

A Study of the Concept of “Killa” in Sinhalese Folklore and Literature

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Birth, puberty and death are considered as the main transitional events in human life. Everywhere in the world, people make various offerings to gods and worship them during these transitional periods. As these events or occasions are universal, such behaviour is not characteristic of any particular social sector. Most of these rituals are related to women. These special events and occasions are connected with blood and therefore, believed to cause pollution. Thus, out of fear and abhorrence of blood, the concept known as 'killa' or 'pollution' has emerged. In Sri Lankan society, events such as birth, puberty, menstruation and death are identified as taints. In addition, there are some other 'kili' or taints such as certain foods, liquor and cobras ('naga') among folk beliefs. Taints of death and food are accepted as common to both males and females.

This study aims to examine the concept and practice of the 'killa' or taint, as it is a major aspect in the folk culture of Sri Lanka. For this purpose, this comparative research project concentrates on the beginning of the [killa] taint, its chronological evolution, folktales and its practice in traditional and modern society. This research was conducted in the Thumpane and Kundasale Pradeshiya Sabha divisions to find out how the rituals connected with the concept of 'taint' are practiced at present. Data were collected on traditional and modern knowledge through interviews, case studies, and group discussions. From the information gathered, it was clear that there is still strong evidence that the concept of 'kili' is believed in traditional Sinhala society. Women, in a taint or polluted state, are strictly banned from attending religious and agricultural events, healing rituals and other occult practices. Therefore, women are not allowed to participate in such events. However, it was clear from secondary sources that an environment more tolerant towards women has evolved through the belief system on super-human forces. Folk tales such as *Giri Devi* and *Dala Kumara* have provided Sinhala society with knowledge and experience for developing these kinds of attitudes. Further, as a result, in traditional societies, an individual self-control as well as an informal societal control has been developed.

Due to developments in education and advancement in technology, the concept of [kili] taint is gradually disappearing in modern society. The ancient customs and beliefs woven around the concept of birth taint etc. have been rejected by the attitudes of the modern society, which in effect has led to conflicts in the social order. Similarly, belief in taints in agriculture too is being abandoned. There is, nevertheless, a feeling among villagers that this kind of disregard for customs and traditions has been the cause of diseases and failure in crops.

When people invoke gods in modern society for attaining multiple objectives and solving personal problems, they pay excessive attention to purity. Therefore, to have or to be with taints is considered as a disqualification for participation. People refrain from associating with everything connected with taints when they engage in cultural practices and rituals. Even though people have advanced in many fields, especially in education, they are still unable to free themselves fully from conventional beliefs and concepts.