

A Sociological Study of Sinhala New Year Rituals and the Functional Role of Women within the Environmental Context

¹ Amarasiri Wickramaratne & Rasika Muhandiramge

Department of Languages, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka

Ruhuna National College of Education

Correspondence: amarasiriw@seu.ac.lk

Abstract

The Sinhala New Year, celebrated annually on either the 13th or 14th of April, marks the beginning of the month of Bak in the Sinhala calendar. The day preceding this is the final day of the previous year, and the rituals associated with this transitional period are divided into two parts: the “Old Year” rituals and the New Year rituals. These traditions are deeply rooted in folk medicine, games, beliefs, and customs, while also showing the influence of Indian Vedic religion and deity worship. This study investigates the potential indirect connections between the origins of Sinhala New Year rituals and Indian cultural influences. The primary aim is to examine the unique characteristics of this influence and how it has been integrated and sustained within the local context, particularly in relation to ecological knowledge and traditional practices. Three sub-objectives guided this investigation: To explore the embedded local knowledge within these rituals as reflected in folk traditions. To examine how the rituals relate to human life transitions and the environmental knowledge they convey. To analyze the ecological dimensions of New Year rituals through a feminist lens. Employing a qualitative, descriptive methodology grounded in interpretivism and human-centered paradigms, data was collected through interviews with ten individuals—including astrologers, fortune tellers, researchers, and scholars—selected using snowball sampling. Thematic analysis was applied to explore key patterns related to the research objectives. The study identifies Sinhala New Year rituals as cultural practices that are intricately connected to the local natural environment. Women’s roles within these rituals are primarily centered around the family, but their functions are revealed to be multidimensional. Women act as facilitators in food production and distribution, and as providers of diverse forms of labor. They demonstrate integrated environmental knowledge rooted in everyday experience—knowledge not used merely for consumption but for planning, conserving, and sustaining resources. Rather than being passive consumers, women emerge as active agents in conservation, investment, sustainability, and productivity. They primarily utilize locally available resources such as water, food, fuel (fire wood and fire), simple tools, and physical labor in their roles.

Keywords: Sinhala New Year, Ritual practices, Women’s roles, Environmental knowledge, Cultural traditions, Feminist ethnography, Cultural transmission