Traditional Medical Practices and Folklore in Sri Lanka: A Historical and Cultural Analysis of 'Kem' Rituals and Mantras in the Benthara Region

K. Karunathilaka

Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya, Peradeniya, 20400, Sri Lanka
nk.karunathilaka2003@gmail.com

The Benthara region of Sri Lanka holds a prominent place in the country's indigenous medical history, primarily due to its unique lineage-based healing traditions. This study explores the intersection of traditional healing, 'Kem' rituals, and mantra practices, preserved for centuries through oral traditions and the patronage of local religious institutions. The primary objective is to analyze the historical evolution and current status of these practices within the 'Bentara Weda Parapura', while examining the role of the Buddhist community as their primary custodians.Adopting a qualitative research design, primary data were collected through an extensive field study at the ‘Bentara Pancha Maha Rajamaha Viharas’ (specifically Galapatha and Wanawasa Raja Maha Viharas) involving in-depth interviews with senior monks who safeguard this medical lore. Crucially, the researcher also conducted interviews and direct observations with contemporary small-scale practitioners in the Benthara area who still actively perform these rituals. Secondary data were sourced from ancient palm-leaf manuscripts and historical chronicles found in temple archives. The findings reveal that the Benthara medical tradition is a sophisticated blend of pharmacology, symbolic acts (Kem), and vibrational healing (Mantras). A significant discovery is that despite the pressures of modernization, a resilient but diminishing network of small-scale practitioners and monks continues to utilize these methods, primarily for psychosomatic alleviation. The study concludes that these traditions represent a vital yet vulnerable segment of Sri Lanka’s intangible cultural heritage. Therefore, the persistence of these living traditions in Benthara underscore an urgent need for systematic documentation to preserve this unique cultural legacy for future generations.

Keywords: traditional medicine, Kem rituals, mantra practices, Benthara medical lineage, intangible heritage