

Vedda People's Political Role in Ancient Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The *Kohombā Kankāriya*, a healing ritual performed to appease King Panduvasadewa, incorporates the worship of numerous deities, including several associated with the Vedda community. It is believed to have been compiled during the Kotte era. The study discusses the socio-political context and the role of the Vedda community in supporting King Parakramabahu VI, proposing that the *Kohombā Kankāriya* may have been a ritual performed to bless the king and the state. By comparing primary sources from the Anuradhapura to the Kotte eras and consulting secondary sources and scholarly research, this study examines historical facts to understand why King Parakramabahu VI incorporated Vedda beliefs into this ritual. The findings suggest that the *Kohombā Kankāriya* was a strategic cultural integration aimed at acknowledging the Vedda community's heritage and beliefs within a predominantly Buddhist society during a multicultural period in the Kotte era.

Keywords: King Parakramabahu VI, *Kohombā Kankāriya*, Kotte era, Vedda community

Introduction

The *Kohombā Kankāriya* is a significant traditional ritual in Sri Lanka, deeply embedded in Sinhalese Buddhist

culture. This ancient ceremonial performance is conducted to invoke blessings, heal illnesses, and protect communities from malevolent forces. It is one of the most elaborate and revered rituals, showcasing the island's rich cultural heritage. *Kohombā Kankāriya* is primarily performed to seek divine intervention for various communal and individual problems such as health issues, agricultural failures, and social discord. The ritual is also believed to ensure prosperity, protection, and the well-being of the community (Dissanayake, 2016).

The story of the origin of the *Kohombā Kankāriya* ritual is considered to have been compiled during the Kotte era, linking the story of *Vijaya* and *Kuweni* (Kuweni Asna saha *Dambadeni Asna.*, 1960). This particular ritual was an act of healing performed by the threefold deity Malaya to appease King Panduvasadewa (504 – 474 BC), the successor to Prince Vijaya (ibid). Numerous gods and goddesses are worshipped when performing this ritual. Among the 206 deities and demons that are worshipped, there are several deities and demons associated with the Vedda community, such as *Vediyak Kadavara*, *Vediyak Bandara*, and *Vediyak Tundolasa*, etc. (Dissanayake, 2016). Offerings to deities known as *Bandara* are also visible in the *Kohombā Kankāriya* ritual. Although this ritual is presided over by the god *Kohombā*, the deity known as *Bandara*, worshipped by the Vedda community, holds a significant place over the threefold deity *Kohombā Kankāriya* (ibid, 62).

Finding out which specific facts about the beliefs of the Vedda community were included in the story of *Kohombā Kankāriya* that originated in the Kotte era is the research problem of this study. The origin of the Vedda community, the state patronage, and the privileges they received are included in the books written before the Kotte era (*Culavamsa*, 1930; *Kuweni Asna saha Dambadeni Asna*, 1960; *Mahavamsa.*,

1950). However, in the Kotte era, the ritual *Kohombā Kankāriya* is considered to have originated by incorporating the Vedda community's beliefs, which are not mentioned in those books. Therefore, in this study, the factors that prompted King *Parakramabahu* VI (1412-1467 AD) to perform a ritual by incorporating information related to the beliefs of the Vedda community were investigated.

Methodology

The present study compared primary sources, including chronicles from the Anuradhapura era to the Kotte era, Buddhist literature, and epistles, with secondary sources that had been compiled associating such literature. Starting from the Anuradhapura period, the era the *Mahavamsa*, the oldest document about the origin of the Vedda community, was compiled, to the Kotte era, where the *Kohombā Kankāriya* ritual is believed to have been documented, historical facts were collected based on these timelines to expose the effectiveness of the Vedda community. Moreover, research conducted by several scholars on historical facts related to the Vedda community included in such primary sources was referred to when conducting this study.

Discussion

Historically, the Vedda community was paid careful attention in each reign. According to the *Mahavamsa*, the two children of *Kuveni* fled to *Samantakoota* and gave birth to the children from whom the indigenous Vedda community originated (*Mahavamsa*, 1950). Thus, the origin of the Vedda community seems to date back to the pre-Anuradhapura era in the fifth century (ibid). According to this legend, the Vedda people are believed to be descendants of Prince Vijaya, the first recorded king of Sri Lanka, and *Kuveni*, a local princess. Their

children are thought to have given rise to the indigenous Vedda community, illustrating a long-standing presence in Sri Lanka's history (Silva, 2005). It is mentioned in the *Mahavamsa* that King *Pandukabhaya* requested the help of *Yakka* in his battle with his uncles, later deified them, and built a temple for Lord *Vyadha* in the creation of the city of *Anuradhapura* (*Mahavamsa*, 1950). *Mahavamsa* also mentions the Vedda community in the story of King *Dutugemunu's* (161-137 BC) creation of the *Mahathupa* (ibid). This story of King *Dutugemunu* (161-137 BC) in chapter 28 of the *Mahavamsa* regards that the '*sunakha - luddo*' provided some construction materials and helped to build the *Mahathupa*.

According to the historical chronicle of the Sinhalese *Culavamsa*, '*Vyaadha*' supported King *Parakramabahu I* (1153-1186 AD) to establish his control over *Polonnaruwa*. It is said that during the *Polonnaruwa* period, the Vedda community performed as soldiers in the army of King *Parakramabahu the Great*. Among the army of King *Parakramabahu II* (1236-1270 AD), there was a particular army consisting of the 8th row Veddas (*Culavamsa*, 1930). In *Dambadeni Asna* of the 13th century, specifically in the history of the reign of King *Parakramabahu II*, the Veddas are mentioned among the officers as part of the king's retinue (*Godakumbure*, 1963).

Throughout the ages of the ancient kingdoms from *Anuradhapura* to the *Kandyan* rules, the Veddas were highly appreciated and respected as members of the royal court. Their responsibility to the state included the heraldry to the ritual *Perahera* (procession), honoring Buddhist shrines in procession, such as the Temple of Tooth (*Daladā Māligawa*) in *Kandy*, and supplying the essence of the natural land to the nobility (*Obeyesekere*, 2002).

However, the Vedda's beliefs are not revealed in the

historical records written before the Kotte Era. According to the above information, a question arises as to what extent the contemporary political and socio-economic context was instrumental in the creation of a story regarding the Vedda community, known as *Kohombā Kankāriya*, which includes their beliefs that are not revealed in the historical records written before the Kotte Era. This well-known ritual *Kohombā Kankāriya*, compiled between the 15th and 18th centuries, contains significant references to the Veddas in Sri Lanka (Godakumbure, 1963).

Senarath Paranavithana (1964) states that King *Parakramabahu* VI (1412-1467 AD) had lived in *Swarnapura* before coming to Ceylon. He had come to Ceylon when his son Purandara was in Java. Moreover, after completing three years since becoming king, he married a princess from *Keeravella* (Rajawaliya 1976, 209). Paranavithana also states that both the son who was born in Java and the son who was birthed in Sri Lanka by the princess of *Keeravella* had died at a young age. Therefore, Mudiyanse *Dissanayake* assumes that King *Parakramabahu* must have experienced an extremely stressful situation due to the death of his two sons and the political crisis that prevailed before he became king (Dissanayake, 2016). *Parakramabahu* VI became king amidst numerous disputes and hostile threats over state heritage. *Parakramabahu* VI, in an attempt to defeat *Parakramabahu Epa*, lived in an area that was dominated by his traditional heritage in the Upcountry along with his followers (*Hemachandra*, 1972, 633-639). Based on observations, it is possible that the indigenous Vedda community played a role in supporting King *Parakramabahu* VI during this period. It could have been the indigenous Vedda community who helped King *Parakramabahu* VI during this time.

Against this backdrop, a Shanthikarma ritual might

have been performed, invoking blessings on the state and the king, and this particular ritual could have been the Kohombā Kankāriya that I have investigated. The *Kuveni Asna*, written by the *Uturumula* Thero to bless King *Parakramabahu VI*, shows the characteristics of a ritual performed for him (*Sinhala Sahithya Wansaya*, 1964, 249), which confirms this assumption. This ritual had probably been led by the Vedda community. It is also worth inquiring why the king was motivated to publicize the concept of *Kohombā Yak Kankāriya* to add a universal value to the beliefs of the Vedda community encompassed in this ritual.

Although the historical sources compiled before the Kotte era demonstrate the role played by the Vedda community in the socio-economic and political arena, it seems that they had lived isolated in society as a group that had a native place but who had lost their identity because no source had described their beliefs. Moreover, since the arrival of Mahinda Thero in the 3rd century BC, Sri Lanka was transformed into a society with Buddhist values; it can be assumed that the chroniclers or writers had neglected documenting the beliefs or faiths of the Vedda community, which resulted in a gradual isolation of such beliefs and faiths in society.

The story of the Kohombā Kankāriya, which included the beliefs and faiths of the Vedda community, had been compiled in the Kotte era, where a social context enriched with multiculturalism prevailed. In fact, it had not adversely impacted Buddhism, the state religion. My observation is that the attempt taken by King Parakramabahu VI to document the origin story of *Kohombā Kankāriya* is suggestive of the king's endeavor of considering it as a timely need that had to be done on behalf of the Vedda community who had been isolated in society, although they inherited their own identity and native attributes.

Conclusion

The incorporation of the Vedda community's beliefs into the *Kohombā Kankāriya* ritual during the Kotte era reflects a strategic cultural integration aimed at acknowledging and preserving indigenous traditions within the socio-political landscape of the time. Despite the Vedda community's longstanding presence in Sri Lanka's history, their beliefs were largely marginalized or overlooked in historical records before the Kotte period. The findings of this study suggest that King Parakramabahu VI, who faced significant personal and political challenges, sought to recognize and publicly validate the Vedda community's heritage through the *Kohombā Kankāriya* ritual.

In terms of vedda community before Kotte era, despite their historical role as military and ritual supporters of the state, had become somewhat isolated, and their beliefs had been sidelined in favor of Buddhist practices. By incorporating Vedda beliefs into the *Kohombā Kankāriya*, King *Parakramabahu VI* not only helped restore their cultural identity but also legitimized their role within the broader societal framework.

This study underscores the importance of understanding how rituals like the *Kohombā Kankāriya* served as cultural instruments, bridging gaps between different communities and reinforcing the monarchy's power. King Parakramabahu VI's efforts were likely motivated by a desire to consolidate his authority, heal the kingdom, and honor the Vedda community, which played a crucial role in supporting his reign.

The Vedda community played an important political role, which is why King Parakramabahu VI highlighted their significance and reinforced their status through the *Kohombā Kankāriya* ritual. Highlighted during the Kotte period, this ritual not only recognized the Veddas' contributions to the kingdom

but also strategically strengthened their political ties with the monarchy. By formalizing their cultural and religious practices in an established document, Parakramabahu VI solidified their influence and secured crucial support for his reign. He sought to acknowledge his gratitude to the Vedda community, especially when their support was politically vital to his rule.

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