

**SOCIO-CULTURAL CHANGE IN MEEMURE VILLAGE IN KANDY  
DISTRICT: TWENTY YEARS AFTER THE PROHIBITION OF CHENA  
CULTIVATION**

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**Introduction**

In the recent past many cultures around the world have undergone extensive changes. Meemure village is an interesting example that has continuously undergone changes in the last two decades. Meemure is traditionally an agricultural village with a population of about 331 people, which has its own specific culture as a result of being isolated from main stream Sri Lankan society for a long time and some of the unique cultural traits associated with Meemure cannot be seen elsewhere in the country. Mythical stories related to king Rawana have dignified the pre-history of this village and have disclosed that the villagers are descendants of king Rawana and the Yaksha tribe. Meemure villagers have developed specific cultural traits from the beginning. Religious practises and rituals, food customs, Chena cultivation practises, paddy cultivation practises are among the unique traditional systems they developed and maintained. However they were confronted with a huge problem after the government prohibited their Chena cultivation practice in 1988. Various cultural practices related to kinship and marriage, economy, religion and traditional knowledge etc. are entwined together to form one fully integrated cultural system. When one or more traits get disrupted it affects the whole cultural system. Other factors that contributed to the change in the Meemure culture are the increase in the assimilation with outside society, the exodus of the young generation, a decline in the practise of the traditional knowledge system, innovation, devolution and forcible change: forced to adapt only to paddy cultivation. These factors cause, misery and community degradation which is colloquially known as a "Culture Crash". Some cultures cannot survive after being exposed to cultural changes. People of the Meemure village underwent this phase. Even though some of these cultural changes could be beneficial and adaptive, it might still be difficult for individuals within that particular culture to accept them. Thus cultural change is considered as a social problem even though it is a part of the necessary process of adaptation. The main objective of this study was to discover the consequences of the prohibition of Chena cultivation toward Meemure village and its unique culture.

**Materials and Methods**

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The study was carried out from April to November 2013. Questionnaire surveys were conducted to gather information about the cultural history and synchronic cultural traits on the Meemure village.

The population of the Meemure village consists of 331 people including 115 families; 40 families were randomly selected for the questionnaire with the aim of including individuals from families who have been living in the village for many generations. Five elderly individuals who were highly knowledgeable about their cultural heritage were selected for in-depth interviews. Observation and participant observation methods were used for comparison of cultural practises.

**Study Area:** Meemure village is situated in Kandy district; Ududumbara Secretariat Division, belonging to the Meemure Grama Niladari Division [N 07.433330 and E 08.833330]. It is a 5 km<sup>2</sup> village in the middle of the Knuckles Conservation Forest. From Colombo to Meemure village it is 229 km. There are no electricity facilities in Meemure village.

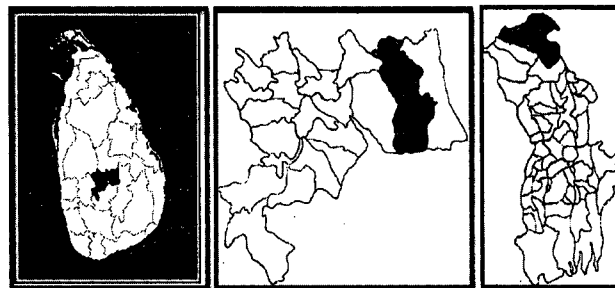


Figure 1. A) Kandy District, B) Ududumbara secretariat division, C) Meemure Grama Niladari Division (highlighted)

### Results and Discussion

The single most significant factor that contributed to the change in their culture is the prohibition of Chena cultivation in 1988. The National Heritage Wilderness Area Act in 1988 defined areas above 3500 ft. as protected areas which included their hereditary Chena cultivating lands. It terminated their self-sustaining economy and consequently these people had to look outside their village to find necessary resources that are now not available in the village. When they were under the power of traditional political authorities they had not such limitations because the traditional leaders knew the link between man and the nature excessively.

During the time when villagers depended on Chena and Paddy cultivation they had enough food such as mun (green gram-*Phaseolus aureus*), thala (*sesame*), iringu (wheat), kurakkan (*Eleusine coracana*), undu (*Phaseolus mungo*) etc. Due to this self-sustaining life they hardly went out of the village for their daily

requirements. In those days they had to visit the nearest town of Kandy only about twice a year to get cloth, salt and other a few other basic requirements. In these visits they had taken their Chena harvest, orange (*Citrus sinensis*), honey, areca nuts (*Areca catechu*), and betel to exchange for other goods or to sell. At present they have to find other ways to get these daily requirements such as vegetables and grains. Therefore the villagers travel 38 km to reach the nearest town of Hunnasgiriya to meet their daily needs. It opened the doors to the outside world on a regular basis and villagers started to settle in these areas. As a result, more marriages occurred between Meemure people and people from outside villages. In addition villagers have sold their village lands for cheaper price and have settled in urban areas. Assimilation has increased by 52 % among three generations. From the sample size of 40 families including 148 children; only 43 % of them are remaining in the village and 57 % have migrated to urban areas for work, marriage or to educate their children.

Exodus of young has become a major problem in the village. Lacks of facilities in the village have made young people to migrate from the village for seeking job opportunities elsewhere. During the earlier times collective agrarian lifestyle supplied their daily needs. However at present they have to find everything individually for their own survival. Thus the decision of young people to migrate out of the village to support themselves cannot be halted.

The traditional knowledge system prevailing in the society is now limited only to the older generation as new generations do not practice or benefit from that knowledge. Thus their traditional cultural knowledge does not get passed down to the next generation through socialization. The traditional knowledge and community relations have been disturbed and these factors have produced individuals who know very little about their traditions or history.

As a result of the prohibition of Chena cultivation, Meemure villagers are practising only paddy cultivation and have absorbed modern farming methods. Many facets of Meemure life and their cultural traits have changed and been lost without replacement. Acceptance of new innovation leads to the loss of older ones. Some aspects of Chena cultivation such as traditional *chena pala* (shack), *pendi weta* (stockade around the chena), *vee atuwa* (traditional paddy storing system different from other areas), and food storing methods such as *iringu aduththa*, *iringu uga* (buck wheat storing systems) are unique cultural traits which are not being practiced by modern day Meemure villagers (Ananda and Nahallage 2014).

Religious practises such as Yakkama and Adukku Pujawa are specific characteristics in Meemure culture that are slowly diminishing. Meemure villagers continue to practice their religious ceremonies despite the fact that

the farming practices which they were built upon no longer exist. Also television and radio has replaced the traditional gathering of the villagers into a nearby house for discussion or entertainment at night or during other free time; 86 % of the families use radios, 44 % televisions and 35 % have telephones. Solar-cells are used by 88 % of the families in the village.

The traditional embalming methods that they used to postpone the putrefaction of the body such as honey, betel and arecanut mixture and mee (*Madhuca longifolia*) leaves, seeds, barks and tumeric etc. These practices are specific to them and are no longer practised since they rely on the modern methods used by the main society.

There is a new tendency among the villagers to let their school age children stay in urban temples until they finish schooling, in this way they can attend urban schools which have far more facilities than the village school does. Meemure primary school is older than 100 years. In 2011 there were only 12 children in the school with 3 teachers and classes up to grade 5. This represents 24 % of the school going children in the village. Seventy six percent of the children are going to nearby schools in Kaikawala (2 km from the village), Hunnasgiriya (38 km) and to schools in Kandy (116 km). As a consequence the majority of the people remaining in the village are of the older generation and the children below five years of age.

#### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

As well as outside influence, materialistic and technological factors have forced a number of cultural changes upon Meemure people. Many of these changes have arisen as a result of alterations in the Meemure traditional agrarian society. Most extreme cases of cultural collapse occur as a result of displacement of traditional political authority by the conquerors who know nothing about the culture they control. Eventually as anthropologists our duty is to document these specific cultural practices for future generations before it altogether diminishes from our society.

#### **References**

- Ananda T, Nahallage C (2014) Traditional agricultural practices unique to Meemure village, Kandy district Sri Lanka. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies* 1: 11-21.