

Either God or Devil: Beyond Buddhism - An Anthropological View of Yakkama Ritual

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This paper focuses on an aspect of the structure of *Yakkama* ritual (*Nanumura Mangallaya*) that is particular to Laggala Pallegama Region in Mathale District. The research has two objectives: to determine how the *Yakkama* ritual is separately constructed within the Buddhist context; and to determine the positioning of Gods and Devils in the devotees' court. This study employed qualitative methods including focus groups, participant observation and key informant interviews in August 2011.

Nanumura Mangallaya is the first ritual activity in the year that was introduced as *Yakkama*. The total structure of the ritual is embedded with worship of the great God of *Rawana* (*Gange Bandara, Sellavi Bandara and Brahmana Bandara*, etc.), God *Saman*, God *Devatha Bandara*, and they associated with eighteen *Yakkas* (demons) who are directly connected to their weapons cleaning ritual. They included 45 sacred weapons, such as swords, bows, arrows, knives, etc., and Goddess *Pathhini's* foot anklet (*Salamba*). The total structure of ritual idiom displaces regional guardian Gods and their pantheon of *Yakkas* in the community belief system. The main expectation of the ritual is protection of hunters and the community from various evil spirit and community diseases (*Deyyange Leda*) such as mumps, chickenpox, etc. The whole day of *Nanumura Mangallaya (Yakkama)*, ritual villagers visit the temple ground premises and fulfill their vows to Gods and Goddesses that they have made during periods of ailments.

There is a fundamental link between *Shanthikarma* and Buddhism in both up-country and low-country Sinhalese societies. However, when clearly observed, the structure, rituals and practices performed in *Yakkama* have a non-Buddhist base and also have particular regional identities. It is also observed that the non-Buddhist element of *Yakkama* is a historical and culturally constructed phenomenon. On the one hand, *Yakkama* symbolises hunting and is a tribal community ritual. Hence, there is lack of specific evidence to link civilised religious norms to this context. On the other hand, *Yakkama* has been developed as a ritual contradictory to the Buddhist tradition. *Shanthikarma* in Sinhalese society is performed in separate spaces to get God's benevolence and rituals are performed in common spaces to receive benevolence and prosperity.