

Healing Cultures

Healing Cultures:

The Sri Lankan Experience

By

Nirekha De Silva

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This book is dedicated to,
My Son, Anuk Randev De Silva
My Parents Nirmalee and Mohan De Silva
My Supervisors and Mentors, Prof. Jay Sanderson,
Prof. Fiona Kumari Campbell, Prof. Afshin Akhtarkhvari
and Prof. Kieran Tranter, Dr. Sinharaja Tammita-Delgoda
and Dr. Sanjay Garg
All the Healers in Sri Lanka

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SUMMARY

This book argues that the recognition, support and regulation by the Government of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka (hereafter known as Sri Lanka) of healing and wellbeing practices play an important role in determining, promoting, protecting or destroying the cultural aspects of healing. To make this argument this book looks into four aspects of healing and wellbeing in Sri Lanka. The first aspect the book examines is the diversity of healing and wellbeing practices in Sri Lanka. The second aspect is to consider how structured, formal healing systems, such as Western allopathic healing, Ayurveda, Siddha, Unani, Acupuncture and Homeopathy are more likely to be recognised, supported and regulated by the Government of Sri Lanka, while the informal healing systems such as inter-generational healing and cosmic healing practices are less likely to be recognised, supported and regulated. The third aspect this book focuses on is questioning the definitions of traditional knowledge in practical application in the Sri Lankan context, and, more broadly, the use of traditional knowledge as legal, social and cultural categories. The fourth aspect that is explored are the issues related to protecting the traditional cultural aspects of healing in the process of systematic regulation by discussing inter-generational and cosmic healing practices.

Taken together, this book highlights existing diverse forms of healing practices matter because of their value in health and wellbeing of the community. These practices also strongly contribute towards the intangible cultural heritage of the country. Yet, it is not always possible for the Sri Lankan Government to protect the traditional cultural aspects of all forms of healing practices by recognising, supporting and regulating the diverse forms of healing practices existing in the country. While recognising Government limitations in protecting some traditional cultural aspects of healing the book highlights the need of the existing regulatory mechanism to be sensitive to traditional cultural aspects of healing and broaden the scope of recognition and protection.

This argument is presented in 7 chapters. Chapter 1 examines the diversity of healing and wellbeing practices in Sri Lanka. Chapter 2 discusses the main regulatory frameworks, schemes and practices related to health and wellbeing applicable in Sri Lanka. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the research design and methodology used to answer the

research question. My findings are presented in Chapters 4 to 6. Chapter 4 is an attempt to understand the complexities of living healing practices in Sri Lanka and questions the healing practices that are considered and used in Sri Lanka. Chapter 5 examines the history and nature of the Government recognition, support and regulation of traditional healing practices in the country. Chapter 6 examines inter-generational healing in Sri Lanka, and argues that this is facing the threat of loss of the cultural heritage aspects of healing due, in large part, to Government interventions in recognising, supporting and regulating healing practices. Chapter 7 is the conclusion of the book.

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CHAPTER 1

LIVING PRACTICES IN HEALTH AND WELLBEING IN SRI LANKA

Part 1 Background

This book, ‘Health and Wellbeing: Culture, Practices and the Role of Government of Sri Lanka,’ examines healers and practices related to health and wellbeing in Sri Lanka. Living practices of health and wellbeing are vivid and diverse. To introduce the nature and diversity of healing practices that will be discussed throughout the book, this chapter begins by presenting four reflections on experiences and interviews of healing and wellbeing practices and practitioners in Sri Lanka.¹ These reflections bring to light not only the diverse forms of living practices in health and wellbeing in Sri Lanka, but also some of the themes and issues that are associated with the culture of healing and wellbeing practices in this country, such as, the role of religion, language, social systems,² customs, education, payment, organisation and duty. This chapter then briefly considers why Sri Lanka matters and why it is necessary to examine some of the traditional practices related to health and wellbeing in Sri Lanka in detail. Afterwards the chapter introduces the research question, the key terms and concepts used, and gives an overview of the book.

1.1 Reflection 1: Spirit Healer Ghana Manio³

In 1995, a young 15-year-old girl who was suffering severe headaches was taken to Ghana manio (mother Ghana) in Anuradhapura, the capital city of

¹ These reflections are based on the interviews and participant observations conducted with the healers (see Chapter 3 for the methodology adopted in conducting interviews and participant observation).

² For a definition of social systems see, Parsons (1970), (1977), (1978).

³ Ghana Manio (# 60). (When referring to an interview, I have used the name of the healer and number of the reflection in brackets. These numbers refer to the number of the interview in ‘annex – list of interviews completed.’ Annex provides full details

the North Central Province in Sri Lanka. Without asking any questions, Ghana manio confidently stated to the girl: “I can cure your headaches.” When the session started Ghana manio was in a trance. She applied a *hisa kudichchi* (medicinal pack) to the top of the girl’s head for approximately 15 minutes, and then carried out a *nasana* (putting a few drops of herbal oil into the girl’s nostrils), getting the girl to inhale forcefully as she did so. After only four visits with Ghana manio the girl has not suffered another severe headache. That young girl was me.

Returning to Ghana manio⁴ in 2012, I was able to reflect on these treatments, particularly the importance of the trance to Ghana manio. Ghana manio said that entering into a trance allows the spirits to enter her body, and mediate the treatment process. In this way, it is the spirit (not Ghana manio) that controls her body; including her language, tone, accent and body postures. Furthermore, she explained that every individual has the protection of a particular spirit god such as Patthini, Kalu Bandara, Vishnu, Saman, Gana, Suniyam, Maha Kali (when she was treating my headaches it was the spirit of Badra Kali that entered her body and told her what treatment to use), and that it is always the spirit gods who diagnose the illness, prescribe the herbs and other remedies to be used. While the tone and accent of each spirit god is different, and some spirits talk in many languages, Ghana manio only talks in Sinhala (the native language of the Sinhalese people, who make up the largest ethnic group in Sri Lanka). In an interview with Ghana manio conducted on 14 July 2012 she explained:

I have been practicing as a spirit healer for 30 years. I am a strong Buddhist from a humble background from Anuradhapura. We were living in a small mud hut. I always wanted to serve humanity. I used to work as an attendant in the Anuradhapura General Hospital. Very regularly I used to go to the

of the interview including name of the healer, designation, organisation if applicable, contact details, subject of the interview, date of interview and the place of interview. The process I have followed to conduct these interviews is given in Chapter 1, Part 6: Methodology.)

⁴ Ghana manio (# 60). When conducting interviews with Spirit Healers, I was required to obtain the consent from the spirit. Only after the spirit approves can I speak to the spirit or the person who possess the spirit. I had to spend 12 hours on a Saturday at the Dewalaya to get my opportunity to speak to the spirit. There were 500 other people sitting under the trees waiting for their chance to be called by the spirit inside the hut where it consulted people. The spirit decides at what time it is going to call and to whom it would give an opportunity. When speaking to the spirit it said it was delighted about my study and granted me permission to do an interview with Ghana manio. On Monday afternoon I visited Ghana manio at her home to interview her.

temple of Sri Maha Bodhiya (the sacred Bo tree) and worship. I would pray for the power and strength to be of service to others. The first time I went into a trance was at the temple of Sri Maha Bodhiya. I do not know what happens to me while in the trance as I am not conscious. The spirit takes control of my body. The spirit can predict the problems of other human beings and give solutions.⁵

Ghana manio does not see her healing activities as being under her own volition. Rather she is an agent. She says that:

With the power of the spirit gods, I can answer any human problem. This includes treating physical illnesses by performing operations, addressing human needs (such as fertility treatment), finding partners for marriage, giving blessings for examinations and blessings for finding jobs, giving protections for people, houses and land, and exorcising malevolent spirits from the human body.⁶

Figure 1.1 and 1.2 below portrays Ghana manio in a trance consulting patients. Figure 1.3 contains some of the statues of spirits gods that are believed to use Ghana manio's body⁷ for healing and for serving humans. Figure 1.4 represents offerings given by devotees for fulfilling healing and wellbeing wishes.

⁵ Ghana manio (# 60).

⁶ Ghana manio (# 60).

⁷ Some healers believe spirits of gods cannot enter the human body as they are more supreme than humans and it is spirits of dead persons (mostly dead relatives) who do not possess sufficient merit to hold a peaceful existence who enter a human body and perform meritorious deeds to obtain good karma for a better existence. (W. S. Pushpakumara (# 61), B. A. Anoma Damayanthi (#62), K. G. K. Rasika Sumidimali (#71), Gallage Niroshan Dilantha Kumara (#73).



Figure 1.1 – Ghana manio blessing a patient for good health. Image taken by author.



Figure 1.2 – Ghana manio tying a protection on a patient. Image taken by author.



Figure 1.3- Garlands for the deva statues offered by the devotees/patients who have come for consultation with Ghana manio. Image taken by author.



Figure 1.4 – Offerings for fulfilling healing and wellbeing wishes. Image taken by author.

The healing practice of Ghana manio is in great demand. She explains how she conducts her healing and is remunerated:

Saturday(s) and Sunday(s) are the days of consultation. There are about 500 people who come each day, out of whom about 100 people are turned away. Tuesday is the day of treatment. When a person is treated or their wishes are fulfilled, they usually make an offering of fruits.⁸

Ghana manio is an example of spirit healing in Sri Lanka. Another popular healing system is spiritual healing, and an example of this is portrayed by the reflections on Venerable Wellawatthe Seelagawesi Thero's case described below.

⁸ Ghana manio (# 60).

1.2 Reflection 2: Spiritual Healer Venerable Wellawatthe Seelagawesi Thero⁹

Venerable Wellawatthe Seelagawesi Thero is a Buddhist monk and a spiritual healer.¹⁰ Despite not having systematic, formal training in healing Venerable Seelagawesi uses a form of healing based on *Karuna* (loving compassion) to treat a range of ailments.¹¹ As a young man, before taking robes and becoming a monk, he worked for a non-government organisation called the Socio-Economic Institute in Kandy.¹² He began by volunteering and later worked as a Health Extension Officer to eradicate malnutrition among the young children and mothers of Kandy. In order to address the issues associated with malnutrition, including neglectful and alcoholic fathers, he introduced and coordinated a mindfulness training programme for fathers. In this mindfulness training programme, the consultant trainer who convened the programme based it on *Maha Mangala Suttthraya*, which describes 38 qualities one should cultivate for a prosperous, happy and fulfilled life.¹³ The first 20 qualities expressed in the *Maha Mangala Suttthraya* are based on different forms of virtue, the next 10 qualities are based on concentration, and the final 8 qualities are based on wisdom. Listening to the training, Venerable Wellawatthe Seelagawesi became interested in exploring Buddhism for health and wellbeing. By the age of 26, he had taken robes and the name of Venerable Wellawatthe Seelagawesi. *Figure 1.5* below portrays Venerable Seelagawesi meditating for spiritual development.

Since his time as a Health Extension Officer with the Socio-Economic Institute of Kandy, Venerable Seelagawesi has developed a range of healing techniques based on spirituality and understanding of the universe. Using the essence and meaning of Buddhism, and according to the personality traits of the client, and the form of diseases needing treating, Venerable Seelagawesi uses the name of the patient, the date of birth and their astral sign to ‘access’ patients. The specific techniques practiced by Venerable Seelagawesi include counselling, occupational therapy, telepathic healing, healing through sounds, healing through auras, neuro-

⁹ Venerable Wellawatthe Seelagawesi (# 66).

¹⁰ Venerable Wellawatthe Seelagawesi (# 66). His meditation centre is in the Central Province of Sri Lanka. Seelagawesi Thero travels widely within the country and overseas.

¹¹ Venerable Seelagawesi (#66) has reportedly healed cancer, meningitis, heart ailments, depression, and personality disorders.

¹² Kandy is a city in Central Province of Sri Lanka.

¹³ For a discussion on the *Maha Mangala Sutta* see Soni and Khantipalo (2006).

psycho immunity, *Kem Krama*, and Pirith, and herbal and oil treatments.¹⁴ Figure 6 portrays Venerable Seelagawesi practicing healing.



Figure 1.5- Venerable Seelagawesi Thero meditating; Image provided by Venerable Seelagawesi Thero.



Figure 1.6- Venerable Seelagawesi Thero healing a cancer patient; Image provided by Venerable Seelagawesi Thero.

¹⁴ To treat cancer patients there needs to be two healers -one healer to give positive rays and another healer to manage the rays in the body. The therapy sessions are 9 minutes long.

Venerable Seelagawesi's main objective in life is to attain enlightenment (*Nissarana Sapaya*) by developing self and by contributing towards the wellbeing of other human beings. He does not believe in claiming ownership over the healing methods or the medicine that he uses; nor does he want to develop a *guru kula* (a restricted group with authority). This means that anyone interested in healing and who has developed loving kindness (*Karuna*) qualities could practice his healing method.¹⁵ According to Venerable Seelagawesi, the practitioner of spiritual healing does not need to be Buddhist. Venerable Seelagawesi's practice of spiritual healing is not advertised, nor does he put a price tag on what he does. With over 20 years of experience in healing Venerable Seelagawesi has created healing groups not only in Sri Lanka, but also in the United States of America, Denmark, England and Malaysia. Venerable Seelagawesi says, 'I don't have a license to practice as a doctor but I have a right to heal when someone comes to me for treatment.'¹⁶

1.3 Reflection 3: Inter-generational Healing Practice of Horiwila Kadum Bidum¹⁷

In Sri Lanka, one of the most famous (orthopaedic) schools for treating fractures, dislocations and wounds is *Horiwila Kadum Bidum*.¹⁸ The current practitioners of *Horiwila Kadum Bidum* are descendants of the famous 'Horiwila' family of Ayurveda Vaidyas.¹⁹ The methods and practices of *Horiwila Kadum Bidum* are still very much intergenerational and passed down amongst family members. Influenced by Buddhism, this traditional knowledge is passed down from fathers to their sons by mentoring from childhood. This traditional healing practice is written down on ola leaves

¹⁵ Venerable Seelagawesi Thero does not claim ownership of his knowledge. He also portrays a desire to resist the formalization of healing practices and how knowledge is transmitted informally when compared with the written traditions of transmitting knowledge in more formalized systems of healing practices such as bio-medicine, Ayurveda, Siddha, Unani, Homeopathy and Acupuncture.

¹⁶ Venerable Seelagawesi Thero (# 66).

¹⁷ S. M. K. Nimal Karunarathne (# 93), R. A. Sudath Priyantha (# 94) and S. M. H. Seneviratne (# 95) Horiwila, Paalugaswewa in North Central Province.

¹⁸ Treatment centres are located in Horiwila (North Central Province), Colombo (Western Province) and Ambalangoda (Southern Province).

¹⁹ *Vaidyas* the Sinhala word for Medical Doctor (*Here it means an indigenous healing practitioner*).

(see Figure 1.7) or hand-made notes.²⁰ The way healing is learnt and practiced is perhaps best explained by a *Horiwila Kadum Bidum* healer:

My father and my uncle used to practice *Horiwila Kadum Bidum* tradition under one roof. My uncle was the more famous one. We used to help them with finding and preparing the medicines when we were small. They taught us the secret traditional knowledge. I have been giving treatment by myself for 8 years now. Before starting on my own I used to work with my brothers.²¹

The same *Horiwila Kadum Bidum* healer explains how they learnt the tradition of healing:

The first thing we used to do as apprentices in my uncle's home was identify and collect the medicinal herbs. Then we started (preparing) the oil refinery (*thel hindinna*). We also had to identify different kinds of oils used for different forms of ailments, i.e., for wounds, scars, inflammation, fractures, dislocations and spasm, the seven kinds of *patthu* (applications) and fourteen kinds of *mallum* (herbal packs).²²

Figure 1.8 portrays a *Horiwila Kadum Bidum* healer preparing the oil for treatment while Figure 1.9 is a patient treated for a fracture based on the *Horiwila Kadum Bidum* healing method. In inter-generational healing practices, religion plays a vital role. In this next passage a *Horiwila Kadum Bidum* healer explains the role of religion in the *Horiwila Kadum Bidum* tradition of healing:

Our religion (Buddhism), the Buddhist principles and values play an important role in our healing practice. We believe the healer should live by the principles of Buddhism and maintain high standards of moral values for the treatment to be effective.²³

The statement above describes how religious beliefs and rituals have become an integral part of healing. This assertion is supported in Figure 10 below that portrays how vows are tied based on religious beliefs on behalf of the wellbeing and protection of the patients.

Despite being one of the most famous and recognised indigenous healing practices in Sri Lanka, *Horiwila Kadum Bidum* is not supported by the Sri Lankan Government, and is not formally organised or practiced in a

²⁰ The researcher was given access to the ola leaves and the hand written notes (12 July 2012).

²¹ S. M. K. Nimal Karunaratne (# 93).

²² S. M. K. Nimal Karunaratne (# 93).

²³ S. M. K. Nimal Karunaratne (# 93).

systemic way. As noted by a *Horiwila Kadum Bidum* healer S. M. K. Nimal Karunarathne:

Although *Horiwila Kadum Bidum* healing practice is recognised as one of the most famous indigenous healing practices, we are not strong enough to systematically organise this knowledge and share the knowledge at the university level.²⁴

The other reason that hinders the systematic organisation of the *Horiwila Kadum Bidum* healing system is that traditional healing is an honorary profession and not a livelihood. Healers often practice healing in conjunction with agriculture, and do not have fixed fees for the treatment. While some patients place money within the betel leaf many cannot afford to pay for the treatment. Perhaps more importantly, practitioners of *Horiwila Kadum Bidum* consider treating patients as their duty. Indeed, there are times when practitioners give complimentary treatment and medicine, and also feed the patient and give them the money needed for a bus ticket home.²⁵



Figure 1.7- an ola leaf manuscript of Kadum Bidum healing. Image taken by author.

²⁴ S. M. K. Nimal Karunarathne (# 93).

²⁵ S. M. K. Nimal Karunarathne (# 93).



Figure 1.8- Horiwila Kadum Bidum healer preparing the oil for treatment. Image taken by author.



Figure 1.9 – A patient with a fracture in his right leg. Image taken by author.



Figure 1.10 - The vows tied on behalf of the wellbeing and protection of the patients. Image taken by author.

1.4 Reflection 4: Traditional Siddha Doctor

For as long as she can remember, Dr Sarojini wanted to be a medical doctor and serve patients.²⁶ When she was in school, her ambition was to become a Western medical doctor, but as she did not obtain the required results for her G.C.E. Advanced Level examination she did not meet the entry requirements. Instead, she attended the Indigenous Institute of Medicine at the University of Colombo, where she studied Siddha Medicine. Siddha medicine is a system of healing of Dravidian origin, from southern India and is closely associated with Tamil civilisation.²⁷ The entire original literature on Siddha is in the Tamil language. The Siddha healers are called ‘Siddhars:’ individuals who achieved supreme knowledge in the field of medicine, yoga and meditation.²⁸ Almost all the students who joined the Siddha Department of the University of Jaffna, at the time Dr. Sarojini was studying, were of Tamil origin.²⁹ The ethnic tensions in Sri Lanka resulted in the Siddha Department being transferred to University of Jaffna in 1984. Dr. Sarojini was in the first cohort of students in the Siddha Department of University of Jaffna. Unlike the present Siddha degree that is offered in English, she studied Siddha medicine in Tamil, her mother tongue and

²⁶ Dr. Sarojini (# 98).

²⁷ Kandaswamy (1979).

²⁸ Narayanaswamy (1975).

²⁹ Dr. Sarojini (# 98).