



A Medical Anthropological Study of Traditional Medicine of the Vedda People for the Prevention and Control of Epidemics

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ABSTRACT

People around the world use a variety of medical methods to treat diseases. Of these, the traditional medicine methods of the indigenous people are unique because they are built in conjunction with their culture. The 'Vedda people', known as the indigenous people of Sri Lanka, use their own medical techniques to cure diseases. What are the treatments they use for the prevention and control of epidemics using their traditional medical methods? This is a research problem in this research. The objective of the research is to study what are the traditional medical treatments of the Vedda people for the prevention and control of epidemics. The research is based entirely on secondary sources. Only qualitative data is used for this. Traditional healers of Vedda community believe that the cause of all diseases is the influence of gods and demons. For this reason, various rituals are one of the main methods of treatment for the epidemics and other ailments of the Vedda people. They perform these rituals to please the evil spirits of their dead relatives who are endangering them. It is the belief of the Vedda people that after doing so, the demonic spirits of the dead relatives will be happy and they will stop endangering themselves. Here, various treatments could be identified in the traditional medicine of the Vedda people for the prevention and control of epidemics. Among them are the use of medicines, the use of Manthra, and the holding of ritual offerings. According to the study data, it can be concluded that the influences of Sinhala medicine have been added to the traditional medicine of the Vedda people.

KEYWORDS: *Traditional medicine, Vedda people, epidemic, rituals*

1 INTRODUCTION

Every living thing on earth is continuously at risk due to many illnesses. Both plant communities and animal communities, including human populations, are susceptible to these illnesses. It is simple to recognize diseases as abnormalities in the structure or operation of human, animal, or plant bodily systems (Lexico 2020). From the day man originated on earth to the present day, man has used various remedies for various ailments based on his/her own experience. Humanity has employed plants to treat illnesses and heal the sick from the beginning of time (Shi et al. 2010). According to fossil records, humans have been using plants for medicinal purposes for at least 60,000 years (Fabricant & Farnsworth 2001). In ancient times, diseases were thought to be the result of invisible forces, and even today, traces of such beliefs remain in various indigenous medical systems (Thomson et al. 2020). Around 460 BC, there was a partial departure from the superstitious notions of medical thought. Hippocrates, a Greek philosopher who lived during this time, concentrated on identifying physical causes for disease and saw it as a natural rather than a mystical phenomenon (Thomson et al. 2020). As a

result, medicine started developing as a science, and it developed to the present day as Western medicine. As man's thinking advanced to the point of reasoning, he turned to the process of experimentation. Through that, he gained insight into food and toxins, as well as drugs, through the use of perceptual knowledge (Thomson et al. 2020). Thus, different medical systems were developed in different parts of the world using different drugs for different diseases. Various medical practices that have been employed from the past to the present are now divided into two main categories. They are modern medicine and traditional medicine. Modern medicine is referred to as Orthodox, Western, or Allopathic medicine while traditional medicine is called Indigenous, Complementary, or Alternative medicine (Xue & Changli, 2008). In a definition-based explanation, the science or art of diagnosing and treating a disease or injury and maintaining health is simply called modern medicine. In modern medicine, treatments include action, diet, exercise, and other surgeries (American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language n.d.). One of the most significant aspects of contemporary medicine is explained by this definition. Meaning that rituals, superstitions, etc. are not used in the

modern medical system. Here, it is obvious that the relevant illness or damage should only be seen from a physical standpoint. Traditional medicine, on the other hand, has a lengthy history. Knowledge, skills, and practices based on theories, beliefs, and experiences inherent to different cultures can be used to maintain health as well as prevent, diagnose, improve, or cure physical and mental illness (World Health Organization 2000). Traditional medicine is an ancient and cultural system of medicine that preceded the use of modern science in health. Traditional medicine varies widely according to the social and cultural heritage of different countries. The development of a medical system in response to the challenge of maintaining healthiness and treating diseases is found in every human community. Thus, it is clear that traditional medicine has been practiced to some extent in all cultures (World Health Organization 2000).

In addition to the English term used to describe traditional medicine, several other terms have come into use at present. Among them are Ethno-medicine, Native medicine, Indigenous medicine, Herbal medicine, Natural medicine, and Folk medicine (Perera 2000). The existence of traditional medicine lies in the

transmission of knowledge from generation to generation. There is a great deal of literature on some traditional medicine. It also deals with theoretical concepts and practical skills. Others pass on knowledge from generation to generation through oral teachings. Currently, in some parts of the world, the majority of the population relies on their own traditional medicine to meet their primary health needs (Che et al. 2017).

Indigenous peoples play a key role in the study of various ethnic groups around the world. 'Indigenous people' can be simply identified as the oldest people living in a country or region. However, according to Dayananda Somasundara (2007) the above explanation is not sufficient to define 'Indigenous people'. He further states that there is no global definition for the term 'Indigenous people'. According to the Oxford Dictionary, indigenous people are people with different cultural, social, and legal traditions that existed indigenously before colonialism or invasion (Martin & Low 2008). An estimated 370 million indigenous people are living in more than 70 countries worldwide. They represent a rich diversity of cultures, religions, traditions, languages, and histories (WHO 2007). These various indigenous groups

have developed medical systems that reflect their identities and are unique to their tribe or group.

The *Vedda* people are identified as the indigenous people of Sri Lanka. The *Vedda* people have a special place in the history of Sri Lanka because they are the only living people in Sri Lanka today who have preserved their cultural and social identity as one of the oldest people. They are also the only indigenous people in Sri Lanka. These people, who have been living under the influence of external and internal influences that have taken place in the history of Sri Lanka since then, are now confined to a limited number of areas in Sri Lanka. At present they are restricted to a few villages in Sri Lanka such as Dambana, Hennanigala, Dalukana, Ginidamana, Pollebedda, Ratugala, and Vakarai and Muttur in the eastern coastal region (Silva & Ranasinghe 2013). They made a living by hunting and gathering and lived a very simple life. Their subsistence economy, customs, dress, food, medical system, and all other practices and habits are different from the Sinhala community and other ethnic groups living in Sri Lanka. In this study, the researcher focused on studying the traditional medicine of the *Vedda* people. The main objective of this

research is to conduct a medical anthropological study of the traditional medicine of the *Vedda* people in Sri Lanka for the prevention and control of epidemics. The sub-objective of this research is to study the prescriptions and rituals used for the prevention and control of epidemic diseases in traditional medicine of the *Vedda* people. During the epidemic season, have the *Vedda* people of Sri Lanka made remedies for the prevention and control of epidemic diseases using their own traditional medicine system? What are those remedies? Based on these research questions, this study was conducted from a medical anthropological perspective on how the *Vedda* people of Sri Lanka used traditional *Vedda* medicine to prevent and control epidemics.

2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted under the medical anthropological approach of beliefs and folk medicine systems that come under the cultural approach of medical anthropological studies. This research has been done using the descriptive analysis methodology that comes under the detailed research category. Only qualitative data were used in this study because qualitative data

contributes more to the achievement of the objectives of this research. The research was entirely based on secondary sources. It also used literature as a method of data collection and the data of people who have studied in this regard. Research books and research articles written about the *Vedda* people of Sri Lanka were used as secondary sources. Also, research books written about *Vedda* people's medicine and reports and works of foreigners during the colonial era were also used as secondary sources in this research.

3 RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Indigenous peoples and tribes around the world still rely on their traditional medicine. These indigenous communities are also the inheritors of many traditional medicines. These indigenous people use their life experiences to diagnose their ailments and seek various medical remedies and sorcery. Looking back at the past of indigenous people, it is possible to go back thousands of years based on various literary and archaeological sources. Accordingly, it seems that these *Vedda* people have continued their lineage for thousands of years to the present day. To survive for thousands of years in this way, they must have a very good knowledge of health and medicine. But

since no formal study has been done on it, it is possible to study the medicine of the *Vedda* people based on various literary sources. Spittel says (1999) that there have been three main divisions in the medicine of the *Vedda* people in Sri Lanka since ancient times. They are,

1. Rituals and Sacrifices (*Puda* (offering foods, etc, to devils), *Pujā* (offering foods, flowers, and lights, etc. to Gods or the Lord Buddha)) have been used by the *Vedda* people as the chief medical practice to prevent diseases and to cure incurable diseases.
2. *Yantra* (diagrams are drawn on copper/ gold plates and worn for health problems)- *Manthra* (incantation), chanting which is done individually or with medicines, has been used as a second healing method.
3. Thirdly, there are reports of *Vedda* people using various medicines from the surrounding environment.

One or two or all three of the above methods are used by the doctors of the *Vedda* people to cure any disease and prevent any disease (Spittel 1999). Chandrathilaka Bandara, who conducted a

study on the medical treatment of the indigenous people (*Vedda* people) in Sri Lanka, says that the medicine of the *Vedda* people consists of five components. They are, exercises to be followed for hygiene, the system of ritual with sacrifices, *Yantra* (diagrams are drawn on copper/ gold plates and worn for health problems) -*Manthra* (incantation), the system of *Kem* (curious beliefs), and medication use (Bandara 2019). This research focuses on the traditional medicine used by the *Vedda* people in Sri Lanka for the prevention and control of epidemics. The *Vedda* people of Sri Lanka are constantly falling prey to various epidemics that occur from time to time along with climate change.

According to the Oxford Dictionary, “A large number of cases of a particular disease happening at the same time in a particular community, is called an epidemic” (Oxford 2020). 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). In Sinhala

folklore, epidemics are known as ‘*Deyyange leda*’ (God’s disease). When interpreting dictionaries according to those standards, the interpretation given by the folklore dictionary is important. That is to say, it is interpreted in folklore and folk language as ‘the work of God’. Diseases of God, diseases that are considered to be caused by the wrath of God, are interpreted as epidemics (Dalupotha 2020). Likewise, the *Maha Sinhala Shabdhakoshaya* (Sinhala Dictionary) defines *Wasangatha* (epidemics) as an inflectional meaning of *Bōviyana* (contagious) and *Pathiriyana* (scattering), has also revealed the epithet *wasangatha* (epidemic) in the noun sense as *Bōwana rōgaya* (contagious disease) (Wijetunga and Harischandra 2017). The word used by the *Vedda* people to describe epidemics is ‘*Kōdāri*’ (Bandara 2019). The *Vedda* people of Sri Lanka believed that if there was any kind of disease or epidemic (*Kōdāri*), it was due to the evil spirits of the dead relatives (*nā yakun*). The rituals and practices of the *Vedda* people, who have been associated with the Sinhala community since ancient times, bear some resemblance to the belief system of the Sinhala community. However, *Vedda* traditional healers believe that the cause of all diseases is the influence of gods and demons (Rathnapala 2003). For this

reason, various rituals are one of the main methods of treatment for the epidemics and other ailments of the *Vedda* people. They perform these rituals to please the evil spirits of their dead relatives who are endangering them. It is the belief of the *Vedda* people that after doing so, the demonic spirits of the dead relatives will be happy and they will stop endangering themselves. Many different types of rituals can be done to cure various ailments and diseases. The following are some of the rituals used by the *Vedda* people for the prevention and control of epidemics.

Four groups of supernatural beings are worshiped in the peace rituals of the *Vedda* people. They are gods, demons, *Kiri Ammawaru*, and *Nē yakun* (The devil souls of deceased relatives) (Rathnapala 2003). Here, an aristocrat named *Bandāra*, who was related to the *Vedda* people, is believed to be the god *Bandāra*. In addition, gods such as *Kataragama*, *Mangara*, *Irugal Bandāra*, *Saṅḍugal Bandāra*, and *Pattini* are worshiped. Devils such as the *Kandē yakā*, *Biḷiṅḍi yakā*, *Rāhu yakā*, *Ītalayē yakā*, and *Īṅḍigollē yakā* are worshiped. The *Kiri ammala* are the wives of the ancient leaders of the *Vedda* people. They are

sometimes considered demons. Some of them are *Nāccilā*, *Kumārilā*, *yamapallī*, and *Vannahi*. Although *Kuveni* is often referred to as the ‘*Maha Kiri Ammā*’, *Saman* god’s elder sister is also sometimes referred to as ‘*Maha Kiri Ammā*’. *Nē yakun* are the dead relatives of the *Vedda* people. They believe that the spirits of dead relatives become demons and do good and bad things (Bandara 2019). It is believed that gods or demons cause various troubles and dangers not only in the *Vedda* community of Sri Lanka but also in the Sinhala society. Even in Sinhala society, many epidemics are known as ‘God’s diseases’. In Sinhala traditional medicine, in addition to medicines, rituals, and various customs are used to prevent and control epidemics. An example of this is the ‘*Kīla pandama*’ ritual performed at the Kadiragala Rajamaha Viharaya as well as the ‘*Devolmadu*’ ritual performed in various places.

There are very few sources that mention that the *Vedda* people are receiving medical treatment for their ailments. Most likely the reason why there is no written record of their medicinal care is that the *Vedda* people pay more attention to rituals than medicine.

Table 01: Rituals performed by the *Vedda* people to protect themselves from epidemics.

Name of the ritual	The purpose of doing
<i>hækma nætuma</i> (hekma ritual)	To protect against epidemics and to protect the health of the <i>ræhē</i> (<i>Vedda</i> community).
<i>kiri koraha nætuma</i> (kiri koraha ritual)	To get rid of epidemic diseases, to cure children's diseases, for the protection of the womb, to cure personal ailments, to comfort the incurable patients and to protect the health of the <i>ræhē</i> (<i>Vedda</i> community).
<i>kaḍaim nætuma</i> (kaḍaim ritual)	To protect against epidemics and to protect the health of the <i>ræhē</i> (<i>Vedda</i> community).
<i>æl yakinna nætuma</i> (al yakinna ritual)	To protect against epidemics and other diseases, to protect against accidents, and to protect the health of the <i>ræhē</i> (<i>Vedda</i> community).
<i>næ yakun piduma</i> (Worshiping the devil souls of deceased relatives)	To protect against epidemics (<i>Kōdāri</i>) and infectious diseases, to bless children and mothers, for the protection of the womb, to cure personal ailments, to destroy human toxins, to demonic bugs, and to protect the health of the <i>ræhē</i> (<i>Vedda</i> community).
<i>ruwala nætuma</i> (ruwala ritual)	To protect against epidemics and to protect the health of the <i>ræhē</i> (<i>Vedda</i> community).
<i>koḷa maḍuva yāgaya</i> (kola maduwa ritual)	To protect against epidemics (<i>Kōdāri</i>) and infectious diseases, to bless children and mothers, for the protection of the womb, to cure personal ailments, to destroy human toxins, to demonic bugs, and to protect the health of the <i>ræhē</i> (<i>Vedda</i> community).
<i>kamba kaṇuva</i> (kamba kanuwa ritual)	To protect against epidemics (<i>Kōdāri</i>) and infectious diseases, and to get rid of ghost bugs.
<i>mirisgē mula</i> (mirisgē mula ritual)	To protect against epidemics (<i>Kōdāri</i>) and infectious diseases, and for the hygiene of mothers and children.

Source: (Seligmann 2009, Bandara 2019)

Seligman also points out that the traditional craft of the *Vedda* people was kept secret from outsiders. In his book, Seligman goes on to say that they did not pass on that knowledge to any of their own people unless they had a kinship (Seligman 2009). However, in his book, Chandraratilaka Bandara has mentioned some of the medicines given by the *Vedda* traditional healers to the *Vedda* people during various epidemics. When a mosquito epidemic (*Maduru Una Kōdāriyak*) spreads, ginger, *bim kohōmba* (*Munronia pinnata*), and *væl kahāmbiliyā* (*Tragia involucrata*) are boiled, filtered, and given to the patient to drink to prevent the fever from escalating. Also, ginger and coriander are boiled, filtered, and given to the patient to drink (Bandara 2019). A medicinal drink boiled with ginger and coriander is also given in the traditional Sinhala medicine to patients in case of any fever. The *Vedda* people also refer to the malaria epidemic caused by the malaria mosquito as '*Maduru Kōdāriya*'. For malaria, boiled water of *yakināram* tree root, *doḍampanā* tree root, *Nika* tree root, *kuṃburu* tree root, *satsaṇḍa*, orange tree root, *madurutalā* plant, and *babila* plant is given to the patient to drink. The epidemics of diarrhea and cholera are referred to by the *Vedda* people as '*turijjavīmē*

kōdāriyak' or '*baḍaeliya yāma*'. To alleviate the condition, the patient is given king coconut water, orange juice, and pomegranate juice. Also, five parts of the *rath-mal* plant (*Ixora coccinea* L.) are boiled and given to the patient to drink. In addition, the *Vedda* people prepare rice porridge and give it to the patient to drink (Bandara 2019). There is a similar treatment for epidemic and other fevers in traditional Sinhala medicine. Food is considered a medicine in the traditional Sinhala medical system. The use of porridge during the sick stage is common in traditional medicine. It is customary to give '*bædi hāl kænḍa*' (fried rice porridge) to quench the anorexia caused by an epidemic. *Vedda* people also chant *Manthrā* on the clear water and lime juice. That water and lime juice are given to the patient to drink. The *Manthrā* are as follows.

For water and lime juice – '*sattāmō tātā tātā mahī tātā subhadrā sadhat buvanaṭa ēsvā haḥ*'

For water – '*sattamotātā tātā mahī tātā subhadrā sakhat buvanḍa ēsvā haḥ*' (Bandara 2019, p.228).

It is said that there is no cure for *Kammul Amāruwa*/ *Kammul gāya* (Mumps) and *æs gāya* (*æs leḍa*). For this, the *Vedda* people

often perform rituals such as the *kiri koraha* ritual. Oyster shells and elephant bones are rubbed on the rock and applied to the cheek (Bandara 2019). There is a similar treatment for Mumps in traditional Sinhala medicine. The elephant's jawbone is rubbed on a rock, mixed with lime juice, and applied to the cheek. According to Spittel (2009) a patient suffering from fever in the village of *Kaditiyaya* was given lime juice. The lime juice is given after chanting a mantra on the lime juice. Chanting on lime in case of an illness is a remedy that is still seen in Sinhala society even today. He further stated that the first wife of a *Vedda* leader named *Tissahamy* had contracted an illness with fever, cough, and cold. It is also said that the *Veddas* used decoctions (*kasāya*) and incantations (*Manthra*) to cure the disease. But it is said that *Sudu Bundy* died without recovering from them (Spittel 2009). Thus, it is clear to us that the *Vedda* people were tempted to use spells to cure other ailments, including epidemics. However, Seligman says that *Vedda* people do not have much faith in the use of *Manthra*. According to him, the practice of *Manthra* has later reached the *Vedda* people due to the cultural diffusion of the Sinhala community (Seligmann 2009). Spittel holds the opposite view to Seligman's.

Spittel points out that *Vedda* people used mantras for various things and as a cause for diseases as well as for healing. He further added that they also used *manthra* to do good deeds and to do bad deeds (Spittel 1999).

Vedda people use the name '*bibiḷi rōga*' to refer to diseases such as measles, chickenpox, and smallpox. This is because they are afraid to name the diseases that cause *Nāe yakun* (The devil souls of deceased relatives). The *Vedda* people believe that when they are told the names of the diseases caused by the *Nāe yakun*, they are also infected with those diseases (Bandara 2019). There is no specific treatment for measles, chickenpox, and smallpox, and when the fever is high, Amla (*nelli*) boils in the water and gives it to the patient to drink. In addition, Neem (Margosa) leaves and stalks are boiled and given to the patient to drink. In addition, squeezes black sugarcane and gives it to the patient to drink (Bandara 2019). Neem (*Kohomba*) leaves are also used in Sinhala medicine to cure diseases such as chickenpox. There we will find sleeping on neem leaves, bathing in boiled water of neem leaves, and applying the body of minced neem leaves. According to Chandraratilaka Bandara, *Vedda* people

use a mantra for this *bibiḷi rōga*. He says that this *mantra* should be mixed with breast milk and applied on the patient's head in the morning. The *mantra* is as follows,

‘orukabel, irikabel, mukkaṁḍal, nākkamḍal śrīga pōga pōga ēsvā hah’
(Bandara 2019, p.236).

Skin diseases such as *panu hori* and *paṇu kævili* (worm infestations) also spread rapidly among *Vedda* people in the form of epidemics. To cure these diseases, they grind *Eth thora* leaves (*Cassia Alata Linn*), *Kohomba* leaves (Neem), raw turmeric, *Ehela* leaves (Golden shower tree), bitter gourd leaves, *Maduruthala* leaves, etc. and apply on the patient's body (Bandara 2019). Many of these treatments are also found in Sinhala medicine.

4 CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Here, various treatments could be identified in the traditional medicine of *Vedda* people for the prevention and control of epidemics. Among them are the use of medicines, the use of *Manthra*, and the holding of ritual offerings. Researchers such as Spittel and Seligmann, who have written notes on *Veddas* of the past, mostly state that *Vedda* people performed

sacrifices and rituals to cure all ailments (Spittel, 1999, Seligman, 2009). Information on medicine use is scarce. However, recent research has shown that medicine use among the *Vedda* community is at an advanced stage. Different types of medicines that were used by *Vedda* people for the prevention and control of epidemics are also commonly used medicines in Sinhala medicine. Also, when considering the way of using medicines etc., it becomes clearer that the influence of Sinhala medicine has caused the current state of the traditional medical system of these *Vedda* people. According to the data found in the study, it is clear that the influence of Sinhala medicine on the traditional medicine of *Vedda* people has been received through cultural diffusion.

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