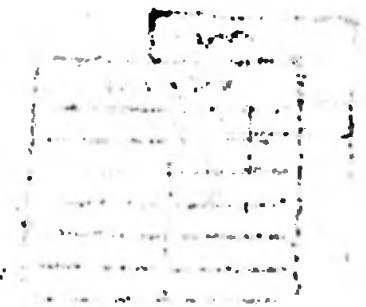


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KOHOMBȦ KANKARIYA

AN ETHNOMUSICOLOGICAL STUDY

A THESIS PRESENTED TO
THE UNIVERSITY OF SRI LANKA
VIDYODAYA CAMPUS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In an interview on 12 December 1974 Tittapajjala Surāmbā, one of the foremost exponents of the Kohōmbā Kankāriya tradition in the Kandy area, expressed his view about the ceremony:

"We perform a Kohōmbā Kankāriya with the assistance of a group of villages for the common benefit of all. Through the performance of the ritual, co-operation and friendly relationships are established. With the establishment of good relations productivity improves.

The ceremony is an expression of a Vedic feature whereby one engages in a blessing activity (vidika śānti karma); the sufferings of people are reduced by improving their social, economic and cultural activities.

We say that we are performing the Kohōmbā Kankāriya for the god Kohōmbā; basically we are performing this ceremony in Viṣṇu's name. The Kohōmbā god's line is connected with Viṣṇu's line."

Tittapajjala's view touches on many important ideas which will be treated at length in this work. The Kohōmbā Kankāriya is described as an expression of a Vedic feature which implies a North Indian wellspring, an idea echoed in the legends of the ritual. Vijaya comes from Northern India to establish the first Sinhalese colony in Lanka, ruling as King circa 483-445 b.c. (For a further discussion see the chapter "Kata Paha"). Vijaya incurs the "curse of perjury" (divi doṣa) due to the mal treatment of his first wife Kuvenī (see Chapter "Asna"). This curse falls on King Panduvas, the legendary second ruler of Lanka, circa 444-414 b.c., who is cured through the performance of a ceremony of blessing by King Male, whose place of residence and family heritage is associated with the Himalayas (see chapter "Maha yātikāva"). The ceremony performed by King Male is said to be the prototype of the Kohōmbā Kankāriya performed today. Godakumbura (1963: Introduction) and Seneviratna (1972/3) suggests a Sinhalese origin of the ceremony as recent as the 17th or 18th century.

Classification and Structure of the Kankāriya Ritual

Tittapajjala classifies the ceremony using a Sanskrit term, "Śānti Karma" (śānti = blessing; karma = activity) which can be translated as a "blessing invoking rite". In Sinhalese this becomes "set kam kirīma" (set = blessing; kam = activity; kirīma = doing) or "doing a blessing invoking rite".

In such a rite, one performs "set Kavi" (kavi = sung verses) "verses sung to invoke blessings." The opposite of "santi karma" is "vas karma" (vas = curse), or "curse invoking rite", expressed in Sinhalese as "vas kam kirima" for which verses are sung to cast a curse (vas kavi).

"Kankariya" can be translated as "ceremony". Etymologically the word "kankariya" becomes "kam kirima" meaning, "doing a (ritualistic) activity". An archaic term not in current usage, when used to designate the ritual can only refer to "Kohombā Kankariya;" no other rituals in Sri Lanka use the word "kankariya" in their names. "Kohombā Kankariya" can be translated, therefore, "the ritualistic activity in connection with Kohombā." Kohombā is one of several deities propitiated in the ritual. For example, Tittapajjala names Kohombā as the chief deity of the ritual, followed by Irugal Bandāra, Kandē Bandāra, Viramanda Devi and Kadavara. The text of the Maha yātikāva describes the origin of these gods. Tittapajjala equates Kohombā with Viṣṇu. Legends differ as to the connection between the two and the origin of Kohombā. For a discussion see the chapter, "Deviyāgē Kavi".

Invocations (yātikāva) refer to the complete ritual as "The Principal Arena of the Great Royal Ceremony" (mul maḍuva raja maha kankariya). The main part of the ritual, beginning in the evening and often continuing well into the next day is called the "Great Royal Ceremony" (Raja Maha Kankariya). The Great Royal Ceremony, or main Kankariya, a cluster of rites, is the main ceremony that marks the culmination of a series of five events or ceremonies - "Kap siṭuvima", "Malapē davas", "Murutān maṅgalaya", "Meleyi yak maṅgalaya", "Raja Maha Kankariya", - which in themselves include a cluster of rites.

A ceremonial pole is planted (magul kapak hitavanavā; kap siṭuvima) as a promise to hold the main Kankariya performance within three months. It is placed variously under the yahana, sometimes to the right of it within the arena, and even outside the arena. It is pulled out towards the end of the ceremony, an activity that can be accompanied by the rite, "Darsana yakkama". The planting and removal of the pole mark the formal duration of the ritual.

On the "Flower Dedication Day" (Malapē davasa), the day preceding the main Kankariya performance, the activity of "going for the Coconut and Betel" (Pol bulatē yāma) which is the collection of the offerings set aside for the Kankariya (akyāla) from the neighbouring villages takes place. The areas and objects sacred to the Kankariya are dedicated (pē karanavā; pē = dedication; karanavā = to do), and these objects of dedication include the banana and the coconut flowers used

to decorate the altars (malapē), the landing where water is drawn for the ceremony and where the participants ritually purify themselves (toṭa pē), the arena where the main Kankāriya is performed (maḍupē) and the storeroom (gabada) for the articles of the Kankāriya. Finally, the "Flower Dedication to the Deities" (mala pē yak) is performed in the main arena marking the end of the "Malapē davasa".

The food offerings for the gods are prepared throughout the night to be ready the next morning for the "Food Ceremony" (murutān māṅgalaya) followed by the "Chanting Associated with the Food Offering" (pēbat yādīna). This ceremony is described in detail in the chapter "Maha Yātikāva".

In the afternoon falls the "Ceremony of the Meleyi Demons" (meleyi yak māṅgalayak) which includes a "Dance for the Meleyi Demons" (meleyi yakkama nāṭīna) and an offering to Kande God (Kande devi pudenava). In the Kurunāgala area a "Rite for the deities of trees" (ruppā yakkama) is substituted on occasions for the meleyi yak māṅgalayak.

Social Benefits

The main Kankāriya in the evening is a spectacle of varied rites "to make men's hearts and eyes happy". Here, Tittapajjala refers to the social benefits derived from the Kankāriya which enhance productivity through the promotion of co-operation and friendly relationships. Sarachandra (1968:10) supports this view when he describes the Kankāriya as a "general-purpose ceremony" which "harnesses every kind of skill and gives members of every profession an opportunity of contributing to a common cause". The "Ūrā yakkama", a comic-ritualistic episode of the Kankāriya supports this view with a satire based on a kalēidoscope of village personalities who, contribute their produce and skills toward the performance of the ritual in return for a portion of the pig.

Everyone can benefit from the Kankāriya performance by contributing offerings of food or money to the store. In the actual performance of the ritual most of the activities, particularly those concerning the preparation and offering of food for the gods, must be done by people in a state of ritual purity. Members of the audience in an obvious state of impurity, menstruating women, or women who have just borne children, are expected to absent themselves from the ceremony.

Division of Responsibility

All activities which must be carried out in the performance of the Kohōmbū Kankāriya are intrinsically defined by predetermined functions associated with the ritual. Once a man has accepted a responsibility, his duties and his supervisor within the context of the ritual are clearly defined. The patient (ātura) is the sponsor of the Kankāriya. It is held at his home and he is responsible for managing all financial matters and delegating responsibility. Although Tittapajjala is correct in saying that the performance benefits the surrounding area, it is the ātura and his immediate family who gain the direct benefits. Usually he himself or a relative has suffered an illness and promises to hold a Kankāriya if the situation improves. The performance is the result of carrying out the promise.

When the ātura decides to hold the ceremony, he or his representatives invite an organizer (atañkārayā), presenting him with an offering of betel leaves which represents a formal request that he assembles all the dancers, drummers, priest (kapuvā) and gods' insignia (ābarana) for the Kankāriya. The atañkārayā is an experienced dancer or drummer well-versed in the tradition of the Kankāriya. Most likely, he is known as a teacher (gurunnānse) runs his own music school (kalāyatana) and has a following of students (gōlāyo), who as the recipients of his knowledge and training in the art of Kankāriya performance, may participate with others on the main Kankāriya day.

The atañkārayā then sets about making up a list of dancers and drummers who are both skilled in performance, and work together in harmony. Wirz (1954:14) translates the term used for the initiated dancer, "yakkessā" as "demon charmer" or "exorcist" (literally, yaka = demon; desana = to preach, exhort). He equates the term with "ādura" of the Southern coastal region and "Kaṭṭadiya" or "kaṭṭari" of the central part of the Island. Sarachchandra (1966:26) comments, "the priest of demon ceremonies is known as the Kaṭṭandiya or yakādura or yakkessā, while the priest who officiates in ceremonies connected with the gods is known as the kapuvā, kapurāla...."