



A Comparative Analytical Study of Chula Yathukarma and Maha Yathukarma (Rituals) Socialization in Contemporary Society: With Special Reference to the Colombo District in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how **Chula Yathukarma** (minor rituals) supersede **Maha Yathukarma** (major rituals) in contemporary contexts. The primary objectives are to compare Maha and Chula Yathukarma and identify the sociological reasons for the latter's increasing prevalence. The central research question is: What factors contribute to the socialization of Chula Yathukarma relative to Maha Yathukarma in contemporary urban society? This study used a qualitative methodology. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and video analysis from subject experts and participants in the Chula Yathukrama and Maha Yathukrama in the Urban Divisional Secretariat Division of the Colombo District, and secondary data were collected through library studies. The collected data were analysed using comparative, thematic, and discourse analysis. Findings reveal that Chula Yathukarma is preferred because it can be conducted within a limited timeframe, at a lower cost, and with minimal labor. The study concludes that the complexities of modern urban life, driven by economic pressures and rapid industrialization, have made Chula Yathukarma a more viable and accessible means for fulfilling spiritual needs in Sri Lanka's commercial hub.

**Introduction:**

Sri Lankan cultural identities are reflected in local rituals. Rituals are not just a system of rituals but a powerful socialisation process that integrates individuals with the values, ethics, and traditional knowledge of society. Furthermore, rituals also play a key role in fulfilling the mental, physical, and social well-being of the community. The Sri Lankan Sinhalese people seek the help of invisible forces by performing rituals in various situations, challenges, and problems. That is, individuals and groups perform rituals to ward off natural disasters, plagues, and the influence of unseen forces and planets. These rituals are intertwined with the Kandyan, low-country, and Sabaragamuwa dance traditions. In this study, only the rituals prevalent in the low-country dance tradition have been studied.

The Southern Province, comprising the districts of Matara, Galle, and Hambantota, and the Western Province, comprising the districts of Colombo, Horana, and Gampaha, are known as the Low Country of Sri Lanka. The popular yathukarma in this area are mainly of two types: Maha Yathukarma and Chula Yathukarma. Maha Yathukarma is a large-scale shanthikarma that has performing art features and involves many rituals. In addition, chula yathukarma is one that is very simple and has fewer performing art features. This study has been conducted based on Maha Yathukarma and Chula Yathukarma. The contemporary social context has undergone a profound transformation due to the impacts of urbanization, industrialization, and globalization. Within that social change, a new tendency in urban society towards chula yathukarma can be seen. Therefore, it is a timely need to investigate why people, especially in densely populated areas like Colombo, are more inclined towards chula yathukarma compared to maha yathukarma, given their daily busyness, limited space, and economic circumstances. This study will conduct a comparative study of Maha Yathukarma and Chula Yathukarma and will examine in depth the sociological factors that influence the popularity of Chula Yathukarma in modern society. Furthermore, it is very important to review the literature to understand the significance of this research, the research gap, and to build the theoretical foundation.

It is important for research to study books and research papers written by various scholars on Yathukarma in Sri Lanka and abroad, as this will allow an understanding of the concept of Yathukarma and society. Furthermore, the origin and evolution of rituals in Sri Lanka are described in the book *Gami Natakaya* (Sarachchandra, 1968). Furthermore, the book *Shanthikarma Saha Sinhala Samaajaya* (Kariyawasam, 1986) discusses in detail the relationship between Shanthikarma and the society of the village. These two books generally discuss the rituals and society of Sri Lanka, the origin and evolution of the rituals, and the classification of rituals. In studying the theoretical basis of the Chula and Maha



Sampradā, the conceptual basis of the ‘Little Tradition’ (Chula Samprada) and ‘Great Tradition’ (Maha Samprada) presented by Robert Redfield (1956) is very useful. Although the content of this book is not directly relevant to the subject of the current research, it was a good help in obtaining a definition for the words Chula and Maha, as well as in obtaining a sociological and anthropological understanding of Yathukarma. P. De Silva (2000) discusses the challenges facing rituals in the modern urban context in his work ‘Globalisation and the Transformation of Planetary Rituals’. In the urban areas of Colombo, limited space, busy lifestyles, and economic pressures have made it difficult to perform traditional maha yathukarma. This has led to a greater preference for chula yathukarma that are easier and quicker to perform. Although this book mainly discusses the impact of globalisation on the Bali (for the nine planets) ritual, its content is also useful for understanding the sociological transformation of modern rituals. Gananath Obeyesekere (1981) and Bruce Kapferer (1983) have made extensive observations on the psychological and spiritual effects of rituals. Kapferer shows that a ritual is not just a cure for diseases, but rather an aesthetic activity that relieves the tension between the individual and society. This confirms that Chula Yathukarma has become a more practical solution to the psychological pressures faced by the individual in urban society. According to this theory, an understanding of psychosocial needs and behaviours can be gained for current research.

For the literature review of this research, Ratayakuma Hewath Riddiyagaya (Kariyawasam, 1975); Suniyam Kapilla Nam wu Shanthikarma Wiggrahaya (Kariyawasam, 1996); Pahathara Shanthikarama sahithay (Kottagoda, 1997); Kalu Kumaraya puda labana Daraka Wathpiliweth (Kottagoda, 1988); and Manikpala shanthiya Hewath Suniyam. Kapilla (Kottagoda, 1998), Gammadu Puranaya (Kariyawasam, 1990), Suniyam Kapime Shanthikaramaya Saha Samaajaya (Garusinha, 2007), Mahasohan Samayama: Sahithya Wimarshanaya (De Alwis, 2019), Kalu Kumara Yaga Piliwela (Bentharage, 1998), Ririyak Sankalpaya (Bentharage, 2009), Bali Yaaga Piliwela (Kariyawasam, 2014), and Lankawe Bali Upatha (Sedaraman, 1964) were books used. According to the information contained therein, although all the information related to the Maha Yathukarma is presented in detail, information on the Chula Yathukarma, which was the scope of the Adyana, is sparse.

Studies conducted in the global literature do not reveal information about the Chula Yathukarma and their socialisation, as well as the specifics of foreign Chula Yathukarma and their socialisation. The above literature review shows that, although a timely research topic, little attention has been paid to the observance of chula yathukarma and their socialisation. Accordingly, it is important to study the socialisation of chula yathukarma in comparison to maha yathukarma. This literature review can identify the knowledge gap and research gap in the world's academic literature related to the research topic.

**Statement of Problem:**

Rituals emerged based on human beliefs and faiths, and they have been evolving unchanged from the past to the present. The Yathukarma is mainly divided into two parts: Maha Yathukarma and Chula Yathukarma. In the contemporary context, chula yathukarma are becoming more socialised compared to maha yathukarma. The research question of this study is: What factors contribute to the socialisation of chula yathukarma relative to maha yathukarma in a contemporary urban society?.

Objectives of the study:

The main objectives of this study are to study the socialisation of Chula Yathukarma in selected Divisional Secretariat divisions of the Colombo District, to identify structural differences between Chula Yathukarma and Maha Yathukarma, to analyze how economic and time constraints in urban society affect the practice of Chula Yathukarma, and to investigate the psychosocial needs of urban society.

Hypothesis:

Chula Yathukarma can be mainly divided into two types: Chula Yathukarma that developed from the Maha Yathukarma and Chula Yathukarma that developed independently. Also, a comparative study of these Chula Yathukarma and the Maha Yathukarma reveals that their rituals, the time required for them, and the cost involved are different, and the final result is similar. Accordingly, the complexities of modern urban life driven by social and economic pressures have led urban dwellers to fulfil their spiritual needs through easily performed chula yathukarma. Accordingly, it is concluded that Chula Yathukarma has become socialised in the contemporary context.

Research Limitation:

This study has investigated the socialisation of low-country Yathukarma forms. Accordingly, among the dance forms in Sri Lanka, only those related to the low-country dance tradition were studied, and only the area of land belonging to the Colombo district of the Western Province of Sri Lanka was used as the geographical scope.

Research Methodology:

The main focus of this research was on the Chula Yathukarma related to the low-country dance tradition and the independently emerged Chula Yathukarma. The Divisional Secretariat Divisions of Colombo, Kotte, Thimbirigasyaya, Dehiwala, and Kolonnawa in the Colombo district of Western Province, which



is undergoing intense urbanisation, were selected as the study area. For this research, which has a sociological approach, the following groups were contacted under the objectives and sampling method: artists (strangers) who perform Yathukarma and people who participate in and organise Yathukarma. 50 observations of the Chula Yathukarma, semi-structured interviews, and video recordings conducted in the above regions between 2023 and 2025 were used in primary data collection. Under this, data was obtained from 35 subject experts and 50 Yathukarma contributors. In addition, secondary data through library studies was also utilised for the research.

Data Analysis Methodology: A mixed methods research methodology was adopted to analyze the collected data. Three main analytical strategies were used: Comparative Analysis: Using Emile Durkheim's principles of comparative analysis, efforts were made to identify the structural similarities and differences between chula yathukarma and maha yathukarma, and to analyze the characteristics inherent in chula yathukarma. Furthermore, the interview and video data were examined using the thematic analysis methodology introduced by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clark. Through this, 'patterns' and key themes were identified and analysed in relation to the social, practical, and economic factors of those involved in and conducting the Chula Yathukarma. Michel Foucault's theory of discourse analysis was used to examine the social influences and attitudinal shifts that have led to the transformation of yathukarma in urbanized society.

Results and Discussion:

According to this research, it was revealed that there are two main types of chula yathukarma. Namely, the rituals that arose from the maha yathukarma and the chula yathukarma that arose independently. The chula yathukarma that arose from the maha yathukarma are the rituals that arise from the main rituals performed for gods, demons, and the nine planets, with the essential elements only of the maha yathukarma. Those,

1. Suniyam Bagaya, which was born from the maha yathukarma of Suniyam Kapime,
2. Riddi Pideniya Dima, which was born from the maha yathukarma of Riddiyagaya,
3. Mahasohon Pideniya Dima, which was born from the maha yathukarma of Mahasohon Samayama,
4. Kalas Bindilla, which was born from the maha yathukarma of Kumara Samayama, and
5. Garaha Thowil, which was born from the maha yathukarma of Bali Shanthikarma (for nine planets), etc. Independently developed cula yathukarma are those that arose without the influence of the maha



yathukarma, such as Dehi Kapima, Bhahirawa Puja Dima, and Nul Damima for various diseases and protection against invisible forces.

Consequently, according to the comparative analysis approach of Emile Durkheim, there are similarities and differences between maha yathukarma and chula yathukarma. Although the objectives of conducting these yathukarmas are similar, the time taken to conduct them, the cost, the number of participating artists, the decorations, the artistic elements, and the amount of space required for them are different from each other. The process of conducting a Maha Yathukarma takes place over a period of several days. That is, usually the date for holding a Maha Yathukrama is reserved several days before the Yathukrama. Furthermore, the Maha Yathukrama is held until noon on the day before the Yathukrama, on the day of the Yathukrama, and on the day after the Yathukrama. However, for Chula Yathukramas, it takes a maximum of about five hours.

In the contemporary context, although a high cost is incurred to purchase the natural raw materials and other items required to conduct a maha yathukarma, as well as to pay the fees of the artisans, the cost of performing a chula yathukarma is minimal due to the minimal number of artisans and the small scale of the ritual. The Maha Yathukarma consists of various rituals, performances, and artistic performances. A large number of artists participate, as they present different dances, singing styles, drumming styles, and dramatic moments (**Refer to Figure 01**). However, since only the most essential rituals are included for the Chula Yathukarma, only a maximum of three artists participate (**Refer to Figure 02**).

Figure 01: It is an occasion with a dance item featuring many artists participating in a maha yathukarama.

Source: Photographed by the researcher during fieldwork .



Figure 02: It is an occasion with a dance item featuring a minimum of artists participating in chula yathukarma.

Source: Photographed by the researcher during fieldwork.



For the Maha Yathukarma, intricate decorations are created using a lot of natural materials and artificial materials, including various types of natural leaves, tree trunks, and various types of flowers (Refer to Figure 03,04). A simple decorative pattern is found in the Chula Yathukarma (Refer to Figure 05).



Figure 03,04: Intricate decorative designs are used for maha yathukarma.

Source: Photographed by the researcher during fieldwork



Figure 05: Simple decorative designs are used for chula yathukarma (Graha Poojawa).

Source: Photographed by the researcher during fieldwork

The Maha Yathukarma, characterised by its performing arts elements, consists of various singing, dance, drumming, and dramatic moments(**Refer to Figure 06,07**). But the contents of the Chula Yatukarmas are only the essential elements required to achieve the main objective (**Refer to Figure 08,09**).



Figure 06,07: Occasions of Maha Yathukarma that include artistic elements.

Source: Photographed by the researcher during fieldwork.



Figure 08,09: Occasions of chula Yathukarma that include essential elements.

Source: Photographed by the researcher during fieldwork.



Also, while large areas of land are used to conduct Maha Yathukarma, only a limited amount of space is required for Chula Yathukarma. For ease of study, the differences between the Chula Yathukrama and Maha Yathukrama have been tabulated.

Characteristics of Yathikarma	Maha Yathukarma	Chula Yathukarma
1. Time Taken	It takes a few days or even a night.	It takes a maximum of three or four hours.
2. Cost	Very high cost for conducting it.	Very low cost for conducting it.
3. Number of Participating Artists	At least 7 people participate.	A maximum of 2 people participate.
4. The Decorations	The intricate decorations are used.	The simple decorations are used.
5. Artistic Elements	The Consists of dancing, singing, playing, drumming, and dramatic scenes.	There are only the essential elements, Yantras and mantras.
6. Area of Dance Space	A large area of land is required.	A minimum area of land is required.

The main reason for the increasing popularity of chula yathukarma among the people of the highly urbanised district of Colombo is the modern, busy lifestyle. In the face of industrialisation and globalisation, urban dwellers are subjected to stressful time management. It is difficult for the modern urban dweller to devote the time (several days, including the pre-sudda) required for a traditional maha yathukarma. Therefore, they opt for chula Yathukarma that can be completed in a few hours and achieve the desired goals. Similarly, the limited space available in urban environments is another reason for the decline in maha yathukarma. A large hall or spacious land is required to conduct a maha yathukarma, but such space is difficult to find in the slums and high-rise housing complexes of Colombo. Urban people prefer small rituals because a chula yathukarma can be easily performed in the living room or even in a small room of a house.

In the face of the current economic crisis and the rising cost of living, holding a maha yathukarma has become unaffordable for the general public. For a maha yathukarma, a huge expenditure is incurred on paying a large group of artists, purchasing materials (coir, paper, etc.) for the decorations, and providing



food and drink to the participants. In contrast, a chula yathukarma costs very little. In most cases, only one or two artists participate, so the labour cost is also minimal. Therefore, under economic pressure, urban people choose austerity as a more affordable option to fulfill their spiritual needs. This situation can be analysed using Robert Redfield's concepts of 'Little Tradition' and 'Great Tradition'. In the face of the mental pressure, stress, and uncertainty that people face in modern society, they look for immediate relief. As Bruce Kapferer has argued, a ritual is not just a cure for a disease but an aesthetic and spiritual activity that relieves the tension between the individual and society. The urban dweller uses the psychological relief obtained through ritual as a quick solution to his daily problems.

Michel Foucault's discourse analysis shows that attitudes towards rituals are changing in urbanised societies. People no longer value the artistic value or tradition of rituals, but rather their practicality and convenience.

Conclusion:

This research presents a comparative analysis of chula yathukarma and maha yathukarma, providing a deeper understanding of the factors influencing the spread of chula yathukarma in contemporary urban society. The study reveals that in the face of socio-economic pressures caused by urbanisation, industrialisation, and globalisation, there is a greater tendency towards chula yathukarma instead of traditional maha yathukarma. It has been shown that Chula Yathukarma is more suitable for modern busy lifestyles due to the reduction in time, cost, and labour. This analysis, conducted using theoretical frameworks from scholars such as Emile Durkheim, Virginia Braun, Victoria Clark, and Michel Foucault, explains how chula yathukarma have become a practical and easily accessible way to meet the spiritual needs of urban people. Moreover, as urban society has become more inclined towards chula Yathukarma, the long dance, singing, and dramatic elements included in traditional maha Yathukarma have been limited. Although this has led to the development of practicality in Chula Yathukarma, it can be observed that the artistic beauty and integrity of traditional rituals have been challenged to some extent. This study makes an important contribution to the evolution of Sri Lankan cultural rituals and their interrelationship with society.

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