikāma Bali* ritual is performed for childbearing. Fear of sexual intercourse, nausea, fear of illness such as vaginitis, dizziness, having sex with red and black men in dreams, various gynaecological conditions from puberty onwards are symptoms, and it has been the custom of the Sabaragamuwa *Bali adura* (*Bali* performer) to perform the rites of *Bali* ritual on the name of the patient when the symptoms of mental illness, cough, nausea, loss of appetite or frequent panic are not completely cured by drugs or *Yanthra* (diagrams worn for health problems). They believe that it will help them to maintain a good marital relationship and have successful children (Kumarathunga, 2006). ‘*Rathikama baliya*’ is also performed for men. Male infertility is one of the most common causes of the problem. The uniqueness of this *Bali* ritual is that it can be performed on both men and women if they have some disease related to infertility. Thereby, it is used to treat men’s fear of intercourse, nausea, and nightmares as well. The conditions mentioned here are the reasons why both men and women do not have a good marital relationship. Failure to conceive due to such conditions is a major cause of infertility. According to traditional folk medicine, when this treatment is performed by a *Bali* performer the mind of the patient is adjusted. That is, to avoid the aforementioned ailments and maintain a good marital relationship and create a desire to have children. *Bali* statue is a fundamental element of the *Bali* ritual’s rites. If the patient is a woman, the statue is made according to the height, width and other measurements of the patient. If the man has a disease related to infertility, the *Bali* statue is adjusted to match his measurements and body features. There are many poems sung for the occasion. The following two poems describe how the *Bali* statue of *Rathikama baliya* is moulded.

Sath viyathak diga massa badinnē - (A seven-spans-long gantry is tied)

Tun viyathak masi pululada gannē - (The width of the gantry is three spans)

Himi laga kanyā ruwak ambannē - (A female figure is sculpted near the male)

Athare kanyā ruwa sathapannē - (The female figure rests on the man's lap)
(Kumarathunga, 2006).

Sirasē nil kes wetiya mudalā - (The blue-like hair that has been released)

Mal pethi kottē isaka thabālā - (The head rests on a pillow made of flower petals)

Gana ran athirillē sathapēla - (Lying on a gold blanket)

Mē lesa rathikam baliya sarālā - (In this way 'Rathikāma baliya' has been created)
(Kumarathunga, 2006).

The traditional '*Bali adura*' was skilled at making the '*Bali* statue' to resemble the patient. After the *Bali* statue is done, everything needed for the *Rathikāma baliya* is prepared. The patient is then subjected to the ritual of '*Bali pāwādeema*'. It means that the *Bali* statue is introduced to the patient after singing the '*ambum kavi*' (poems) for each *Bali* rite (Kumarathunga, 2006). The *Rathikāma Bali* ritual begins with the performance of the '*Pūrwa yāga chārithra*' (pre-Bali rituals) [the rituals performed by the chief *Bali adura* (chief Bali performer) and his assistants on the day before the Bali ritual] and the '*Handā samayē chārithra*' (evening rituals). After the introduction of the Bali statue to the patient (*baliya pāwā deema*), the poems '*Namaskārā*' and '*Vēēdimālāwa*' are recited. In the performances of *Bali*, these three phases can be identified by distinctive ritual actions and performances. In the first phase, the patient is introduced to a pre-constructed ritual arena. He/ she is separated from the mundane world. There is a sequential introduction to the various objects to be used in the ritual through their descriptions in verse. The patient (*āthurayā*) is instructed to see, feel, touch, hear and smell certain things. Both *adurā* and the *āthurayā* are gradually transformed into a state of maximum preparedness. In the second phase, requests and offerings are made to all possible sources of relief and removing a patient's *dōsā*. In the third phase, the patient is separated from the ritual space and he or she is returned to the real world (Silva, 2000). In this way, all the rites are performed and the *Rathikāma Bali* ritual is performed till dawn. They believe that looking at the

Bali statue and listening to poetry until the next morning makes the sick woman or man want to have intercourse.

Rathikam yāgaya kala āthura hata - (To the patient for whom the *Rathikāma baliya* was performed)

Nithiyen sama dos nothibeyi ada sita - (Inevitably from today all ailments will be gone)

Ruthiyen dhola dun sama devi balayata - (By the power of all the gods for whom the sacrifices were performed)

Nithiyen sama dosa duru weyi ada sita - (From today all ailments will inevitably disappear) (Kumarathunga, 2006).

In this way, the mind of the patient is healed by chanting poems and offering sacrifices to the demons that make people sick. Thus, the rites of the *Bali* ritual vary according to the patient's condition. Finally, a rite called '*Bali hellēma*' is performed and the *Bali* statue is smashed. That is, the board which was used to make the '*Balirūpaya*' (*Bali* statue) is tied with a rope to the leg of a cow and the cow is chased away. Then the *Balirūpaya* breaks due to the fall. It is believed that it removes the evil eye of the person who created the *Balirūpaya*. Infertility sufferers are treated with local traditional medicine. Another speciality of this is that the *Rathikāma baliya* heals the minds of patients and enhances their sexual energy under the local folk medical system and provides medicines and food for it. It heals pre-existing weaknesses. At the *Bali* ritual, the patient is given king-coconut water mixed with '*Inginī Ata*' (clearing nuts) to drink after chanting. Decoctions, as well as medicinal porridges, are also given to the patient after the *Bali* ritual. Also, the patient is made aware of the habits that are needed to be practised. In this way, traditional folk medicine provides treatment for those suffering from infertility and it should be noted that this '*Rathikāma baliya*' in the Sabaragamuwa Province is currently on the verge of extinction due to various reasons.

Conclusion

Indigenous Traditional Medicine Has A Large Space For Witchcraft. The ‘*Rathikāma Baliya*’ Is Very Unique Among The Various Treatments Available In Indigenous Medicine To Cure Infertility. That Is Because It Is Performed On Both Men And Women. Also, It Heals Patients Mentally. Therefore, Their Ailments Heal Faster, Which Is Because Mental Well-Being Causes The Body To Begin To React Better Towards The Drugs. This Allows Patients To Recover Faster. Thus, It Is Clear That The *Rathikāma Baliya* In Traditional Folk Medicine Is A Very Valuable Treatment For Infertility.

Recommendation

The ‘*Rathikāma baliya*’ and other rituals in traditional folk medicine are also valued as cultural heritage. Due to the neglect of such intangible cultural heritage and the actions of fraudsters, these therapies are becoming extinct. Researchers suggest that the time has come to formulate a program to protect such valuable cultural heritage through state-level intervention.

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