

Consultation in Traditional Medicine and Western Medicine for Cases of Rite of Passage During Epidemics: A Medical Anthropological Study

Nāgānanda International
Journal of Humanities & Social
Sciences

Vol: 6 , No. 3, 2023 pp. 24-34

© NIIBS Publications.

All Right Reserved

<http://www.niibs.lk>

Issue Published Online:01 Dec., 2023

ISSN No: ISSN 2961-5801-F (online)

G. A. A. N. Srishan¹, P. N. Abhayasundere², A. A. J. Jayasiri³

Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka.¹

Department of Anthropology, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka.^{2, 3}

Abstract:

During the epidemic season, the normal daily life of people changes completely. In order to control the spread of disease, people have to move from their familiar lifestyles. In an epidemic situation, the instructions given to control the disease in Western medicine are issued to the people in a legal form. For example, the laws imposed by the health sector for things like lockdown, and quarantine can be mentioned. Other health tips are made known to the public using various media. In the past, this situation takes a different form. In many cases, the traditional medicine emphasizes the ways in which people's lifestyles should change during an epidemic, through rituals and cultural social practices. Apart from marriage, other rites of passage cannot be postponed due to an epidemic situation. A birth, a puberty, and a death should be done hygienically, even in an epidemic situation, following restrictive practices. What are traditional and Western medicine recommendations to deal with cases of human rites of passage during the epidemic? What are their similar inequalities? These are the research questions of this research. This research aims to comparatively study the advice given in traditional medicine and Western medicine in performing rites of passage cases during the epidemic period. This study falls within the descriptive research category, which is situated between social science and anthropology research. Colombo district and Monaragala district of Sri Lanka were selected as the study area of the research and 05 traditional practitioners and 05 Western medicine doctors from one district were selected as the total sample of 20 data contributors under the purposive sampling method. According to this research, it seems that during epidemic conditions, more attention was given to dealing with health advice for birth, puberty, marriage and death. Restrictions on rituals, food preparation, and even other routine practices can be seen in both traditional and Western medicine. Similarities can be seen in traditional and Western medicine when it comes to imposing social restrictions. Nonetheless it can be concluded that these restrictions are directed to the people in the form of rituals related to cultural characteristics in the traditional system, and in legal form as health advice in the Western system.

Keywords -Traditional Medicine, Western Medicine, Epidemics, Rites of Passage, Consultation.

Received : 01 July 2023

Revised : 25 August 2023

Accepted : 10 September 2023

Published : 01 December 2023

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Consultation in Traditional Medicine and Western Medicine for Cases of Rite of Passage During Epidemics: A Medical Anthropological Study. Nāgānanda International Journal of Humanities and Social Science.1:1, Pp.24-34

Introduction

Rites of passage are culturally significant events that mark transitions in an individual's life, such as birth, puberty, marriage, and death. These events hold deep cultural and social significance, often involving ceremonies, rituals, and gatherings that bring communities together to celebrate or acknowledge these milestones. An epidemic refers to the rapid and widespread occurrence of a particular infectious disease within a specific population or geographic area. It is characterized by a sudden increase in the number of cases of the disease beyond what is normally expected. Epidemics can vary in scale and impact, ranging from localized outbreaks to global epidemics. The definition of an epidemic by the world health organization (WHO) is important in furthering the definition of an epidemic. Simply put, a disease spreads from person to person in an area where many people are affected at once and the disease is not permanent. They further point out that epidemics can occur at the regional or community level (Kelly, 2011). Due to an epidemic situation or for any other reason, apart from marriage in cases of rites of passage, other rites of passage such as birth, puberty, and death cannot be postponed or stopped. Those instances are processes that occur naturally and due to biological causes. Epidemics, characterized by the rapid spread of infectious diseases within a population, pose a challenge to traditional rites of passage. The need to control the spread of the disease often requires implementing measures such as physical distancing, quarantine, and limiting social gatherings. As a result, communities must adapt or modify their traditional practices to align with public health guidelines.

During an epidemic outbreak, a traditional health physician would even come out of his house and treat patients in a makeshift hut or yard to prevent the outbreak from spreading. They also do not give up on their occupations during times of epidemic and check if the people in the village are following health habits properly (Dalupotha, 2020). In many societies, traditional medicine plays a vital role in addressing health issues and maintaining cultural practices. During epidemics, individuals and families may seek guidance from traditional healers, herbalists, or spiritual leaders to ensure that rites of passage can be conducted safely while

considering the health risks associated with the disease. Traditional practitioners might recommend specific rituals, remedies, or modifications to traditional ceremonies that mitigate the risk of disease transmission. As well as, Western medicine, which encompasses conventional medical practices based on scientific evidence, also becomes an essential resource during epidemics. Individuals might consult medical doctors, nurses, and other healthcare professionals to ensure that the rites of passage are conducted with the least possible risk to public health. Western medical practitioners may provide guidance on preventive measures, infection control, and health considerations to be observed during these events. This refers to the act of seeking advice, treatment, or guidance from practitioners of both traditional medicine (indigenous or culturally specific healing practices) and Western medicine (conventional medical practices commonly used in modern healthcare systems). This indicates that the study is conducted within the context of disease outbreaks, which can significantly impact social practices, healthcare systems, and traditional rituals due to increased health risks and the need for infection control measures. This specifies the nature of the research as being within the field of medical anthropology. Medical anthropology examines the relationships between culture, society, and health, shedding light on how cultural beliefs, practices, and social structures influence health-related decisions. What are traditional and Western medicine recommendations to deal with cases of human rites of passage during the epidemic? What are their similar inequalities? Based on these research questions, this research has been conducted in traditional medicine and epidemiology. This research aims to comparatively study the advice given in traditional medicine and Western medicine in performing rites of passage cases during the epidemic period. Accordingly, this research has comparatively studied the advice given in traditional medicine and Western medicine for performing rites of passage cases during the epidemic period.

Materials and Methods

The study takes a medical anthropological approach, collecting and analyzing data using qualitative research techniques. This research was conducted under one of the medical anthropological approaches, in which beliefs and folk medicine systems are observed through ethnographical analysis. that come under the cultural approach

of medical anthropological studies. This study falls within the descriptive research category, which is situated within social science and anthropology research.

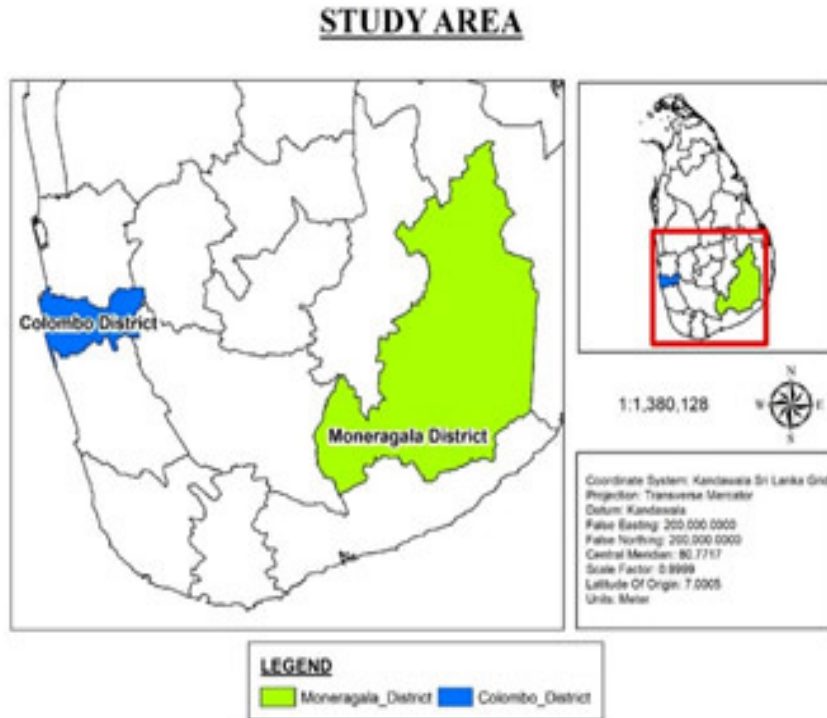


Figure 01. - study area (Colombo District in the Western Province of Sri Lanka and Monaragala District in the Uva Province of Sri Lanka)

Additionally, written documents, historical records, and relevant literature are reviewed to contextualize the practices within broader cultural and historical narratives. The study area chosen for this research is Colombo District in the Western Province of Sri Lanka and Monaragala District in the Uva Province. Since rural areas and urban areas are represented in these two areas, the data needed for the research can be obtained by representing urban and rural areas. The map showing the study areas is shown in Figure 01. In order to achieve the objectives of the research, the most suitable data contributors for this research were identified as Sri Lankan traditional doctors and Western doctors who practice Western medicine. In selecting the sample for this research, 05 traditional doctors and 05 Western medicine doctors from one district of the study area were selected using the purposive sampling method. Accordingly, 20 data contributors covering

the two districts as the total sample of the research participated in this research. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to collect data from the relevant data contributors for this research. Accordingly, the interview method and observation methods were used as the data collection methods of this research, and the necessary data were collected.

Results and Discussion

Sri Lanka, a diverse and culturally rich country, has several traditional rites of passage that mark important milestones in the lives of its people. Rites of passage are ceremonial or symbolic events that mark an individual's transition from one social or life stage to another. These rituals are found in cultures around the world and serve to acknowledge and celebrate important life changes. These rites of passage are deeply rooted in the country's religious and cultural traditions. Rites of passage can encompass various aspects of life, including birth, adolescence, marriage, and death. They often involve specific customs, traditions, and rituals that are meant to facilitate and signify the transition. We identify the four moments of birth, puberty, marriage, and death as 'dvārakarma cāritra' rites of passage moments in a person's life.

The birth of a child is celebrated with various rituals. In the Sinhalese society, the first feeding of the breast milk to the newborn baby is known as 'Rankiri kaṭagāma'. Here, a small amount of breast milk is poured into a small spoon or a clean green leaf obtained from a plant. Then sprinkle rub against some gold on it and give it to drink. This ritual aspires to the child's future prosperity. The baby's first taste of solid food (typically rice) is an important event, and there is a traditional ceremony called 'inḍul kaṭagāma' where the baby is fed rice for the first time. In this way, many rituals are performed in the Sinhala society when a child is born, such as cutting the child's hair for the first time, giving a name to the child, performing the ritual of ear piercing in the case of a female child, and reciting words for the first time (Akuru kiyawēma). All these rituals are made up of a set of religious and culturally valued practices. There, food and drinks are prepared, sweets are prepared, religious rites are performed and the child is blessed, relatives gather and celebrate these occasions. During the epidemic, the rural people of

Sri Lanka are working to adopt strict protective practices regarding birth. Thus, according to the primary sources and secondary sources collected in the research, various restrictions are imposed by the village healers on rituals related to birth during the epidemic. The birth of a child in a village is a cause of joy for everyone in the village, but in an epidemic situation, for the safety of the child, the mother, and everyone else, the celebration of such occasions is prohibited. In the study, it was clear that in performing the rites associated with birth, people are performing essential rites during the epidemic. Postponable rites are said to be postponed until after the pandemic has passed. These are the rituals performed after the birth of a child such as ear piercing, naming, *iñḍul kaṭagāma* (The ceremony of feeding the baby solid food for the first time), hair cutting (The ceremony of cutting the baby's hair for the first time), and *Akuru kiyawēma* (The ceremony of getting the baby to read the alphabet for the first time) are postponed until the epidemic is over.

The safety of the pregnant mother is important when it comes to childbirth. When the village shows signs of an epidemic, pregnant mothers, babies and nursing mothers are kept in a house outside the area. Babies and pregnant women are kept out of the epidemic area until the situation clears up. It is additionally advised that anyone from the epidemic area stay away from homes that have infants or pregnant women living in them. This situation can also be seen in western medicine. During the epidemic period, counseling is done through family health workers and doctors to keep pregnant women and babies safe. Also, western medicine cares about wearing a mouth mask to avoid exposure to pathogens, avoiding inappropriate food and drinks, giving instructions for germs removal, cleaning the residents and the house regularly using disinfectants, etc.

It seems that the traditional doctors have also given various advice about the 'doladuka' (strong desire to eat something during pregnancy) that occurs in pregnant mothers. If the desire for 'doladuka' is due to a food that is unsuitable for eating during the epidemic, it is advised to give that food to the pregnant woman after the epidemic subsides. If not, the study revealed that very few are given on the doctor's advice. In Western medicine, it is advised that it is inappropriate to use foods that can cause illness during epidemics.

Correspondingly, if there is a pregnant mother, a baby, and a nursing mother in a house, during the epidemic season, a ‘pādiya baṇḍunak’ (Dalupotha, 2020) is placed near the front door of that house. That is, a little turmeric and lime juice are mixed in a bowl of water and placed near the entrance of the house. Then everyone who goes out of the house and returns home wash their face, hands, and feet with water mixed with lime and turmeric and enter the house. This is a traditional practice for disinfection. Also, the study revealed that our traditional villagers were careful enough to enter the house after going out of the house and returning home, changing the clothes that the person was wearing before entering the house and taking a bath.

During epidemics, a piece of ‘amukaha’ (raw turmeric- *Curcuma longa*) or a piece of ‘perumkayam’ is tied to the hands of pregnant women, infants, and nursing mothers. This is believed to reduce the risk of contracting the plague. Also, a special ‘Suraya’ (Something worn to protect against various hazards) is used in the Monaragala area. This Suraya is known as ‘gūta candana suraya’. The people of this area believe that by tying this ‘Suraya’, they are protected from plague. Apart from this, various sacrifices are performed for the protection of the pregnant woman, a safe birth, and the protection of the newborn baby and the mother. They pray to Goddess Pattini to protect pregnant women and babies during epidemics. Performs various ‘bāra’ (vows) ‘hāra’ (making offerings). At the end of the plague, the residents fulfill the promised ‘bāra’ by giving a ‘kiri ammāvarungē dānayaak’ to the goddess Pattini.



Figure 1: Gūta candana suraya

In this way, in addition to treatment in traditional medicine, the people of the village also refer to spiritual activities. This helps to maintain the mental condition of the community. These measures are used to prevent people from unnecessarily fearing the epidemic. Accordingly, in an epidemic situation, taking measures for the safety of pregnant mothers and babies is mostly done by giving advice in traditional medicine. Western medicine does not refer people to rituals and religious activities. Safeguarding practices are seen to be directed at the public through a legal framework. That is to say, a role similar to the role played by the use of rituals in traditional medicine is played by Western medicine through public awareness programs in the form of imposing laws and regulations.

The other rite of passage occasion that cannot be postponed as there is an epidemic season is the puberty of a girl. According to the customs of the Sinhalese society, many rituals are performed when a girl child reaches puberty. Finally, a small party is held among the relatives to celebrate the occasion. But during the pandemic, all these activities change. It is common practice to keep a girl child separated from others in a room in the house after she reaches puberty. It is a Sinhalese custom to keep the girl who has puberty in a separate room, especially out of sight of the male side. After that, according to the auspiciousness, bathing her in the morning and other rituals are performed respectively. However, the study made it clear that the process is completely changed in an epidemic situation. The day after the girl reaches puberty, she is bathed without auspiciousness. Proceeds to cancel all rituals. Patthini entrusts the protection of the child to the goddess and ties an offering. The day after the girl reaches puberty, she is bathed without auspiciousness. Proceeds to cancel all rituals. Entrusts the protection of the child to the goddess of Patthini and ties an offering. In Western medicine, due to the epidemic situation, the groups of relatives are prohibited from meeting. Therefore, it is prohibited for relatives and friends to gather to perform rituals in the house. The mother is advised to perform all rituals if required. All of them should be done subject to the rules and regulations imposed due to the epidemic situation.

Marriage is the third occasion of the rites of passage. During the epidemic period, all marriage-related activities are postponed. During the epidemic, the

Vedarala (Traditional healer) of the village prohibits all festive activities. The imposition of bans like ‘Ranchu-thahanchi’ (This restriction is imposed during the epidemic season to avoid meeting in small groups, holding associations, etc. It helps control the spread of the disease.), ‘Yām-ēm-thahanchi’ (During epidemics, it is forbidden to walk in each other's houses in the village. If someone is ill, it is customary to hang a branch of the neem tree or a branch of the mango tree in front of the house. Doing so symbolizes that no outsiders should enter the house) etc. will inevitably lead to disruptions in marriage ceremonies. Postponement of a marriage is practically possible, so that marriage rites are not performed until the epidemic situation is over. Western medicine advises postponing those celebrations. These measures are taken to protect the health of the bridegroom and the bride and the health of all relatives as well as to prevent the spread of the epidemic in society. Then if the plague lasts long and for some reason the marriage must take place, only the family gathers and performs the rites and gives permission for the marriage. A good example of this is the permission to perform marriages subject to restrictions and health precautions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Death is known as the final rite of passage. It is imperative to take action outside of the customary Sinhala rites when a person passes away during the epidemic time. If a person dies during the epidemic period, they are buried without performing rituals. The last rites like ‘pānsakūlaya’ (A ritual performed by Buddhists for the deceased person) are also not done during the epidemic. During the epidemic period, if someone died due to the epidemic disease, immediately after the death, a few people wearing masks and following protective measures, as per the instructions of the physician, bury the deceased. Dalupotha (2020) mentions that when burying the body of a person who died of an epidemic disease, the people who carry out the work wear masks and grind raw turmeric, and apply it well on the body. It is believed that the people doing the burial will be protected from germs. Also, after removing the body from the house, the traditional doctor of the village advises to burn the mat or mattress on which the patient was sleeping, all the used equipment and clothes. In addition, the entire house is washed. It is also advised to rinse again with antiseptic liquid (A liquid prepared by mixing turmeric and lime juice with water). Outsiders are prohibited from entering the

house and residents are also prohibited from leaving the house until the epidemic is over. In Western medicine, it is advised to burn the body of a person who dies due to plague. For example, during the Spanish flu and COVID-19 epidemics, instructions were given to burn the bodies of the dead to kill pathogens. Since all viruses and other micro-organisms are completely destroyed during cremation, cremation of infected corpses is the most appropriate method on public health principles. But since Muslims are strongly opposed to cremation, in some cases Covid-infected corpses were later allowed to be buried under strict monitoring conditions at special sites where it was confirmed that there would be no harm to the community (Hulathduwa, 2021). There, the dead body was not exposed to anyone and the officials of the health service department carried out the work under strict health security measures.

Conclusion

This study has examined how individuals or communities navigate the complex terrain of healthcare choices and rituals during times of pandemic, with a particular focus on cultural rituals. This research has explored how people decide between traditional and Western medical treatments in such times, how these choices affect their health outcomes, and how cultural beliefs and practices influence these decisions. Thus, through the analysis of the data of the research, similar disparities were seen between the counseling given in cases of rites of passage in the traditional medical system and in the Western medical system. In most cases, these two medical systems provide similar advice. Both forms of medicine seem to have focused more on preserving the health of the community than on rituals during epidemics. It can be concluded that the traditional medical system has given the necessary health care advice to the people in the form of customs based on cultural characteristics. It seems that the necessary health counseling has been given to the people at the state level in the form of rules and regulations in a way that fits with the attitudes of the modern society through the western medical system. Thus, it can be concluded that the two medical systems of Sri Lanka, the traditional medical system and the western medical system, have performed the same tasks in two forms, giving advice to maintain the health of the people at a good level during the epidemic.

References

- Dalupotha, M.K. (2020). Infectious disease epidemics and our folklore (Bowana Roga wasangatha ha ape janashruthi). Fast Publishing (Pvt) Ltd.
- Hulathduwa, S.R. (2021). Disposal of corpses (mr̥ta dēha bāhæra kirīma). Neptune Publications.
- Jayasiri, A.A.J. & Premarathne, M.G.L.M. (2011). Medical Sociology and Medical Anthropology 1(Waidya samaja widyawa saha waidya maanawa vidyawa 1). An author publication.
- Kelly, H. (2011). The classical definition of a pandemic is not elusive. Bulletin of the World Health Organization, 89, 540-541. <https://doi.org/10.2471/BLT.11.088815>
- Uragoda, G. C. (1987). A History of Medicine in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka Medical Association.
- World Health Organization. (2000). A Report of the Consultation Meeting on Traditional and Modern Medicine: Harmonizing the Two Approaches-Harmonizing the Two Approaches. World Health Organization Western Pacific Region. https://www.evidencebased.net/files/trad&mod_med.pdf
- World Health Organization. (2000). General Guidelines for Methodologies on Research and Evaluation of Traditional Medicine. World Health Organization. World Health Organization: General guidelines for... - Google Scholar