

An Investigation into Water-Related Customs and Beliefs in Sri Lankan Agriculture

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Introduction

Since the prehistoric Iron Age, the human landscape of Sri Lanka has been characterized by organized, permanent village settlements centered around primitive irrigation networks. Archaeological excavations have repeatedly confirmed that these early agrarian communities were anchored by village tanks, establishing a socio-hydrological relationship that has lasted for millennia. This foundational dynamic was further reinforced by the arrival of the Aryans from India around the 6th to 5th centuries BC, as documented in the *Mahavamsa*. These settlers established expanding networks of villages clustered strategically around major natural water sources, including the Malwathu Oya, Kala Oya, Mahaweli River, Walawe River, and Kiridi Oya. In this historical expansion, small-scale village tanks (*wewas*) emerged as the primary socio-economic nuclei. For generations, the sustainability of both rural and urban settlements across the island has depended heavily on agriculture, with paddy (rice) cultivation serving as the primary livelihood. While the soil profile of the island's Dry Zone is highly conducive to paddy cultivation, the region suffers from severe hydro-climatic constraints, receiving low annual rainfall that is starkly inadequate for multi-seasonal cultivation. To mitigate this environmental vulnerability, ancient Sri Lankans engineered the village tank system, creating an intricate interdependence between human communities and managed water bodies. Even with these systems, ancient farmers frequently faced existential challenges, such as cyclical droughts, seasonal water scarcity, unpredictable monsoons, and catastrophic floods that threatened to breach earthen embankments. In response to these recurring environmental pressures, the agrarian populace developed a rich framework of ethical practices, intangible customs, and ritualistic belief systems designed to manage water resources. This study investigates these traditional practices, exploring how safeguarding intangible cultural heritage builds a meaningful dialogue about cultural identity, even as rural landscapes increasingly adopt advanced modern technologies.

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Research Problem

The central problem addressed in this research is determining the extent to which rural agrarian communities successfully achieve their resource-management goals and psychological security by utilizing intangible customs, rituals, and supernatural beliefs to fulfill their essential water needs.

Research Objectives

This study focuses on the customs and beliefs developed by rural communities to manage their agricultural water needs. The research objectives are three-fold:

- To systematically analyze the structural and cultural uniqueness of Sri Lanka's intangible heritage concerning hydraulic civilization.
- To identify the contemporary utility and functional relevance of ancient intangible practices within modern irrigation and water resource management.
- To demonstrate the socio-cultural and ethical value of preserving these traditions for future generations.

Research Methodology

This study is framed as an anthropological investigation using a qualitative research methodology. Data collection was split into two primary tracks: extensive library research to analyze historical texts, inscriptions, and previous scholarly literature, paired with empirical field studies conducted within traditional Dry Zone village communities to observe surviving ritual practices first-hand.

Results

The field and archival findings reveal a highly resilient matrix of customs and beliefs preserved by the rural population of the Dry Zone. While the exact historical origins of many of these rituals remain difficult to date precisely, it is evident that they have evolved dynamically over time to adjust to changing socio-political and economic conditions.

The study highlights that the contemporary belief system remains deeply anchored around the village tank. Key surviving elements include rituals dedicated to sacred objects like the Sri Maha Bodhi and the Tooth Relic, alongside the worship of localized guardian deities such as *Ayyanayake* and *Pulleyar*. Specific community rituals documented include the milk-pouring festival (*Kiri Ithirima*), the pot festival (*Mutti Mangalya*), the ritualistic firing of guns (*Puja Vedilla*),

acts of truth (*Satyakriya*), the chanting of rain-inducing protection verses (*Wesi Pirith*), the *Hunnakada* festival, the tying of the divine ball, sacrificial offerings, the maintenance of the sacred *Sanhida* spaces, ritualistic naked dancing, the symbolic wearing of the *wangedi* (Wangedi Endaweema), *Mahadana* almsgiving, and the tying of *murikkadi* charms.

Discussion

Within the precarious environment of the Dry Zone, water was the ultimate determinant of survival. Without a reliable supply, the community's primary economic engine—paddy farming—would collapse. Consequently, water became the central focus of religious and ritual life.

Historical evidence shows that even in the pre-Buddhist era, Sri Lankans made regular offerings to rain deities. Following the formal introduction of Buddhism to the island, these practices adapted, linking hydraulic success directly to the state's most sacred Buddhist symbols: the Sri Maha Bodhi and the Tooth Relic (Senevirathna, 1998, p. 276). This shift shows how completely the agrarian community integrated their physical survival with religious teachings.

Deity worship centered on village tanks is a crucial element of this cultural complex, drawing on traditions that predate the arrival of Buddhism. The ancient populace believed that superior spiritual entities presided over the waters, a mindset so powerful that it eventually led to the deification of historical figures like King Mahasen, who engineered massive irrigation works and was later worshipped as a god (Wimalawansa Thero, 1964, p. 406).

A defining spatial feature of the traditional post-Buddhist village layout is the close physical proximity between the tank (*Wewa*) and the temple (*Pansala*) (Gunawardena, 2016, p. 62). This deliberate layout was designed to facilitate regular, community-wide water worship and agricultural rituals. The historical depth of this connection is explicitly confirmed by the 10th-century Hopitigamu inscription, which notes that market funds were formally set aside to support rituals for the Sorabora tank, illustrating how temples were built and maintained alongside key water bodies to ensure spiritual protection (Wimalawansa Thero, 1964, p. 407).

In these farming systems, prioritizing localized deities like *Ayyanayake* and *Pulleyar* remains central. Rituals like pouring milk and the pot festival are widely performed to secure divine blessings for the agricultural calendar (Abhayawardena, 1995, p. 529).

The intense psychological reliance on these deities is vividly illustrated by the *Puja Vedilla* ritual. When intense monsoon rains cause a tank to fill past capacity, threatening an imminent breach that would wipe out the downstream fields, the community turns to this emergency ritual to invoke divine intervention (Dissanayake, 2019, p. 115).

Historically, this emergency response followed a structured community protocol. During the British colonial era, the *Velvidane* (irrigation headman) was legally responsible for managing the tank's water levels. If opening the sluice gates and cutting secondary spillways proved insufficient to control the rising waters, the *Velvidane* would lead the villagers to the tank embankment. Together, they would pray, cut sacred branches, offer coconuts, and fire a gun (*Vedilla*) to plead for the deity's protection, highlighting the *Velvidane's* role in coordinating both the physical and spiritual defense of the village infrastructure (Senaratne, 2013, p. 36).

During the island's monarchical periods, a king's legitimacy was tied directly to his ability to ensure timely rainfall for agriculture. The populace strongly believed that regular monsoons reflected the ruler's personal piety and moral righteousness. This connection is visible in historical chronicles detailing kings who performed *Satyakriya* (acts of truth) to break severe droughts, such as the famous account of King Sirisangabo (Mahavansa, 36: 73-80).

These royal interventions show that water rituals were a state-level responsibility performed by the sovereign on behalf of the citizenry, strengthening the sociopolitical bond between the crown and the public (Senevirathna, 1998, p. 276). Similarly, the populace maintained a long-standing belief that offering prayers to the Sri Maha Bodhi could bring rain. During severe droughts, water collected from the sacred Tissa Wewa was carried in a formal procession to bathe the holy tree, a ritual that remains active today (Senevirathna, 1998, p. 276).

The Dalada (Tooth Relic) is likewise believed to possess rain-making powers (Dissanayake, 2019, p. 77). Historically, during prolonged dry spells, the relic was brought out into the open to trigger rainfall. The modern *Aluth Sahal Mangalya* (New Rice Festival) is a direct extension of this tradition, where farmers offer the first portion of their harvest to the Buddha to ensure future prosperity and predictable weather.

Within this cultural framework, water serves as a premier symbol of purity, fertility, and auspiciousness, with a overflowing pot of water (*Pun kalasa*) representing ultimate prosperity. This symbolism is reflected in the historical practice of *Buddhabhishek*, where Buddha statues and Bodhi trees were bathed in milk and water to invite peace and regular rain (Senevirathna, 1998, p. 277).

Due to the sheer concentration of reservoirs in the Rajarata region, the communities of the Dry Zone developed highly specialized irrigation rituals, most notably the pouring of milk, the *Mutti Mangalya*, and the *Hunnakada Vedilla* (Siriweera, 2017, p. 52). The milk-pouring ritual is performed post-harvest on designated *Kemmura* days (Wednesdays or Saturdays, considered spiritually potent). The community offers milk rice to the gods to secure the safety of the tanks, ensure the health of their cattle, and invite prosperity, with every household contributing rice or milk to the communal pot.

The ritual takes place near the paddy field or tank embankment, where a temporary shrine is built and covered with a clean white cloth. The milk rice is cooked in a large ceremonial clay pot known as a *Raja Heliya*. A secondary altar is built nearby to display the weapons and insignia of the deities, brought from the village shrine. Before cooking begins, the village elder chants praises to the gods accompanied by ritual drumming. Once the milk rice is prepared, it is offered to the deities before being shared among the villagers (Siriweera, 2017, p. 53).

The *Mutti Mangalya* (also called *Mutti Namima* or *Mutti Perahera*) is another vital Dry Zone ritual, named for its central use of clay pots (Wijerathna, 2016, pp. 39-41; Weerakoon, 2025, pp. 46-49). This ritual is performed to win divine protection for the village tank and crop cycles.

The process follows a strict communal sequence. First, the village elders collectively select an auspicious date for the ceremony. When the tank fills at the start of the season, the elders and villagers travel to the ritual site on the embankment, where they vow (*bāra*) to complete the full *Mutti Mangalya* post-harvest, symbolizing this promise by hanging a coin washed in turmeric water and wrapped in clean cloth from a sacred tree branch (Siriweera, 2017, p. 54).

The final performance occurs on a subsequent *Kemmura* day. Once the date is finalized, the leading elders invite the local Buddhist monks, traditional drummers, and dhobis (cloth cleaners) to assist with the event. The village headman commissions the local potter to craft pristine, custom clay pots specifically for the puja. In the days leading up to the ritual, all active participants must strictly fast and abstain from meat and fish to maintain ritual purity (Wijerathna, 2016, pp. 44-47).

While this festival was once an annual requirement, changing economic pressures mean many villages now host it every three, five, or seven years. The scale also varies by location; at major historical reservoirs like Kala, Hurulu, Padaviya, Kanadara, and Minneri, the festival is a massive public event supported by government officials and elaborate processions (*Peraheras*). In these larger

settings, the primary presiding deity of that specific reservoir receives top priority, with Lord *Ayyanayake* invoked as the secondary guardian (Siriweera, 2017, pp. 54-56).

Finally, the *Hunnakada Mangalya* is triggered specifically when a tank reaches its spill level. To prevent the earthen dam from collapsing under the immense pressure, elders gather on the embankment, pray to Lord *Ayyanayake*, fire three gunshots to signal the completion of the vow, and disperse, confident in the deity's protection (Siriweera, 2017, p. 56).

Contemporary perceptions of water management are undergoing a paradigm shift, driven by technological innovations such as automated sluice gates and the prevalence of agrochemical farming. Despite the widespread adoption of artificial irrigation systems, traditional rituals like *Mutti Mangal*—customary offerings to deity pantheons—persist within rural communities. Notably, the functional role of these rituals has evolved: rather than serving primarily as divine appeasement, they now function as symbolic frameworks for promoting water conservation. Consequently, traditional cultural practices adapt alongside technological progress, facilitating a degree of socio-cultural continuity amid modernization.

Conclusion

For thousands of years, Sri Lankan agrarian communities have navigated severe environmental and hydro-climatic pressures to sustain their agricultural livelihoods. Because water availability directly determined both individual survival and the broader economy, it became the focal point for a sophisticated collection of customs, values, and beliefs.

Organized around the village tank, these communities relied on shared rituals to manage their water resources collectively. While modern observers might classify these practices as superstitions, they served a vital practical purpose: they united the entire village, directing their shared labor and attention toward maintaining and protecting the tanks and paddy fields that anchored their economy.

Furthermore, these rituals served as powerful tools for social cohesion. By requiring individuals from different castes and social backgrounds to collaborate on the ceremonies and share the communal milk rice, these traditions dissolved social distance and reinforced the cooperative spirit necessary to sustain Sri Lanka's historic hydraulic civilization.

Keywords: Traditional Ecological Knowledge, beliefs, water, agriculture, people of dry zones

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