

Incest, Rape, Suicide and Murder in Sinhala Folklore

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Introduction

This article deals with incest, rape, suicide and murder in Sinhala folklore. The close relationship of the norms and their violations is described here. The Buddhist belief in rebirth and karma are closely related to it. When a person of consequence in a locality is wrongly put to a violent death, to might create disturbances in the community. On such instances there had been examples of individuals being promoted to the rank of gods in order to keep the people at peace.

Incest, Rape, Suicide and Murder in Sinhala Folklore

Incest, rape, suicide and murder are a recurrent motif in Sinhala folklore; particularly in myths and legends associated with the birth of gods and yakkās (= evil beings). It is interesting to probe into the nature of these motifs and the specific socio-cultural situations in which they are presented to us, and thus postulate a probable theory of their origin and recurrent appearance in Sinhala folklore.

Dala Kumāra Myth:

Of incest, the best known example is the Dalakunāra and Giridevi myth¹. These two were brother and sister born in a royal family. When Giridevi attained age (first menstruation), she was confined to an underground cave. Dalakumāra, the brother, met the washer-woman who was carrying with her the soiled clothes to him. He was thus immediately struck by passion as a result of this taboo. (i.e. not to look at the sister in the first menstruation) being broken. He thus forced his way to the underground cave, and forcibly raped the sister who did not consent to his suggestions to engage in sexual intercourse with him. Giridevi, in great shame committed suicide, and the chief of the gods (Sākra) recognising her virtues in not consenting to engage in sexual intercourse with the brother, resurrected her, and she became a goddess while her brother transformed into a ferocious yakā who still roams the world in search of his sister².

1. WIJESEKERA, Nandadeva, MAN, Jan-feb, 1943.

2. PRAJNALOKA, H. U. Purāna Sivapada Samgrahaya, Colombo 1952, 83-86.

Gods and *yakkās* are born through various complex processes. Here, we observe one such process at work. It concerns the maintenance of social norms relating to sexual life. Norms contribute their share to the well-being of the family, clan, community and thus to familial, community and social solidarity. Then once such serious norm is broken, the net result is the inordinate disturbance in the network of personal and social relations among those who constitute the family, community, society etc.

The norm here is the avoidance of sexual conduct between brothers and sisters. Sexual conduct is made more serious here not only because of incest, but of also of the ritualistic occasion (first menstruation) in which the sister was placed. Dalakumāra violated this norm, and the result is that he was born as *yakā*, while Giridevi upheld the norm, and she was resurrected as a goddess. The myth and the ritual underscores the importance of maintaining such norms by means of reward and punishment after life.

The Dalakumāra - Giridevi myth has in it, rape, violence and a ritual suicide. The sister remonstrated when the brother wanted to have sexual intercourse with her. She was thus virtually raped, and this led her to take her life by resorting to a violent means of self-destruction. She hanged herself. Her birth as a goddess and the birth of Dalakumarā as a *yakā* are thus associated with rape and suicide, ear-marked with violence, associated with a ritual-status. We observe the identical motif in certain other myths too.

Seven Kiri ammās:

The original tale of the seven Kiriammās relate how seven powerful beings (Udayakku) came to worship the Buddha's footprint in the guise of seven queens. On the way to the holy shrine (Śrī Pāda), a man of low caste is said to have pulled one of the queens by her hand. This led all seven queens to jump down a waterfall in shame and commit suicide. All seven were born as goddesses worshipped as Kiriammās by the people³.

Here too, a sexual norm is primarily involved. A man of low caste 'pulls the hand of one of the queens'. In Śrī Lanka, the belief associated with caste purity is not so strong as in India where a person of high caste could not get defiled by means of mere touch from a person of low caste. But, 'pulling by the hand' in Sinhala folklore suggests sexual intercourse. The man probably raped the woman. The folk poems describing the seven queens refer to the 'Sanayamkeli' in which the seven queens were engaged. They

1. MĀPOTE CHANDAJOTI and GODAGAMA VIPULASARA, *Lāmkika Devivarū*, Eheliyagoda, Sri Lanka 1954, pp. 26-28

were thus engaged in water-sports symbolised in the Sinhala folklore as a sport engaged in with some form of sexual satisfaction. On certain occasions, water-sport is a prelude to sexual intercourse. The man who had come to the waterfall to engage in such a sport was attracted doubly serious by the fact the queen was a holy pilgrim (ie. in ritual-status). All the seven queen then committed suicide by jumping down the waterfall. It was as if the defiling of one tantamounts to group defilement-again a characteristic feature in Sinhala folklore. One often performs the ritual pertaining to seven or twelve gods, taking then all as a group. Offerings made to one is thus meant to be offered to the entire group. In this defiling, the ritual-status of one amounts to the 'collective rape' of seven women.

Thus the seven queens committed suicide while defending the norm, ie. the celibate life of woman pilgrims. Once it was violated, they sacrificed their lives. It is this act which motivated the community to transform then into seven goddesses. The myth and the ritual reminds society of the norm, and reinforces the necessity to maintain it.

Incest:

Incest is mentioned in others myths and legends too. In relating the story of Vijaya, the progenitor of the Sinhala race, it is stated that the two children fathered by Vijaya and born to Kuveni committed incest ("The brother, the elder of the two, when he grew up, took his sister, The younger, for his wife"⁴). The two children became fatherless when Vijaya got rid of Kuveni who committed suicide in desperation "by eating her own tongue" On certain legends it is said that she was cruelly killed by her kinsmen who were angry with her for helping Vijaya against them. The brother and sister who subsequently went are believed to be their descendants⁵.

Incest as such, as it is known in folklore is not something alien to certain royal clans. Vijaya himself was the son of Sinhabāhu who married his own sister. Such instances of brothers marrying sisters were found in the royal families of Egypt and Hawaii, and also among the tribal Azande and Incas of Peru. The royal inheritors of the throne are believed to "do this" in order to safeguard the purity of the throne are believed to "do this" in order to safeguard the purity of blood. In the case of Kuveni's son and daughter, the sexual union took place in the wild, where apparently there were no other human beings living at the time.

4. MAHAWAMSA vol. I, ed. by Wilhelm Geiger, London 1904, VII, 67. WIJESEKERA, Nandadeva, *The People of Ceylon*, Colombo 1954, p. 40.

5. WIJESEKERA, Nandadeva, *The Veddas in Transition*, Colombo 1954, p. 42

Kuveni's two children are also of royal blood. Incest among them is in a way, for that reason, ritually permissible. But among the veddas, who are their descendants, incest is completely taboo. Even a hint towards an incestuous relationship among them is fraught with dire consequences⁶. As in the case of incestuous relationship elsewhere, those born to a royal clan are allowed to practise - but to all the others, it becomes a taboo.

Incest when performed by ordinary people is considered as a serious violation of norms, with no exception made. Among Sinhala folklore, the legend of 'Nagā meru ala' (the yam that killed the sister) relates how a brother and a sister walking in a strange locality came across a particular type of yam. As they were hungry, they ate it. The yam created an intense desire in them for sex. After they indulged in sexual intercourse, they came back to their logical senses. They thus committed suicide in shame.

In the case of the above version of this story (there are a number of other versions), both brother and sister committed suicide once their sanity was restored because they realised the gravity of the norm violated. As they were not of royal blood, there was no question of elevating them to the status of gods, or even to that of *yakkās* though they ended their lives in violent suicide. For ordinary mortals, such rebirths by way of regeneration in another form appears not valid at least in Sinhala folklore.

When a serious norm is violated, there is practice of ascribing a definite role to the victims of that violation, who are then born as gods, goddesses or *yakkās*. The seven *Kiriamā* goddesses, who in their former life committed suicide collectively in defiling their ritual purity are entrusted with the task of looking after pregnant, lactating mothers and little children; particularly protecting them from contagious illnesses such as chicken-pox, measles, mumps etc. This is primarily because of the violation of the norm that concerned sexual life. The queen 'molested' by the low caste man could have conceived a child. He or she then could have been an illegitimate child. If the queen gave birth to the child fathered by a low caste man, this would have made the lot of the child as well as that of the mother intolerable in society. The norm emphasises the importance of the confirmative behaviour. At the same time, it ascribes the protection of children and lactating mothers as their main role. To the seven *Kiriammas* who are now seven goddesses, on one hand, violent rape, particularly associated with ritual status is ruled out. On the other hand, a specific role for such rape victims is prescribed in the 'regenerated life'.

6. SELIGMANN, G. C. and Seligmann, Brenda, *The Veddas*, Cambridge 1951.

7. WIJESEKERA, Nandadeva *The Veddas in Transition*, Colombo 1996.

Dalakumāra was reborn as a yakā because he violated this powerful sexual norm. *ie.* committing incest, injuring the ritual status of his sister. He, born as a yakā today is entrusted with the task of 'cleaning'⁸. Whenever the need to cleanse a place arises, he is summoned. During the wedding festival of God Kataragama, the veddas brought so much of wild flesh to prepare meals for the wedding-guests. The entire place where the wedding was held began to stink with the smell of rotting flesh. God Kataragama then secured the services of this yakā (also called Garā Yakā) to cleanse the place.

This role is ascribed to Dalakumāra, now born as Garā Yakā, not primarily because of committing incest. He was born in a royal family, and as such under certain circumstances one could have excused him of this particular infringement. But incest here was associated with violence and also the violation of a ritual status. The result is the role prescribed (*ie.* clean the world when so needed), probably in attunement of the serious crimes he had committed.

Crime and punishment:

This brings to us another aspect of Sinhala folklore, which is the notion of crime and punishment. When an evil act; an act is committed, violating a serious norm, a punishment is invariably prescribed. This punishment often involves the offender being born in a state of suffering, and then being made to perform a role involving much physical discomfort. Very often such a role (*eg.* as that prescribed for Dalakumāra) would involve activity normally condemned as inferior in social status (as in the scavenging activities of Dalakumāra).

Norms enforce solidarity. Once a serious norm is violated, social solidarity gets highly disturbed. Such violation could eventually disorganise the family, the community, or even the wider society (*ie.* inter-community relationships). Certain myths would enable us to understand this important aspect of Sinhala folklore.

Hapumal Bandāra assaulted his mother out of sheer remorse; thereafter he committed suicide by jumping down a deep precipice. Subsequently he was born as a yaka. Brāhmana Bandāra struck his younger brother with a katti (sharp knife), and killed him. This younger brother was born as a yakā⁹.

8. OBEYSEKER, E Gananath, *The Cult of Goddess Pattini*, Chicago 1984, p. 184.

9. KARUNATHILLAKE, N. T. *Devaru Oyabada Edahili*, Colombo 1985, p. 80.

These stories show how familial relationships were seriously disturbed when such established norms were violated. The result of striking one's mother is the remorse the son suffered, finally driving him to commit suicide. The relationship between brothers in the family is disturbed as seen in the second story. In both, violence and suicide are the predominant motives. In both these instances one observes how the offence is punished by being born as a yaka in the next birth.

In family life, the wife is expected to be always faithful to the husband. That is the norm, The queens of Buvanakabahu II who ruled at Kurunegala were given the false news that the king had died in battle. The queens in great sorrow jumped down a precipice and committed suicide. If they lived, they would invariably be put to death by the king's enemies, followed them by committing suicide himself. The king, as well as the queen were then born as Yatigaloluwē Bisō Bandāra gods. The fact that they were king and queens, and they suffered violent deaths resulted in being born again as a god and goddesses.

Taniyawellē Deviyō:

A folk-tale of a similar nature relates the birth of Taniyawellē Deviyō. He was a provincial ruler who lived at a place called Madampe. The queen was given the false news of his death in the identical manner as in the earlier story while Taniyawellē was engaged in a battle away from home. The queen overcome by tense sorrow committed suicide. The king later having learned this planted his sword on the ground and ended his life by jumping onto it¹⁰. Here again a god and a goddess were born.

In these stories, no established serious norm has been violated, But when one examines closely the potential to violate such a norm is prompted by the queen's act. If they lived after the death of their king, the enemy would have violated their ritual status, perhaps by forcibly engaging in sexual intercourse with them. By committing suicide through violent means (eg. jumping down the precipice) they avoided this situation. The result was their elevation to the status of goddesses. The king, gripped with intense grief too committed suicide. This also was done in a violent manner. He not only underscored the queens' behaviour, but even bravely jumped into the point of the sword blade planted by him in the ground. It is this sustenance of the norm plus the violence associated with the king's act which elevated him to a higher status in his next birth.

10. Dharmadasa, K. N. O. and Tundeniya, H. M. S. *Sinhala Deva Puranaya*, Colombo 1994.

Mangara Myth:

The Mangara myth relates about the birth of god Mangara. According to one popular version, he was a leading hunter. In an encounter with a wild buffalo, Mangara was gored to death. His own fellow-hunters organised a ritual to resurrect him. The wild buffalo's skull was used as a 'pot', the four legs as hearth-stones, the entrails and the brain as 'milk'. All these were boiled, and the ritual of 'boiling milk until it overflows' took place. The ritual gave life to the dead man who was then 'reborn' as God mangara.¹¹

Hunters live by hunting wild animals. To be killed by them and then to accept the wild animal's victory is to forfeit life in the wild. Mangara dies, but is resurrected by the boiling of the entrails of the killed buffalo. It is the buffalo that eventually dies. Mangara lives forever, symbolising the hunter's victory over the wild animals in the forest. The violence in Mangara being gored to death, the wild buffalo's death, and the gruesome method of boiling the buffalo's entrails and brain in its own skull, supported by his four legs, all enhance the motif of violence in the tale. A similar type of ritual is reported in the case of plain Indians.¹²

Story of Suvandahami:

The story of Suvandahāmi who lived in the Hiriyāla Hatpattuwa in the Kurunegala district shows a god similar to Mangara in the making. Suvandahāmi was a hunter who was killed by a wild elephant. His violent death gave birth to him, being resurrected as Nirāmulle Yāpā Bandāra Deviyō. This legend too emphasises the victory of the hunter-community over their prey, the wild animals. Community solidarity was reinforced by ritual celebration of the resurrection of the community heroes such as Mangara and Suvandahāmi.

When a person of consequence in a locality is wrongly put to violent death; no doubt the others in the community get disturbed. This is what happened in the case of Kiribandā who was pushed down a precipice by his own brother on the insinuation of the king who was extremely jealous of Kiribandā's popularity. Kiribandā dead, became a more serious problem to the king than Kiribandā living. The only course of action available to the king was to elevate dead Kiribandā to a status of a god with a shrine dedicated to him, where people could make offerings to him. This is how Ekkasse Deviyō was born.¹³

11. Mapote Chandajoti and Godagama Vipulasara, *Supra* 1954, p. 10.

12. Herat, S. R. *Game Edahili, Mahaweli Wansaya*. vol. II, Colombo 1985, pp. 533-540.

13. Devapriya, Sirisena, *Nuwara Eliya Distrikkaya, Nuwara Eliya* 1992.

Vat' himi Bandāra:

Sometimes, putting an individual belonging to a powerful community into a cruel and unjust death, created serious problems. Vat' himi Bandāra was the son of King Buvanekabāhu II who ruled at Kurunegala. Vat-himi was the son of the king by a Moor (Muslim) woman. When he ascended the throne, his partiality, both by royal officials as well as by prominent Buddhist monks. They all got together and employing a clever strategem, threw Vat-himi down the rock at Kurunegala, thus causing a cruel death.

One can now visualise the consternation that arose among the sizeable Moor community at the loss of their king in this violent and unjust manner. Almost immediately, Vat-himi was elevated to the status of a god. Galē Bandāra by name. This elevation apparently pacified the disturbed Moor community. Today there is one dvale (shrine) at Kurunegala where a Moorman (a Muslim) is officiating as the Kapurāla (a lay priest). This shows how well the myth and the ritual integrated themselves into the Moor (Muslim) people's beliefs and practices,¹⁴ a type of myth which we may also call 'a myth of social integration'.

Violence associated with mystery played its role as a significant factor in 'creating' gods and yakas. Kivulegedera Bandāra died a mysterious and violent death. According to the myth, he was ordered to be put to death by the king and was buried alive.¹⁵ Another person by the name of Dahanaka Bandāra, detested by his own community due to his anti-social acts was put to a cruel death by making him enter a cave in a mysterious manner, the opening of which was closed down by his own community. Because of the hatred he had at the time of his death, he was born as a yakā who started to take revenge from the people who subjected him to such a cruel death, by causing various illnesses. In the Deduru Oya area, there is a shrine of a goddess known as Walāme Pattini Devi. According to the legend, she was a beautiful young woman with beautiful long tresses. One day she disappeared mysteriously, and her dead body was found between two branches of a tree. Undoubtedly she was drowned. The sudden disappearance and the death climaxed in finding her body being the prominent features in her legend, although her cause of death remains a mystery.¹⁶ In all these instances, various miraculous acts are often ascribed to the new gods in order to strengthen their newly ascribed positions.

14. Devapriya Sirisena, Nuwara Eliya Districckaya, Nuwara Eliya. 1992

15. Navulle Dhammananda, Uva Ithihasaya, Colombo 1966, p. 180.

16. Karunathilake, N. T. Deduru Oyabada Edahili, Colombo 1985, pp. 193-194.

Abuta Devi

Instances of individuals put to cruel death, perhaps by selecting one or more traditional forms of punishment resulted in such people being born as gods or *yakkās*. Such individuals did not possess any virtues worthy of mention or a leadership among the people. The gate-keeper of King Gajabā was put to death, and he was resurrected as Abūta Devi. Ambanwala Deviyo was the person who led a revolt against King Rājasinghe, and who was put to death in a cruel manner. In all these instances, the violent circumstances of death has been the factor that is per-eminent among others as being responsible for the community to raise them to the level of gods.

Kalu Kumara myth:

Acts against the king were punished by death because treason was never condoned by society. Even when a king's son indulged in treason he was severely punished. Kalukumāra was the son of a king who requested his father to hand him over the throne. When his request was refused, Kalukumāra in sheer anger, plotted against the father. He employed a clever strategm to kill him. He planted sharpened wooden pikes in the pond where his father was customarily having his baths. The pikes were planted well below the level of the water so that these were not to be seen. The prince thought that the king jumping into water would get killed by these pikes.

The secret however was made known to the king by the woman of his harem. The prince sensing his father's wrath, ran away from the palace. The king caught him and out him to death by adopting the same means. The prince was born as a *yakā*, and immediately broke the necks of the women of the harem who gave the secret out to the king. Even today the *yaka*, now know as Kalukumara, roams the world inflicting various illnesses on people, particularly on woman who were the cause of this own death.¹⁷ Although he was born not as a god but as a *yaka*. The dual role ascribed to an individual (both as a god and a *yakā*) is again a common feature in Sinhala folklore.¹⁸ It depends on the nature of the duality of roles ascribed by society to such a person.

Human Sacrifices:

Human sacrifice amounts to nothing but ritual murder. From primitive times, people believed in human sacrifices, although the introduction of Buddhism with its respect for life of all sorts to a great extent rid the society

17. Prajnaloka, H. U. *Supra*, pp. 48-49.

18. Nandasena Ratnapala, *Janasruti Vidyava*, 1995, pp. 113-114.

of such practices. But in medieval society and even at present, we come across solitary instances where human sacrifices are reported to have been made. In the past, when a huge water reservoir known popularly as a tank was constructed, it was customary to offer a human sacrifice in order to make the venture a success.

This human sacrifice was made with two purposes in mind:

1. By such a sacrifice, the spirits in charge of such sites where the water reservoir or tanks are constructed become satisfied and then assist the work.
2. The human being who is sacrificed would be born as a yakā (a water-spirit or Udaka Rakusā), and then he would look after the water reservoir, protecting it from all harm in the future.

When constructing the Minnerivewa legend states that king Mahasen is said to have sacrificed his own son. Another version of the legend states how an animal (Kaludāvā) was sacrificed and that the prince was eventually saved. Such sacrifices virtually meant murder, but the person sacrifices often becomes a god or a yakā. because of the ritual nature of the act.

The birth of some gods and goddesses as well as evil beings are associated with the violation of serious social norms. A significant number of such serious norms pertain to sexual morals. Incest and rape goes hand in hand with suicide and murder as shown in the examples given. In all those, in addition, the serious norm is broken by violent means. One may die, employing a horrible means of suicide or he or she may be murdered by the application of violent means. Sometimes, the nature of such violent acts remains a mystery although the victim has obviously died under such violent conditions.

A god, a goddess or yakā is reborn, and he or she earns the reward of punishment for the violation of the norm in the previous birth. We observed how the seven Kiriammās who committed suicide collectively, upholding the norm of ritual purity being born as seven goddesses with the task of looking after pregnant and lactating mothers given over to them. Dalakumāra was born as Garā Yakā, and his role is to clean the world of impurities whenever called to do so.

The Buddhist belief in Karma (volition) and reaping the reward or punishment according to Karma is also associated with such myths and legends. The most important aspect in this context is the attention paid, to

socially compensate for an act that violated the norms. In one way, this social compensation was dispensed by either elevating to the form of a god / goddess or ascribing a lower role as that of a yakā. Social compensation goes further by prescribing rituals in honour of the gods/goddesses or the satisfaction of the yakā. In a way, such rituals performed again and again, reinforced the positive value of norms violated. Finally, the god / goddess with his or her new ritual status assumed a special social significance. Whatever harm had been done to that person in the past life (eg. Gale Bandara who was put to death in a cruel manner) is socially compensated for in an ample manner by promoting him or her to the status of a local god or goddess honoured by everybody.

CONCLUSION

Violation of a norm is associated always with rape, incest, suicide and murder. Disturbances caused by violation of the norm has to be set aside by social construction activities. The belief that a person who has undergone a violent death to be born as a powerful character is reinforced by the belief in rebirth and karma. If the person is a man of violent character and of less social significance; he is conceived as born as a Yaka. If he is a person of social value and has no willful connection with the breaking of the norm; than he is promoted to the status of a god. Even if he commits suicide, if that is done for the upholding of a norm, his birth in a better place, perhaps as a god is assured. If is also solved by such strategies-Vat himi who was the king of Kurunegala was put to death. This angered a sizeable community to whom Vat himi belonged. In order to appease that community, he was raised to the status of a god. The identical story is found in the case of Kiri Banda deviyao.