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Constructing gama or ūr amidst inescapable ethno-national politics: Everyday experience of Pānama people living on the Eastern coast of Sri Lanka

Abstract

Despite the undertakings of the colonial administration which took into consideration the caste system in their census and gradually gave much prominence to creating ethno-religious categories through scientific enumerations and linked them with the political administration of the country and shaped by the majoritarian democratic model, the caste too survived in Sri Lanka. The formation and mobilisation of ethno-religious political categories contributed towards creating an ethno-religious nationalism and multi-ethnic people engaged in a competition to obtain a better share of the post-independence state. This power competition eventually created victorious as well as defeated feelings within the communities, which were eventually translated to ethno-national tensions and conflicts in Sri Lanka. Against this backdrop research was conducted in the Eastern coastal area in general, and Pānama in particular, suggested that people of rivalry ethno-national groups had developed traditional long-term connections and disconnections through caste lines which ultimately created a “community” identified as *gama* in (Sinhala) or *ūr* (Tamil), with a social equilibrium. The ethnographic data collected in this village from 2010-2012 suggests that the people with Sinhala and Tamil ethnic origins (as discussed in today’s context) were linked (and delinked) in relation to religious, cultural, economic, social, and political norms. This aspect was ultimately instrumental in constructing one whole village or a system in which all can live. The village possessed several caste groups; namely,

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Goigama, *Vellālar*, *Baber*, *Dhobi* (washerman), and *Padu*. The *Goigama* and *Vellālar* caste were accepted as the castes commanding the highest status, while *Barbers* came in the second place followed by washermen in third and *Padu* taking the final place in the social structure of the village. The *Goigama* caste is part of the Sinhala social system, while *Vellālar* belongs to the Tamil social system. Similarly, both the *Barbers* and Washermen represented Tamil social system, while the *Padu* group represents the Sinhala social system. To describe

further, both the Sinhala and Tamil social systems had combined and created a hybrid unique system which included members from both the Sinhala and Tamil ethno-national groups, to construct a home or the village.

Keywords: Sri Lankan village, Sinhala and Tamil caste systems, caste relations, ethno-religious nationalism, social equilibrium

Introduction

The Caste based organization or structuring of the society is a common phenomenon in South Asia. In such a context, Sri Lanka was no exception. However, in comparison with the Indian caste system, caste divisions in Sri Lanka were considered to be humanitarian as opposed to the Hindu caste system in India. Meanwhile, as elaborated in literature, there are three caste systems applicable among the three communities, namely, the Sinhalas, Sri Lankan Tamils and Indian Tamils in Sri Lanka (Silva, Sivapragasam & Thanges, 2009). Moreover, there can be various regional-based interpretations of the inter and intra-caste associations and disassociation which should be further evaluated by scholars. The main issue one can ascertain being the inadequacy of such research after the 1980s, since the primary attention of the researchers were largely focused on the ongoing ethnic conflict and the associated peace initiatives as well due to associated or intervening power struggles. This paper endeavours to analyse how a group of Sinhala and Tamil members constructed a liveable space (community) termed the *gama* or *ūr* through a process of negotiating their traditional caste and religious practices, as well as the modern ethno-national identities. The comprehension of this situation is considerably difficult due to the complexities associated with existing literature that are widely available, as it does not elaborate adequately on the numerous facets of human nature which disallow communities to strictly adhere to certain identities or practices. These boundaries are fluid and cannot be grasped from the point of an official or a politician's view.

The uniqueness of Pānama village

A few anthropological analyses have been conducted in the Eastern part of the country. The first Anthropological interpretation of people living in this part of the country was undertaken by Nur Yalman in his monograph,

Under the Bo Tree (1967) whilst Dennis B. McGilvray researched on caste, marriage and the matriclan structure of Tamils and Muslims. His recent research *Crucible of Conflict* (2008) was dedicated to discussing the lifestyles of Tamil and Muslim societies residing on the Eastern coast of the Island. Meanwhile, the recent anthropological writings discuss the East as a location where a considerable level of inter-ethnic relations, co-residence, inter-marriages occur between ethnic and religious groups, including religious co-operation. These views are elaborated in the observations made by Nur Yalman (1967), Gananath Obeyesekere (1984), Dennis B McGilvray (2008).

I included Pānama and Pottuvil as they fell under the Ampara district secretariat jurisdiction, in the study conducted on ethnic boundary negotiations in everyday social lives. These two locations were battlefields and frequently described as border villages, where both the civic and civil life of ordinary human beings (often referred to as *samanaya minissu* in Sinhala (hereafter referred to as S:) and *pothu makkal* in Tamil (hereafter referred to as T:) were sandwiched between The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Government armed forces. Pānama symbolizes the social world of rural villages, while Pottuvil is a social world of rural town where the majority of residents, belonged to the Muslim community. However, both places were characterised as rural and adopting an agriculture-based lifestyle.

The LTTE had attempted to attack the village of Pānama several times and according to the villagers these attacks were averted with the intervention of Goddess Pattini. For instance, on an occasion where the LTTE resorted to attack, the Goddess Pattini had shown them a team of soldiers who subsequently frightened them and thwarted the attacks. However, the Navy, Army, and the Special Task Force (STF) based their camps in this area, and the LTTE often engaged in attacking the forces, rather than the village Pānama.

The process of ethnographic data collection in Pānama commenced in December 2010, and were documented by anthropologist Nur Yalman and included as a chapter under the theme; The Articulation of structures: Pānama in his book, *Under the Bo Tree*, published in 1967. Yalman had spent less than two months in Pānama with a local research assistant to collect data and continued to reside until the end of October 1955. After the above initiation of Yalman, it is likely that I may be the only student in Anthropology, to visit this village for long-term fieldwork. Meanwhile, during the time Yalman conducted his research, the population of the village comprised of 987 individuals. However, the population steadily increased in Pānama and currently boasts of residents in excess of 10,000 and who are divided into five Grama Niladhari (GN) divisions. Meanwhile, Yalman's findings on Pānama, provided me an Anthropological profile which enabled me to arrive at

comparisons of the past and the present undertakings of the village, whilst focusing on inter-group relationships and unity building.

Moreover, the Sinhala described the village as *gama* in Sinhala, while the Tamils identify it as *kiramam* or *ūr* (T.). However, both the Sinhala and the Tamils added an adjective, to claim the inheritance or ownership of the village. Whilst, the Sinhala use the adjective *ape* (S.), the Tamils use the terms *enga*, *engaludaya*, *engaluda* (T.) to denote the meaning “our”. In general, they adopt the plural sense to address the village, which includes everyone and term it as *ape gama* in Sinhala and *engaladu ūr*, *enga ūr* or *engaludaya kiramam*, *enga kiramam* in Tamil. The village Panama is commonly known as “our village” which signify solidarity, as well as an emotional attachment to it.

Villagers identify themselves as “Pānama people” (*Pānama minissu* (S:) and *Pānama ākkhal* (T:)) irrespective of caste or, ethnic divisions. They all came forward to help: a villager in need is a villager indeed. They were also referred to as “fifty-fifty” (*panahata-panaha* (S:)) by the people in Pottuvil and elsewhere, due to the fact that two ethnically diverse communities, comprise the society of Pānama. On the whole, people coming from external areas and who are not familiar with the culture of the East had commenced labelling them as *fifty-fifty* people (*panahata panaha* (S:)). Perhaps, this labelling might have been most often used during the ethnic conflict by individuals such as the members of the armed forces and government officials. The members of armed forces were often confused when they observed the Sinhala and Tamil mixed identities in one individual, during their daily ritual of identity-checking at security roadblocks set almost every kilometre. Despite this labelling undermining the inhabitants of Pānama, such markings also contributed towards securing a unique identity as *Pānama minissu* (S:) and *Pānama ākkhal* (T:)) (Pānama people).

Meanwhile, the Pānama community had been using a unique dialect. Interestingly, one finds this uniqueness existing in both the Sinhala and Tamil dialects and popularly cited on various research sites in Colombo. For instance, the Sinhala and the Tamils are known to use similar words. They chase dogs yelling *hadi*, the term *ada*, (man) used in Sinhala might have originated from the Tamil *ade* (man). Meanwhile, some of the other common words used both by the Sinhala and the Tamils are as follows: *pingi* (row), *rottuwa* (road), *olunguwa* (narrow road), *abagannawa* (take a seat), *marikkiwenawa* (go), *bukul denawa* (hit), *ona* (chin), *gongaya* (crow), *atikitta* (frog), *hinno* (ants), *mappudiya* (a hand of paddy), *hura* (brother-in-law), *kundikora ennawa* (*ukkutayen innawa* in other Sinhala locations), *kundukattuwa* (sleep in the shape of a curve), *ambanawa* (chase), *Mattayo* (Muslims), *brumpetti* (turbine), *wade* (rent), *kudilla* (a thatched house), *Vattavidane* (head of twelve farming community identified as *Welvidhane* in

other Sinhala areas), *Vattandi* (an assistant to the lay clergyman). During our prolonged stay in Pānāma and the observations derived of this community, it was noted that several villagers were bilingual. For instance, the Tamil people are fluent in Sinhala and vice versa. Likewise, our neighbours in Pānāma, who were low-caste Tamils, often conversed in Sinhala, during their daily engagements.

Interestingly, it is popularly known that the high-caste families in Pānāma had initially hailed from the Sinhala warrior families who withdrew from up-country, following the rebellion which took place with the British forces in the hill country of Uva-Wellassa province, Sri Lanka, during the period 1817-1818. The then ruling British Governor, Robert Brownrig, published a gazette notification condemning the persons who revolted against the British rule in Sri Lanka: and the rioters were branded as “traitors” and their possessions were confiscated (Kostal 2000). This Gazette notification was changed only in 2011 and those who participated in the uprising of 1818, were honoured as “National Heroes”. However, the educated people of Pānāma asserted, that they had been living in Pānāma long before the warriors came in 1818. Meanwhile, there is also a claim that the residents of Pānāma originated from the local aboriginal / indigenous community known as Vāddas in Sri Lanka and referred to in *Halwa Paramparawa* (Helawa generation (S.)). However, genetical hybridity of this nature was not taken into consideration, in the formation of the caste-based hierarchy of this village.

It is stated that the high-caste warrior families arrived in the forest area of Pānāma to escape from the British rulers’ torture and punishment and subsequently settled in the villages of Halawa, Kumana, Kudumbigala, Radella, Meeyangoda situated on the river banks of Hada Oya, Kumbukkan Oya, and Vila Oya to ensure access to water resources for drinking and cultivation purposes. However, they subsequently arrived in Pānāma to avoid natural hazards such as droughts. They have been living as a farming community in this forest area and developed marital, social, and economic ties with the Tamil community of the east. Interestingly, the residents of Pānāma and Pottuvil continue to recall mythical stories regarding the origin of the Pānāma community and their close association with the Tamil society. As per one of the more popularly known mythical accounts; two sisters hailing from same family and known as Kirihami and Kaluhamy living in Meeyangoda were married to men of Pānāma and Pottuvil. Kirihami arrived in Pānāma to adopt a Sinhala lifestyle, while Kaluhamy proceeded to Pottuvil and espoused the Tamil culture. I met the grandchildren of both ladies of Pānāma and Pottuvil, who continue to regularly contact me.

Yalman identified Pānāma as a village, which is most isolated in Sri Lanka, located between largely Muslim and Hindu conglomerations, like Pottuvil, Thirukkovil, Kalmunai, and Battcaloa in the north and the small

“Sinhala jungle communities” to the west (1967: 311). This “Sinhala jungle community” who lived in Kumana were resettled in irrigated agricultural land in the Mahaveli new settlement area, which was a mega development project of the then ruling government namely The United National Party (UNP) in the 1980s, who were instrumental in promoting the conservation of the Yāla national forest. Yalman had reported that approximately 67 residents lived in Kumana, during this period. Resultantly, approximately ten families from the Kumana community had expressed their desire to settle in Pānama; which is close to their “lost home” from where they were forcefully evacuated. This group is resettled in a specially demarcated settlement identified today as Kumana Gammanaya (village named Kumana) in Pānama. This initiation may have taken place to safeguard this community who belonged to the low cast community of *Padu* people. Meanwhile, the closest community to Pānama was from Pottuvil, which was a predominantly Muslim area, and comprised of approximately 7,000 residents in 1967, during which time Yalman undertook extensive research activities. However, the population had increased considerably as at to-date. Meanwhile, Tamil groups living on the east coast were sub-divided in terms of religion (namely Hindu, Muslims, Roman Catholics, Protestants), whilst Hindus were further classified according to caste.

The development of ethno-national crisis and the battle for protecting state sovereignty or territorial integration

The intension of this section is to deliberate very briefly regarding the ethno-national conflict and its impact on fluid identities-based communities. Sri Lanka experienced a nearly three-decade-old ethno-national based war, which only ceased in 2009, however, the discussions for healing wounds of the war and negotiations for a reasonable solution for all the parties are ongoing. The ethno-nationalism-based war had disturbed the peaceful life of the people who lived in both the centre and the peripheries. The community life of the villagers living within the war-zone were significantly disturbed while the State attempted to capture the so-called “uncleared lands” controlled by the LTTE and similarly the LTTE made attempts to capture state-owned land. Disappointingly, these attempts severely impacted community life. Unfortunately, the small village of Pānama was not spared of these atrocities. Meanwhile, the LTTE regularly made concerted attempts to capture Pānama and was searching for Sinhala-only residents to kill or drive-away, whilst the Sri Lankan government forces occupied the village and maintained permanent camps. However, they too could not find Pure-Tamils whom they could consider as LTTE supporters or suspects. Moreover, both the Sinhala and Tamil divisive ethno-nationalisms faced difficulties, as they could not identify pure ethno-religious nationals in this tiny village. Resultantly, this suggested

the possibility of the existence of unique different, location-specific ethno-religious-caste dimensions. At this point, it is important to discuss the history of the fully distinct ethno-religious-nationalism construction, by denying long lasting cultural resemblances.

The analysis of history highlights that prior to the 19th century, the ideal resemblance of race, language, religion, and political territory were barely distinct, as elucidated by Nissan and Stirrat (1990), Tambiah (1986), Obeyesekere (2004), and Rajasingham-Senanayake (2002). Meanwhile, (Nissan & Stirrat, 1990) and Tambiah (1986) identified three differences namely; caste, geographical and communal aggregates which existed in the pre-colonial period on the Island. Additionally, it was evident that the migrant communities from India had significantly converged with the local communities, during the pre-colonial period to maintain social equilibrium. The natives had been living in constituents of local or regional socio-political complexes namely; kingdoms of Kotte, Kandy, Jaffna, without being identified as rival groups of the “Sinhals” or “Tamils” as they are increasingly referred to currently.

Moreover, the careful deliberation of literature substantiates, that modern ethnic rivalry was largely promoted by the colonial invention. The invention has been completed through colonial scientific categorisations in the census taking procedure initially and followed by cultural codification introduced to the laws of the country and thereafter confirming this aspect as a base for the political representation, in 1833. The post-orientalists placed significant emphasis on the role of British rule in India to construct new identities (Rogers, 1994). “Scientific classifications” and “enumerations” of the people of the colony was one of the fundamental aspects of “liberal colonial mission civilisatrice” as explained by liberal imperialist, Thomas Babington Macaulay, who stated “to educate the masses in the ways of civilized men (also in the path of democracy)” (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2002:55).

The analysis of the census which occurred during the British occupation indicates the manner in which colonial administrators in Ceylon gradually simplified the “complexity and diversity of the island’s people and cultures” over a period of time (Nissan and Stirrat, 1990; Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2002:55). According to Tambiah (1986) during the Portuguese and Dutch periods this did not occur since the people were increasingly “enumerated and aggregated” according to the Sinhala caste structure namely; *Karāwa* (fishermen), *Salāgama* (Cinnamon peelers) and Tamil castes; *Mukkuvār* (matrilineal Tamil caste), *Vellālar*, *Karaiyār*. The censuses took place in 1824 and 1827, and categorised communities according to their respective caste and religion. However, in the 1880’s “caste” was used as a category to differentiate people of various communities. A similar method was

practiced in India as well. Unfortunately, a census was not organized during 1827-1871, while the census held in 1871 could be considered as the first modern census to be conducted in Sri Lanka. Likewise, during the same period a census was organized in Great Britain and Northern Ireland as well. The British had used the terms “race” and “nationality” for the first time in the 1871 census, wherein they had categorised 78 “nationalities” and “24 races”. Meanwhile, the census which took place in Sri Lanka during the same period; where the Sinhalas and Tamils were considered as races as well as nationalities (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2002). This exercise was initiated to introduce ethno-racial criteria on local communities.

Likewise, several other important improvements occurred parallel to the scientific enumerations which led to the increase in ethno-national groups. The British colonizers also codified cultural complexities into “civil” law and concreting “ethnic” consciousness. This was evident within the colonial legal system in the areas of family law and property law. The introduction of Kandyan law, Thesavalamai law, Muslim law came under the special attention of the State; on two areas such as marriages and inheritance, followed by the field of education (Nissan and Stirrat, 1990:28; Wickramasinghe, 2006:25; Zackariya and Shanmugaratnam, 1997:22). Meanwhile, the low-country areas were ruled as per the Roman-Dutch law. The British colonisers connected these racial categories into politics, i.e., 1833. The Colebrooke-Cameron commission and Donoughmore Commissioners, in 1931, set a base for a contemporary ethno-political crisis, as elaborated by Nissan and Stirrat (1990), Zackariya and Shanmugaratnam (1997). Ultimately, the British ‘divide and rule policy’ in Ceylon were able to sow nationalism in economic and social thoughts prior to Independence, in 1948 (Roberts 1998).

The ethno-national divisions promoted by the British were maintained or encouraged by the local elites in the Post-Independent period. The post-colonial Ceylon elite groups namely; the Sinhalas, Tamils, and the Muslims who inherited considerable wealth through new mercantile capitalism of the colonial masters. Therefore, they cultivated a high sensitivity towards ethno-racial identity and were politically and economically motivated, to contribute further to the claim for a “better share” in the post-colonial Sri Lanka, under the rule of Sinhala leaders elected thanks to the Westminster parliamentary model. The absenteeism of a colonial mediator to draw a balance among these forces, conspicuously contributed to ethno-racial competition and antagonism during this period. The Sinhalas attempted to invent their identity through Buddhism and language while the Tamils pursued their identity through Hinduism as well and subsequently extended Saivism to include significant linguistic and cultural legacy. As a response to these two main attempts of identity construction, the Muslims also investigated the origins of their identity in Islam including their historical past (Nuhman, 2007:95).

There are some major divisions, discriminations and unfair treatment which originated from ethnic rivalries. Some of these areas are the promotion and establishment of distinct ethnicities invented by the colonisers and the creation of nationalism. For instance, the discovery of essential connections among religion, language and ethnicities and disenfranchising ethnic “others” and the aggravation of violence, which is often connected with the communal form of politics and indicate formation dates from and after independence as discussed by Arasaratnam (1998), DeVotta (2007), Tambiah (1996), Spencer (1990), Nissan and Stirrat (1990), Rajasingham-Senanayake (2002), Hellmann-Rajanayagam (1990). Moreover, the controversies connected to economic policies, rural development, constitutional reforms, state patronizing religions, state language policy, educational policies, sharing of economic benefits and economic policies (Schrijvers, 1997), failure to create an umbrella identity (Arasaratnam, 1998:311), or, politician’s opportunistic moves such as party changing and making ethno-religious forces, i.e., *pancha maha balawegaya* (the five forces (S.))”, to come into power, “political violence” (Kapferer, 2001:33; Nissan and Stirrat, 1990:37), ethnic riots took place in 1958, 1961, 1974, 1977 and 1983 (Sampanthan, 2012; Tambiah, 1986), whilst religious revival movements, the intervention of India and other foreign powers to resolve local issues, etc. also contributed towards ethno-religious political issues and tensions in Sri Lanka. Overall, the continuing suspicious nature of ethnic minorities regarding Sinhala political leaders and the Sinhala majoritarian State’s behaviour contributed towards the ethno-national war mainly between the Sinhala and Tamil communities in which the Muslims also played a significant role. In this section, I highlighted how fluid identity categories were identified as politicised binary categories. However, the above process failed to influence the whole society to abide by its authority and therefore, it is possible to have fluid identity categories, which is deliberated in the next section.

Caste-based social system of Pānāma

We cannot fully comprehend the Pānāma social system by superficial observations that are laden with various biases: ethnic, class, gender, and politics. Pānāma should be understood from the perception of the “Pānāma community”, which necessitates the long-term acquaintance and investigation of the behavioural patterns of the community in Pānāma. I only understood that my approach shaped by the ethnic lenses directed at Pānāma was inappropriate only after I had conducted research for a short period of a few months. Initially, I was referring to groups as “Sinhala people”, and “Tamil people” using a language loaded with ethnic biases. This might have occurred since I was focusing on ‘ethnic’ relations. Subsequently, I understood the difference in juxtaposing myself with the society in Pānāma. The vocabulary

of Pānāma people was influenced by caste references and does not include ethnicity: *Dhobi minissu* (*Dhobi* people- washermen), *honda kattiya* ((S:) high-caste people), *ape kattiya* ((S:) our people), *egollange kattiya* ((S:) their people), *egollan* ((S:) they), *megollange kattiya* ((S:) his clan). They only refer to ethnicity routinely when discussing with outsiders, to cater to a clearer understanding of their society. However, outsiders such as I, often come with ethnic lenses.

Yalman (1967) and Obeyesekere (1984) have identified Pānāma as “shatter zones” where there is a substantial degree of intermarriage, ritual collaboration, and ethnic merging. I endorse Yalman’s recognition of Pānāma as a merger between the Sinhala and Tamil social systems. He observed this amalgamation in kinship, caste, and religion, since these three spheres create the traditional idiosyncratic social system of Pānāma. Meanwhile, caste plays a prime role in the organisation of Pānāma society. This could be observed in other villages of the East as well.

The Pānāma society comprises of five castes namely: *Goigama* and *Vellālarr*, *Dhobi*, *Barbers*, and *Padu*. This is a combination of Sinhala and Tamil castes to form one unique social system in the village. In general, Sinhala high-caste *Goigama* and Tamil high-caste *Vellālar* were identified as groups of equal caste by writers such as Sabaratnam (2001). According to the inter-caste relations of traditional Pānāma, the *Goigama* and *Vellālar* people have enjoyed the highest respect from the other three castes. The next two caste groups: the *Dhobi* (Vannar Washermen) and the *Barbers* (hair cutters) (Navitar barber) are also Tamil caste groups as explained by McGilvray (1982) in relation to Akkaraipattu and Kokkadicholai located on the Eastern coast. The lowest-status caste group in the hierarchy *Padu* is ethnically a Sinhala group. There are several arguments existing regarding the Sinhala people’s exclusive claim to be *Goigama* caste. At the conclusion of extensive discussions with the Sinhala villagers; one concludes that the seasonal fisherman who initially arrived in Panama are a caste-mixed community and not the *Goigama* caste as they claim to be. Therefore, these low-caste people who joined the village community from a low country area have been elevated to high-caste positions. Likewise, the up-country Sinhala warriors who came to Pānāma and married the high-caste *Vellālar* Tamil families. Moreover, these two caste groups were significantly cautious to avoid a marriage union from the *Dhobi* families. Interestingly, there was no indication of high-caste and low-caste Tamils uniting on the grounds of ethnicity, even during the peak of war.

Despite the *Dhobi* caste having originated from the Tamil ethnic group, the Sinhalas use the name of Sinhala washermen caste *Radha* but who did not exist in the village, and refer to them as *Dhobi*. Once the high-caste Sinhalas settled in Pānāma permanently they were compelled to re-settle a few

Dhobi Tamil families to utilize their services which comprised of several mundane affairs of social life such as: washing clothes; helping during funerals, weddings, coming of age ceremonies and funerals including participating in rituals at the *devālaya* ((S.) shrine) and temples. The current *Dhobi* population consisting of approximately five hundred families of the village is an expansion of those initial migrants to the village. Traditionally high-caste Sinhala and Tamil families own a bonded *Dhobi* family to provide various services in both joyous and sad occasions, other than the routine clothes washing. The *Dhobi* generally arrives at the *kadulla* ((S.), the gate of the home garden) and the high-caste Sinhala handover the dirty clothes or accept clothes which have already been laundered. As payment, the washermen families were given paddy and money by the respective high-caste families.

These low-caste people have been helping the high-caste Sinhala and Tamils during funerals, weddings, puberty ceremonies, and religious functions of the Hindu and Buddhist temples. The reckoning of *Dhobi* people to be considered as low-caste, is prevalent in the Sinhala and Tamil communities even today, as noted by Yalman in 1955. The borders of the ethnic groups are maintained by caste. In the past, the *Dhobi* respected the high-caste society even on the road, by removing the towel worn by them on their shoulders and bowing down and give way for high-caste people to pass by. Gnanawathie, 50-year-old woman in Pānāma illustrated that the *Dhobi* people's *baya-saka* ((S.) respect) temperament towards the Sinhala is not a form of ethnic border maintenance whatsoever, but the caste borders which is often misunderstood by outsiders. She also stated that the *Dhobi* people were a suppressed community due to the low-caste status.

We came to understand of instances where the washermen and *Barber* castes had not offered their services to *Padu* people. This witnessed a unique way of inclusion of Tamil people (high caste *Vellālar* and low caste *Dhobi*) to the existing social system of the village. Sinhala people are known to bestow a lower status to *Padu* community who are Sinhala. Sinhala people lived in the Kumana village, a living arrangement established during President Ranasinghe Premadasa's rule. They were given land in the Mahaveli hydro development project areas in Mahiyanganaya. Approximately, 10-15 families who were opposed to leaving Kumana had expressed their desire to settle in Pānāma. Houses with limited square area were constructed on half an acre of land by the government and handed over to each family, as compensation for having to forego their livelihoods that were harmonious with the forest. They were settled at the edge of Pānāma in an area identified as Kumana Gammanaya ((S.) Kumana village), since they belonged to the low-caste of *Padu*. Meanwhile, a few other Tamil families who represented the *Barber* caste, also resided in the community, alongside the *Padu* families. The caste

system is generally associated with the kinship and marriage patterns of Pānama.

In the traditional Pānama context, the caste boundaries were maintained by clothes, food consumption and sharing, sexual relations, and division of labour. For example, the *Dhobi* and low caste people did not cover the upper part of their body nor, did they partake of meals and beverages using the same plates and cups utilized by the high-caste people. Therefore, the low-caste people were not allowed to sit on benches that were of equal height, as with seating used by the high-caste and were often given a mat. The high-caste families maintained separate mats, cups, and plates to treat the low-caste visitors.

However, these practices have changed considerably in the present context. Meanwhile, there was another tradition followed by the *Dhobi* caste, where they allocated special days of the week to service for Sinhala high-caste people. Once a Sinhala boy who had recently succeeded in passing his G.C.E. Advanced Level examination in Arts, and aged around 20 years, agreed to take me to the house of Kavitha, a low-caste Tamil girl. Despite having accompanied me to this particular house, he remained on the road without entering the house. Therefore, it is a clear testimony of the existence of caste consciousness, even among the educated youth in the current context.

The long-term stay in Pānama convinced me that the caste system plays a prominent role in organising community life of the Pānama society. The role of caste in shaping community life will be discussed in a few areas of the Pānama social system for instance; how it is reflected in marriage, kinship, religious activities, and other rituals of life.

On the one hand, the caste system connected various other dimensions of the social lives of the people in Pānama. This was observed in several areas such as marriage and sexual relationships, religious and ritual practices, economic activities, important rituals to mark life cycle such as birth, coming of age, marriage and death, etc., occurring in the daily lives of these social entities. This has contributed significantly in recognizing the “Pānamaness”, a notion of a community which is linked to the structure of the community. Likewise, the caste aspect is instrumental in influencing various social structures, whilst contributing in defining religious practices, economic structures and culture. I will briefly explain how rituals such as horn pulling (*Kombu Vilayāttu* (T:) or *Ankeliya* (S:)) strengthens or broadens cultural and social practices including religious beliefs, which mutually support or reinforce each other.

***Ankeliya* (horn pulling or hook tugging) festival of Ampitiye devalaya**

This ritual is practiced by the Pattini cult existing in the country, and generally associated with the Eastern province and in this village, in particular.

This Ankeliya ritual of the village is connected to the Goddess Pattini (Amman (T.)), and God Kōvalan (T:) (Aluth Bandara (S:), and also prince Palanga (S:)) who are husband and wife. According to mythology, the Goddess Pattini was born from a Mango. One day they were walking in the forest and the Goddess had seen Sapu flowers. The prince Kōvalan climbed up the tree and attempted to pluck the flower for his wife. Meanwhile, Goddess Pattini, the wife of Kōvalan, also attempted to help her husband pluck the flowers, by bringing a sandal stick hook. Unexpectedly the two hooks became entangled. Each tugged at their stick, which resulted in Kōvalan's stick breaking. This delighted Goddess Pattini and her friends, and they danced to celebrate it. This was performed by the Pānama society, as a mark of respect to the Goddess Pattini in a bid to obtain her blessings for the prosperity of the village.

The traditional Pānama villagers were divided into two groups; *udupila* ((S:) upper side) to represent God Kōvalan (T:) or prince Pālanga (S:), while *yatipila* ((S:) lower side) represented Goddess Pattini in this ritual. Once the ritual of *kap situaweema* ((S:) hoisting the flag of the God) is completed, they allocate five days for *kolu ankeliya* ((S:) horn pulling by young boys) and subsequently a further seven days are set aside for *maha ankeliya* ((S:) horn pulling by adults). Only men participate in the *Ankeliya*. The process of *Ankeliya* ritual is as follows. The *udupila* tie their horn to a tamarind tree (identified as *an gaha*-horn tree) located slightly behind both devālayas and situated at equal distance, while the *yatipila* tie their horn to a tree trunk (around 15-20 ft high) identified as *henakanda* ((S:) thunderbolt tree). The *henakanda* (S.) is placed in a channel hinge approximately a 6-8 feet long conduit and held in position by logs identified as *happini kandan* ((S:) female cobra trunks). This channel helps the trunk to move back and forth easily during horn pulling. Two ropes are tied to *henakanda* (S:) to tug. Once both the hooks are entangled to the satisfaction of both sides, they commence the traditional *an edeema* ((S:)) and *kombu iluththal* ((T:) horn pulling) ritual. While six persons from both sides hold their hooks, men of both sides tug two ropes tied to *henakanda* (S:) to generate pressure until one of the interlocked horns snap. The breaking of a hook is considered as defeat. Immediately when one hook is broken, the winning party whose hook remained unbroken, takes their hook inside the devālaya. Simultaneously, the winning party commences a jubilant dance, yelling salacious (scandalous) songs at the vanquished (defeated) team in front of their (defeated group's) devālaya. The defeated team remains calm and silent during these provocations. Both sides arrange a position called the *Vattami* (S:) who is at the target of these sarcastic acts on their behalf.

All the rituals of horn pulling have been conducted mainly in the night, with the exclusive participation of men. The ritual includes several items such as horn pulling; villagers visiting the temple ((S:) *game minissu devalayata*

yaama); low-caste people visiting the temple ((S:) *Dhobi people devalayata yaama*); Gods visit to the village ((S:) *deiyana gena yaama*); and concludes with the water cutting ceremony ((S:) *diya kepeema*).

The *Ankeliya* is one of the popular festivals arranged in the village and people generally purchase new clothes to wear, when they visit the Ampitiya devālaya. Meanwhile, Pānāma people who live elsewhere in the country owing to migration in search of employment or for other reasons, return to the village during this period. Likewise, those who cannot participate in the festival observe traditions such as refraining from the consumption of meat and adopting the lifestyle of a vegetarian. During this period the villagers adhere to certain practices. Some of the popularly known practices followed by the villagers are as follows. They do not eat fish (including dry fish), meat, and eggs. Members from homes with new-born babies, menstruating women, puberty ceremonies, funerals, and weddings are considered as being “unclean” and thereby not in a position to participate in the *ankeliya* festival and thus prevented from attending the ceremony. During this period, people refrain from sexual relations and the two *Kapuwa*'s ((S:) lay clergyman) of the devālayas reside at the temple eating vegetarian foods. Meanwhile, the fishermen do not engage in fishing ((S:) *rassawe yāma*). The villagers consume only vegetarian food during *Ankeliya* and eat fish only after *diya kepeema* ((S:) *nīr vettuthal* (T:) water cutting ceremony) ceremony is concluded, after the fourteenth day of the observances.

Both the high caste and low caste Tamils participate along with the Sinhala community, in the above festivities at this event. Low caste people; *Dhobi* (mainly consisting of low caste Tamil, who are assigned to wash clothes) are given the responsibility of providing *Pāwada* ((S:) carpets) to both *udupila* and *yatipila devālayas*. I did also observe that only the high caste *Goigama* and *Vellālar kapuvus* (pl. *kapuvo* (s:)) and high-caste members are allowed to visit the inner rooms of both shrine rooms.

Meanwhile, the Muslim community attended the above described ceremony as well. One of the Muslim families I met at the devālaya had come to offer a puja to Goddess Pattini and requested her blessings for his daughter suffering from an incurable disease. Likewise, one of the *Kapuwa*'s ((S:) lay clergyman) mentioned that he assisted a few Muslim families to meet their requirements, when they come to the devālaya during *Ankeliya* ritual. Similar to Okanda devalaya, Muslim people from Pottuvil had come to Ampitiya devālaya to engage in trade. There were approximately 50 such shops. However, several Muslims could not attend the event in that particular year, due to a tense situation which prevailed in the Pottuvil area, arising from a situation of the so-called grease devil ((S:) *Grease Yaka* or (T:) *Grease Manithan* or *Grease Pei*) phenomena, as well as the nombi ((S: & T:) fasting) period co-inciding with the festival.

The horn pulling rituals of the Ampitiya devālaya connects all the other religious places as well. The discussion of the flag hoisting ceremony and other connected activities that are scheduled are held at the temple, with the participation of the chief monk of the respective Buddhist temple and frequented by both *Goigama* and *Vellālar* high caste members of the village. Generally, people go to *Gana devālaya* ((T:) Pulleyar Kovil), before going to Ampitiya devālaya which is located on their way to the Ampitiya devālaya. The devotees used to come to Gana devālaya to obtain a *pooja wattiya* ((S:) a basket of offerings), *Pahadum pettiya* ((S:) similar to a basket of offering), or *katu gaseema* ((T:) *mullu kutturadu*) (obtaining a hook a small arrow made out of iron called (S: & T:) *adayālam*), with the assistance of the *aiyar* ((T:) clergyman) *kapuwa* (S:) of the *kovil* or *koil* ((S:) devālaya). Those who did *katu gaseema* (S:), at the Gana devālaya ((T:) Pulleyar kovil) would go to either Pattini devālaya (S:) ((T:) *Pattini kovil*) or Aluth Bandara devālaya (S:) ((T:) *Kowalan kovil*) to remove the *katuwa* (S:) or the *mullu* ((T:) the hook). When the *deyiyan game yaama* (S:) ritual takes place Gods also visit Gana devālaya, Buddhist-temple (S:) Pansala) where the monks partake in rituals at the temple premises and thereafter, the Goddess Pattini's statue is taken in a procession to both high-caste and low-caste Pānama residents houses, while the low-caste villagers gather at nominated places in their village, to perform rituals for Goddess Pattini.

Apart from the above described rituals, the annual ritual of Okanda devālaya (*Kōil* (T:) is dedicated to God Murugan and is another occasion which is performed with the cooperation of the Pānama villagers. Of the 14 processions celebrated by the temple, 3 processions were organized by the Pānama villagers under the guidance of the chief monk of the respective Buddhist temple. During these events, I have observed that both the high-caste Sinhalese and Tamil villagers actively participate together, in these processions. Irrespective of ethno-religious background, they all wear a white *vaetti* whilst performing the rituals in the Hindu-Tamil way. Incidentally, the Muslim villagers from Pottuvil and elsewhere in the Eastern province, also arrive at the temple to commence shops and engage in trading during the ritual. Therefore, they also participate in the rituals either directly or indirectly.

Conclusion

The discussion initiated by this paper on Pānama described the possibility of inter-mingling of different forms of identities from modern ethno-national to traditional identities such as caste and religion. The inter-mingling of all communities was possible, due to the absence of fixed boundaries and this aspect was highlighted in the census and other administrative documents. This situation arose due to the people's capacity to soften various boundaries, according to their survival needs. People in this

village have been engaging/ performing these traditions for generations. Resultantly, this situation ultimately created a conducive environment or space called *gama* or *ūr*, which was suitable for daily living. This space has been continuously tested by the ethno-racial and other politicised identity-based clashes, but has survived successfully.

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