

Difficulties of preserving intangible knowledge and practices: A special reference to Make Nasal Septum Hole (*Mookanam Kuthal*) and Branding (*Kurisudal*)

Kennedy J.

Senior Lecturer in English, Department of Languages, Eastern University, Sri Lanka.

Correspondence: kennedyjeevaretnam@gmail.com

Abstract

Intangible knowledge or tacit knowledge of versatile of their respective fields is a treasure which is to be conserved and preserved. Batticaloa, a district of Sri Lanka is a place for so many important entities. Intangible cultural heritage in many aspects is peculiar one. Among the entities branding (*Kurisudal*) and making nasal septum hole (*Mookanam Kuthal*) are important as they are related to cattle farming maintaining farm authority. As these activities are now decreased or demised due to many reasons. This situation leads to think on the problems of the subject. The overall aim of the study is to record the important element and present to the learnt world. Data were collected from in-depth interview and participatory method based on the qualitative results recommendation and suggestion were given to portrait the knowledge and preserve it.

Keywords: Intangible Knowledge, Branding, Nasal Septum Hole

Introduction

While the concept and practice are being analyzed it is inevitable to give a background of the research area and its nature. Batticaloa in the sense of understating it has the boundaries as Verugal Aru and Trincomalee District in the north, Neelavanai and the Ampara District in the south, Indian Ocean in the east and Polonaruva District in the west (Figure 1). According to *Land Use Plan Batticaloa* District, it consists of 2482 square kilometers land (15, 2016). This land is divided by a belted lagoon into the west part which is called *Paduvankarai* (sun setting shore – the West) and the east part which is called *Eluvankarai* (sun rising shore – the East). The eastern part is popular for miner crops cultivation and western part is popular for paddy cultivation. But the cattle farming is available on both the sides of the lagoon.

Since cattle farming is done both the sides, branding (*Kurisudal*) and making nasal septum hole (*Mookanam Kuthal*) are practiced in both the places. Even though the lands are available for cattle farming on both the sides, mainly it is done massively in the west, (the herd of cattle in a farm is called *paddi* in Tamil language).

The social structure of the Batticaloa society has unique identity. The large owner of paddy land and a big cattle farm (or a large herd of cattle – both cows/bulla and/or buffaloes) owner is called a *Podiyar* in the Tamil language who is a person of wealth whose profession is paddy cultivation and/or

cattle farming for his living. People as laborers depend on him for their survival. They are employed for cultivation and cattle farming works. Laborers in the cattle farming do milking, preserving milk, and maintaining cattle. Maintaining cattle includes branding (*Kurisudal*) and making nasal septum hole (*Mookanam Kutthal*) as well. These *mookanam kutthal* and *kurisudal* are important for maintaining the cattle farm which are to be studied further in this research.



Figure 1: Boundaries of Batticaloa

Source: <https://www.parliament.lk/uploads/documents/paperspresented/performance-report-district-secretariat-batticaloa-2018.pdf>



Figure 2: Representative Image for a Cattle Farm in Batticaloa District

Source: Google Images

Hallo (2005) argues that the use of placing nose rings (as in the case id *mookanam kutthal* and using *mookanam kayiru* – the rope which is used for the controlling purpose) which were used by the ancient Sumer that dates to the dawn of the human civilization. Khan (2007) states that branding of cattle (with fire heated marks) for identifying ownership dates back around 2,700 BCE and D’Ambra (2007) notes that those brands were used as magic spell to protect animals from harm by the ancient Romans.

This research attempts to focus two concepts related to cattle farming, viz. branding (*Kurisudal*) and making nasal septum hole (*Mookanam Kutthal*) which are being done for different purposes. Among the two, very important one is branding (*Kurisudal*). *Kurisudal* is the action of writing the ownership on the

cattle's skin using heated hooks. Initial of the name of the owner, area code, and the symbol of the caste are written. Wherever the herd of cattle go, people easily recognize the owner of the cattle and the area they belong to. Sometime *kurisudal* is done as treatment for particular sickness when the cattle are unable to walk due to rheumatism, they do it as an effective treatment.

Making nasal septum hole (*Mookanam Kutthal*) is a process to place a rope through nasal septum (*Mookanam Kayiru* in Tamil language) for the oxen to control and to steer them to a direction. The rope is inserted into nose and keep holding the tail of the rope to control the oxen while driving a bullock card and while ploughing and *Soodadithal*. The two traditional skills and way of practice are diminishing due to many including modern development of lifestyle and technological development.



Figure 3: A Representative Image for a Bullock with Nasal Septum Rope
Source: Google Images. Copywrite: Philip G. Veerasingam

Objectives

The overall aim of the study is to reveal the local knowledge and record them and the following objectives are identified:

1. to reveal the importance of *Mukanam kutthal* and *Kurisudal* as an intangible cultural heritage of Batticaloa,
2. to show the reasons of diminishing these cultural heritages,
3. problems of preserving the cultural heritage in the present context, and
4. to propose ways and means to conserve and preserve the heritage.

Methodology

Since this research covers traditional concept related to social norms of villagers and attempt to present them in a new arena, expletory research method was used to do the study, in their qualitative design was employed to find information and finding. For that, in-depth interviews as research strategy was applied. The data from the interview were used as primary data and for secondary data, peripheral readings were used. The data were analyzed in qualitatively and recommendation and suggestion have been put forwarded.

Concept Analyzing

In the global context, intangible cultural heritage and knowledge of it are considered as vital elements and UNESCO pays much attention in identifying and preserving them. UNESCO mainly pays more attention on it. According to UNESCO, intangible cultural heritage is manifested inter alia in the following domain, on the understanding that the expressions of intangible cultural heritage can simultaneously belong to the several of the domain. They are;

- (a) Oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage.
- (b) Performing arts
- (c) Social practices, rituals and festive events
- (d) Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe
- (e) Traditional craftsmanship.

Among the above five, the study is focusing on “Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe.” The *Mukanam kuthal* and *Kurisudal* are very important knowledge for the use of community. In the data analysis section first of all the concept of *Kurisudal* is analyzed.

***Kurisudal* (Branding)**

Kurisudal is an activity of writing ownership of the cows on their left skin. Altogether six letters and symbols are encrypted on the skin viz. First letter of the owner, symbol of the owner's caste, area letters and “X” letter on the cheek, eight-line letters. It is easy to recognize the ownership of the cattle when the cattle are stolen or misplaced in the jungle, anybody can pass the message to the owner or the cattle farm manager or any worker in that particular cattle farm. The symbol of the caste is an important one as many names are similar in a particular village. For instance, if there are people on the same name, the caste symbol will reveal the real ownership. F. X. C. Nadarajah (1998) also states about different symbols of different castes of Batticaloa (97).

The act of *Kurisudal* is not only for identification, it is also done as a treatment for rheumatism where commonly the cattle face mainly during rainy season. The cattle are unable to walk due to this sickness. The one and only therapy and treatment for the ailment is *Kurisudal*. According to one of the interviewee Mr. Thambimuthu from Sithaandy “deliberately we do this and the following day particular cow can walk as usual.”

If the brand (*kuri* in the Tamil language) is inscribed on the left side, it indicates that the cattle's owner is the first owner, and written on the right side the cattle, that means the cattle is transferred to the second owner. If the *kuris* are on both the sides the letters on the right side reveal the present ownership. Normally cows are not purchased in the third time as there may be some ownership problem.

***Mookanam Kuthal* (Making Nasal Septum Hole)**

The activity of *mukanam kuthal* is done often in order to control the bulls for the use of the domestic purposes. Making a hole between the nasal septum and insert a rope through the hole is called *mukanam kuthal*. The tail of the rope is held by the user (or driver) to control and steer the oxen towards desired direction, stopping and moving. The oxen are used as pairs and single as well. When they are used as pairs, similar size oxen are selected. For ploughing, carrying things, pulling trees and heavy things,

harvesting paddy and sorting paddies, travelling, selling things, etc. the bulls are used either single or double.



Figure 4: *Kurisudal* (The branding process)



Figure 5: A cattle with *kuri* (brands)

The process of selecting the bulls *mukanam kuthal* is a skillful art. All oxen have a circle (like hair whorl) on their necks. If the whorl is 6 inches from the top of the head, the particular bull is considered strong and dangerous one and not suitable for the people's domestic usages. If the circle is beyond 6 inches from the top of the head, it is considered controllable and suitable for people's domestic usage. These bulls are selected for *mukanam kuthal*. There are skillful people who have traditional knowledge to make the hole and insert rope. Particular stick from particular varieties of trees is taken and sharpened to make the hole on the nasal septum. Further, the rope is also made from the fiber of particular trunk of trees. This rope is soft and durable for long usage. There are different types of ropes for different purposes. The rope which is inserted into the nasal septum is called *mukanam kayiru* (nose rope), the rope which is encircled the neck is called *thali* (in the English language it is called bridal string) which is held by the person, is called *thalaik kayiru* (head rope). *Thalai kayiru* is slashed both left and right side of the bull(s) and is pulled for striving and turning the bull(s) toward desired direction. This is a steering system while driving a card or during ploughing and also it is used as brake system. If the rope is pulled towards the right side, the bull(s) will turn towards right and the same is applicable to turn to left, and if the rope is pulled back straight, the bull(s) will be stopped.

Data analysis

Primary data and knowledge which were derived review that the *kurisudal* and *mukanam kuthal* are important intangible cultural heritages of the Batticaloa people. Knowledge of the *kurisudal* and *mukanam kuthal* are very important practices in the cattle farming which are not in the literary (written) format. The knowledge is passed to generation by generation orally. According to the interviewees, modern knowledge and science cannot be applied in certain practices, for instance, the certain sickness of the cattle - like rheumatism and the like - will be easily cured by using the local medicine rather using western medicine.

When certain example can be clarified to reveal the importance of *kurisudal*. After *kurisudal*, if the wound remains uncured, sometime there might be worms in the wounds. They follow three types of treatment;

1. There is a creeper called *Sunnaampu Kodi* in the jungle. They extract the juice of the creeper and apply it on wounds and the wounds will be cured within five days.
2. The second treatment is chanting mantras which is called *māddu vākadam*. There is a section in the palm leaf manuscripts (ōla leaves (in the Tamil language it is called as *ēdu*)) is called *māddu vākadam*. They chant that Mantras and apply ash paste from the firewood Hedge Boxwood (*Drypetes sepiaria* - in the Tamil language it is called *veera kollī*) on the wound and the worms are killed and wounds are cured.
3. The *Kurisudal* is used as a treatment method for sickness. Cattle get sick of rheumatism especially during the rainy season, are cured by this *kurisudal*. There are some important aspects in intangible cultural heritage in relation to *kurisudal* and *mukanam kutthal*.

There have been changes in all spheres of knowledge and practices. One important element for the changes is knowledge and technological advancement. This brings the following facts in diminishing the intangible cultural heritage:

1. Introduction of new devices and instrument. Cattle farms have been used to transport things plough lands, floating paddy, etc. Tractors and machineries are now used for the purpose of these practices. Hence using bulls has been diminished. Hence, the need for *mukanam kutthal* and other related practices have almost come to an end.
2. The other intangible cultural heritage is medical treatment for wounds and other ailments. As we know that the folk medical practices are practiced from generation to generation and transferred orally. But, at present there are different types of studies which focus on cattle farming and ailments of cattle diseases. Scientifically, those practices are more reliable than folk medicine. Hence, farmers are advised to seek assistant from the government and they are to do so as it seems simple and easy way. Therefore, it has been reduced.
3. Farmers' attitude has been changed towards scientific fruitfulness which is an important factor. According to the current context, people are reluctant to go behind folk medicine and other ways since there is an easy and reliable way is existing. They have their mind to fix reliable way of medicine. Hence, people have less reliability towards folk medicine.
4. The system of social structure and its acceptance is different from the past. People are now following confused life. They try to have a sophisticated and easy life. The ways of following the rural life and its practices are hard to follow and the people attempt to sort out their burdening. Hence, they deliberately give up intangible cultural heritage and follow new ways of doing cattle farming.

Suggestions

It is proved so far that the above two practices are being diminished as that of other cultural heritages due to various reasons which have been mentioned above. These have to be preserved and conserved for the following reasons:

1. The whole world is now realizing that rich cultures and heritage have been diminishing, and many conventional organizations, including UNESCO, pay attention and provide supports to prevent them.
2. Farmers' identity depends on many elements, which are related to agriculture and cattle farming. In cattle farming *kurisudal* keeps their identity viz; caste, generation, special position and alike.

3. Cattles are used now a days for only milk and meat purposes. But some other benefits are ignored due to technical and industrial advancements. The waste of cattle (organic fertilizer) used for farming. But due to inorganic fertilizer usage, this was given up. This new inorganic trend gives us many side effects. Thus, if we preserve the traditional methods, we can reduce many problems.
4. In such cultural practices we use many technical terms and phrases which are unique. When these practices are being reduced, these terms are also forgotten. Hence the language loses its scope and richness by the narrower terms. Hence, the language is getting weaker.

Recommendations

1. The Divisional Secretariats have to promote to hold these activities when it is necessary.
2. Organizations like UNESCO or local bodies like cultural ministries can organize awareness programmes in following the traditional life.

References

Eva D'Ambra, "Racing with Death: Circus Sarcophagi and the Commemoration of Children in Roman Italy" in *Constructions of Childhood in Ancient Greece and Italy* (American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 2007), p. 351.

Hallo, W.W. 2005. Sumerian History in Pictures: A New Look at the 'Stele of the Flying Angels', in: Y. Sefati et al (eds), *'An Experienced Scribe who Neglects Nothing': Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Honor of Jacob Klein*. Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 142-62.

Kandiah, V.C. (2002). *The Batticaloa State* (kl;lf;fsg;Gj; jkpo;fk;), Excel, France.

Khan, S.U. and Mufti,O., "The Hot History and Cold Future of Brands", *Journal of Managerial Sciences*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2007, p. 76

Nadarajah, F. X. E., (1998), *The Glory of Batticaloa* (kl;lf;fsg;G kh;dkpak;), Batticaloa, Batticaloa Cultural Board, District Secretariat, Batticaloa.

Shanmugasundaram, T., (1986), *The Jaffna Bullock cart Journey* (aho;g;ghzj;J khl;Ltz;br; rthhp), Thellipalai, Arul Veliyeetaham.

Guidelines for the Establishment of National "Living Human Treasures" Systems, <https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/00031-EN.pdf>, 18.06.2017.
https://luppd.gov.lk/images/content_image/downloads/pdf/llrc_batticaloa.pdf

Interviews

1. Arulampalam, K. Age 46. *An Owner of a Cattle Farm*. Kalumunthanvely, Interviewed on 18.06.2019.
2. Pasupathipillai, K., Age 65. *A Cattle Farm Owner and farmer*, Irrakathuvalli, Kannakudah. Interviewed on 18.06.2019.
3. Sinnathmpi Poody, S. Age 59. *A Cattle Farm Owner and*, Munaikadu, Interviewed on 19.07.2020.
4. Sivanasarasa, K., Age 64. *Farmer*, Pandariyavely, interviewed on 18.06.2019.
5. Velayutham, P., Age 74. *Agriculturalist*. Paruthichenai, Kannakuda, Interviewed on 19.09.2019.