

A Study of the Prehistoric Burial Rituals of Sri Lanka with some Selected Areas of the World

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Abstract

The prehistoric period can be depicted under various aspects including the surrounding environment, the social background, and the culture. Of these, the burial rites; one of the most intriguing aspects occupy a significant place in the prehistoric culture. This study was conducted to clarify whether these burial rituals are equally practiced in all parts of the world despite the present-day divisions regional-wise. Today, the world is politically divided into states, but not society during prehistoric times. In this research, research articles and interviews were used as the main methodologies. As people disperse from the African subcontinent, which is considered to be the original homeland of man, they have left traces of their cultural identity everywhere as they spread to the rest of the world. The same scenario can be visible from the burial rituals also, as evidenced from the study of selected sites in Asia and Europe. Studies at these sites have shown that there is a worldwide linkage between the body treatment methods and the burial methods in prehistoric burial practices.

Keywords – Burial rituals, Prehistoric, Mesolithic era, Sri Lanka

Introduction

Man is a social animal. Mankind with a collective behavior shows the traits of a social being from the very beginning of their evolution. The emergence of social traditions in his evolutionary journey has contributed to the development of various ritualistic patterns. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, rituals are the performances of ceremonial acts prescribed by

tradition. Explaining further, it states that the definite identifiable patterns of behavior presented by every society belong to the category of rituals (Penner, 2016).

Rituals can also be identified as a form of human behavior that developed under the influence of supernatural forces and demonic spirits, believed by humans who lived a very primitive life long before the technological revolution (අමරසේකර , 2009). E.B.Tyler elaborates on ritual practices in the 'Primitive Culture', a book on human societies. As shown here, a man attributes life to all objects in the world and believes that there is a spirit in them. This concept of "panpneumatism" is twofold (Tylor, 1958).

- 1) The belief in the spirit that exists after a person dies
- 2) The belief that supernatural forces exist in the physical world

In archeology, rituals are referred to as informal institutionalization. In this informal institutionalization, the grief that first accompanies the death of a person gradually becomes disgusting and eventually becomes a frightening feeling, creating burial-related rituals.

Although there have been questions among researchers as to when the burials began, it is believed to have begun circa 100,000 BP (Bailey & Spikins, 2008). Primary and secondary burials and associated rituals can be traced back to prehistoric times, which can be described as the first significant chapter in human history. Based on the evidence found, Neanderthals were the first people to begin systematic burial practices after the death of the people in their tribe. Evidence of caves such as the Shanidar

Cave in Iraq and the Kebara Cave in Israel further illustrates this point (Roberts, 2011).

It is not clear when was burial rituals began in human society. According to Colin Renfrew, since chimpanzees and bonobos, which are descended from primitives, show recognizable responses towards death, these ritual practices could have been passed down to mankind from their ancestors (Renfrew, 2016).

The prehistoric period is the time in which the foundation for the creation of burials and associated rituals was formed. Evidence of the common behavioral patterns of man was left behind in the regions of Asia and Europe when migrating from Africa to other regions. An example of this is their micro-lithic tradition, which can be discovered during the journey of modern humans from Africa across Asia to the Australian region. It is also important to examine the similarities between the creation of the burials and the rituals associated with it, as they are a common feature of this collective behavioral pattern of humans. Based on these factors, the aim is to study the similarities between prehistoric burial rituals in Sri Lanka and prehistoric burial rituals in selected areas of the world.

Methodology

Since prehistoric skeletal remains have been found in Sri Lanka since the Mesolithic, attention has been paid to the Mesolithic Age of the other regions as well. In addition, two regions, the Asian region, and the European region, mainly referring to the countries such as Sri Lanka, India, and Palestine have been selected to examine the prehistoric burials.

Primary and secondary data collection methods were used as the basic methods for data collection for this study. Interviews were conducted

under the Preliminary Data Collection Methodology, with the main focus on identifying data uncovered from prehistoric research. Furthermore, the identification of burial rituals was done focusing only on the human skeletal factors.

Research results

The prehistoric period can also be described as the period in which the foundation was laid for the creation of burials and associated rituals. The Paleolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic Age are three major cultural divisions of the prehistoric era. Among these, the Mesolithic is focused here during which the burial rituals of Sri Lanka can be identified, and the attention has been given to the same period in other regions as well.

The beginning of the Mesolithic coincided with the beginning of the creation of micro-lithic tools. Although the formation of micro-lithic can be found during the Paleolithic, the developmental stage is the Mesolithic. The earliest period of the Mesolithic is approximately 11,000-9,000 BP (Athreya, 2014).

It is believed that humans first migrated to Sri Lanka between 125,000 and 75,000 BP (Deraniyagala S. U., 1992). Human skeletal remains have been found in Sri Lanka since the Mesolithic. That period spans between 48,000 and 3,800 BP (Perera, 2010). There are some setbacks with the human remains in Sri Lanka compared to the ones found in other countries of the South Asian region. However, it corresponds with the arid climate associated with the Palk Strait and the frequent climate changes.

Wet zone caves and open-air habitats are some of the major landmarks of prehistoric burials in Sri Lanka. Wet zone rock caves such as

Pahiyangala (40,000 - 5,400 BP), Batadombalena (36,000 - 11,500 BP), Kitulgala Belilena (32,000 - 3,500 BP), Attanagoda Alulena (10,500 BP) as well as Bellanbandi Palassa (12,000 BP), an open-air habitat, are some of the important sites (Deraniyagala S. U., 1992).

The Mesolithic in Europe can be portrayed as relating to the hunters in the Holocene period. The end of the Mesolithic was when humans, who lived by hunting, turned to an agricultural way of life. The Mesolithic varies regionally, and for ease of study, researchers divide the Mesolithic in Europe into two parts, the early and late stages (Crombé, Philippe; Robinson, Erick, 2014).

The study of burial rituals can be done on several factors, but it is important to clarify whether the remains of human skeletons identified during the excavations are buried due to natural causes or a deliberate burial, as the focus here is only on the skeletal remains. These are some of the things that can be identified in a deliberate burial after the death of a person (Knusel, 2014).

- 1) Burial of bodies in a standard burial posture identifiable in prehistoric burials. This can be recognized as a burial done immediately after death.
- 2) The body is placed in an elongated or curved position.
- 3) Detection of a pit or mound associated with the body.
- 4) Identification of burial ruins associated with the body.

The first two of these can be identified in a deliberate burial, and all the above can be seen from well-organized burials. Paying close attention to all

of this, it is easy to highlight the ritual practices that have been practiced in cemeteries.

Burial rituals are a presentation of a recurring social process. These processes are not uniform at all stages. Therefore, it is important to have three observations to identify burial rituals that are always based on material evidence (Knusel, 2014)

- 1) Identify the places where burial rites were performed.
- 2) Identify the last time a ritual was practiced in an area and whether the ritual was active at various times in the area.
- 3) Identify areas where a certain form of ritual has been continuously practiced.

In modern societies, burial after death is practiced individually, but mass burials can be discovered during the Mesolithic. H. Duday classifies such burials into two types, Collective Burials, and Multiple Burials. Remains related to the burial rituals from the Mesolithic can be identified in the cultural subdivisions of the prehistoric period and the later pre-modern societies. This is a result of the cultural flow.

The creation of burial rituals is mainly based on two factors, body disposal, and body treatments. Disposal methods include the posture of the body in burial, the nature of the burial, and so on. The rites performed at the burial of the deceased are identified as body treatments.

Apart from the African region, there is much information that can be detected in a number of selected locations in the Asian and European regions.

How prehistoric man buried bodies in a burial, depicts their beliefs and practices. Based on the Mesolithic, which is considered to be a cultural subdivision of prehistoric times, several major post-mortem postures can be identified.

- 1) Flexed burial with the body facing upwards in a shape similar to the way, an embryo develops in the mother's womb.

The bodies were placed slant to the right or left side when placing in this posture. This can be seen in the Azraq 18, a burial ground of the Natufians and Pothana in Sri Lanka. This posture can also be found in the Bellanbandipalassa in Sri Lanka, as well as in Langhnaj in India, and the Iron Gates¹⁵ burials between Serbia and Romania in the lower valleys of the Danube River (Boroneant, Adina; Bonsall, Clive, 2012).

- 2) Burial in pairs
- 3) Burial as parts

It can be mentioned that a secondary burial method has been followed in burying the body as parts. After a person dies, his body is taken out of the habitat and left to decompose, leaving the remains to be buried near the

¹⁵ Evidence suggests that large numbers of people migrated along the Black Sea border through the Iron Gates, which can be identified as a gateway through the southern Carpathian Mountains during the Ice Age.

habitat. This can be clearly shown in Batadombalena in Sri Lanka (Deraniyagala S. U., 1992).

Outside of these postures, it is also common for corpses to be set aside to bury naturally in the dung-hill mounds. Furthermore, the burial of the body in a bag-like cover made of plant remains (Bag burial) and the burial of the body in parts (Fractional burial) can also be identified.

Bellanbandipelessa in Sri Lanka is one of the foremost places where bodies are set aside to be buried naturally nearby the dung-hill mounds. Skeletal remains of nine people between the ages of 25 and 35 have been identified in proximity to these mounds (Deraniyagala P. E., 1958). They were buried in pairs. The presence of these types of human skeletal remains near the dung-hill mounds around Batadombalena was a root cause for many questions. Problems such as, are corpses dumped with everyday garbage? Sacrificed for rituals? Or was there another burial ritual? has been occurred (Deraniyagala P. E., 1958).

In the Langhnaj area of India, human remains that have been buried under the dung-hill mounds after the death of the people were discovered nearby the ruins of settlements (Agrawal, D P; Kharakwal , J S, 2002). Pallemala and Mini Athiliya are other sites where the dead bodies were buried in dung-hill mounds. Significantly, here all the skeletal remains were found in association with a shell midden of discarded shells (Kulathilake, S., Deraniyagala, S., Perera, N and Perera, J, 2014). No pits were ever made during the burials.

Misplacement of skeletal remains in some of the burial sites can also be recognized during the Mesolithic. The skull cannot be found often. This is a common feature of the burial sites at Bellanbendipelessa, Pallemala, and

Catalhoyuk in Turkey. Commenting on this, Deraniyagala states that *Homo sapiens balangodensis*, like the Vedda people who are considered to be a pre-modern society, may have left the bodies of the dead covered with leafy branches. The bones may have been displaced due to environmental and animal influences (Deraniyagala S. U., 1992).

Body treatment techniques are also specialized in funeral rituals. The main distinctive feature is the application of red or yellow ocher on the bones of the deceased. It has been identified that in places like Bellanbendipalassa where the corpses were buried, half of the bones were coated with red ocher (Deraniyagala P. E., 1958). Examples include the ocher-plated frontal bone found in the Ravana Ella Cave, the painted faces and skulls of the bodies buried in the Azraq 18 burials.

The backs of the bones found in the Azraq 18 burials have been painted (Rosenberg & Nadel, 2014). Researchers have shown that the rest of the unpainted face is covered with decaying materials. Yellow and red are used for colouring and black are used for drawing stripes etc. (Rosenberg & Nadel, 2014). The Vantaa Jönsas burial site in Finland is also known as the “Red Ochre Burials” since the red ocher had been used for many burial rituals there.

Discussion

Considering the above, it is clear that the curved posture in which the fetus develops, that is, the posture in which the corpse is placed where the knees are in contact with the mandible, has been generally active in Sri Lanka as well as in other regions.

If the body is not bent in this way as soon as a person dies, it can never be buried in this position without breaking a bone. So, it seems that it was done as soon as a person died. The curved posture can also be seen in the skeleton known as the Manikhami, which is found in Miniathiliya, nowadays displayed in the Star Fort in Mathara. The fact that the body is strongly bent which can be identified by the curvature of its spine proves that the body was bent as soon as the person died.

Among the burial sites belonging to the Mesolithic in Sri Lanka, in Bellanbandipelessa, Miniethiliya, Pallemalala, Langhnaj in India, it can be identified the burials associated with the dung-hill mounds. No pits have ever been dug around these sites. Over time, the corpses are let to be buried naturally by the garbage dumped from the settlement. Although no definite cause for this process can be known, an idea could be derived from the community in the Catalhoyuk area around Turkey.

When paying attention to society, it can be seen that the people who lived in Catalhoyuk constantly tried to maintain the present form of their houses. It turns out that over time, they have built another foundation upon the existing one of their houses. Ian Hodder discovered in his research that the image of two leopards facing each other in the same house was created in the same way in the rebuilt part of the house. Commenting on this, Ian Hodder states that they have maintained the souvenirs for generations. That fact must be considered to identify the burial rituals practiced in this society. Ian Hodder states that even after the death of their loved ones, they dig pits in the houses to keep their memories with them for a long time and buried them in those pits inside the house (L.B. Christensen., O. Hammer & D.A. Warburton, 2013).

It is also vital that in some cases the skull was not visible of the buried bodies in the existing burial sites at this time. According to Professor Raj Somadeva, who researched the Pallemalala, the absence of cranial bones associated with the identified bodies was the result of some form of burial ritual (Somadewa, 2006). Even today, the skulls of dead people in the village of Pallemala are used for various traditional black rituals. It is believed that the skull may have been misplaced in the past because of its use for rituals. Commenting on the Catalhoyuk scenario regarding this, Ian Hodder said that the skull had been removed from the skeleton of the deceased and repositioned in a separate place in association with the elite of society.

In addition to these, the process of applying red or yellow ochre found in the vicinity of Ravana Ella Cave, Pahiyangala, Azraq 18, and Vantaa Jönsas is also important. From the prehistoric site of Pahiyangala, a thoracic spine coated with ochre could be identified. A worn-out grindstone used for grinding ochre has also been identified in the cave. This proves that the process of applying the ochre has been active for a long time.

The ochre coating process can also be found in Azraq 18 and Vantaa Jönsas in Europe, which belong to the Natufian tribe. Vantaa Jönsas is also known as the “Red Ochre Burials”, largely due to this reason. Red was used in ancient societies to symbolize the concept of fire, light, and warmth. Also, the skull bone is the most commonly used part for these rituals.

It is not easy to understand the nature of the rituals done by applying the ochre. To explain it further, one can use the *Brahmajala Sutta Warnana* of the *Seelakkhandha Vagga* in the Pali *Diganikaya Attakatha*¹⁶.

“ධොපන යනු ඇට දෙවීම ඇතැම් ජනපදවල ඥාතින් කලුරිය කළ කල්හි නොදමන්. වළදමා තබන්. ඉක්බිති ඒවා කුණු වූ කල් දැන ඉවතට ගෙන ඇට දොවා සුවද ගල්වා තබන්. ඔවුහු නැකැත්කෙළි කෙළනා කල්හි එක්තැනක ඇට තබා එක්තැනක සුරා ආදිය තබිබවා අඩ අඩා සුරාබොති. මෙයද කියන ලදි. මහණෙනි, දකුණු දනව්වේ ධොපන නම් දෙයක් ඇත. එහි බොහෝ ආහාර පාන බජජ (කෑ යුතු දේ) ලෙය් (ලෙව කෑ යුතු දේ) පෙය් (බිව යුතු දේ) ඇත. මහණෙනි මේ ධොපනය ඇත. එය නැතැයි නොකියම් ඇතැම්හු ඉන්ද්‍රජාලයෙන් ඇට දෙවීම යයි කියති ”

Here, it mentions a verb called "*dhopana*". It describes one of the sixty-two superstitious views preached by the Lord Buddha. In this process, which is said to be identifiable in the South Indian subcontinent, people bring the remaining bones of the bodies of their dead relatives at home after letting the body flesh be decayed, wash the bones with scented water annually, place them in the middle of the yard and enjoy around it.

The cranial bones are the most common type of bone which can be recognized during the processes of retention over a long period. During the Mesolithic, people may have taken the bones out of the skeleton and kept them in their possession for the rituals which were done by applying the ochre. Only a part of the bones is used in the process called *dopana*. In certain prehistoric sites, only the skulls can be identified with ochre marks, probably because they were brought into the cave for commemoration.

¹⁶ Diganikaya Attakatava 1 Seelakkhandha Vagga Brahmajala Sutra Praise Page 87

Consideration about the direction in which the head was kept during burial is another distinctive feature of the Mesolithic burials in the prehistoric period. Although not commonly found in Sri Lanka, in some cases the head is placed towards the east. Since the sun sets in the west, the head may not have been directed in that way. Even today, never turning one's head towards the West can be pinpointed as a living expression of beliefs from the past. Prehistoric man has always lived in conflict with the environment. The sun is possibly the most influential object towards the environment that he has ever identified. So, this natural process may have been automatically affected their daily lives as well.

In view of all these, the below-mentioned details can be taken as the overall outcomes of this study. Burying the dead body in the posture of an embryo can be recognized as a common practice around the world. In addition, although it is not common to find a body buried in a pit after digging, it is clear that the buried place is covered in some way after the burial. The practice of applying ocher on the skull as a ritual to commemorate the dead can also be mentioned as a universal form of burial ritual. Hence, it can be said that there are similarities of prehistoric burial rites between Sri Lanka and the world as indicated from these findings.

Acknowledgment

This research paper was presented in association with the Bachelor of Arts dissertation. I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Mangala Katugampola, Senior Lecturer, Department of Archeology, University of Kelaniya, who advised me in preparing the dissertation.

I would like to thank all the lecturers in the Department of Archeology, Post Graduate Institute of Archaeology of the University of Kelaniya who have been guiding me throughout this research. Special thanks to all those who provided the necessary data and information in the field studies, staff members of the library of the University of Kelaniya.

A heartfelt thank you to Miss. A.K.S. Jayatissa and for everyone who supported me in many ways.

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