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Pregnancy Cravings (*Dola Duka*) in Relation to Social Structure and Personality in a Sinhalese Village by Gananath Obeyesekere

A Review Article

R. M. Auchithya Rathnayake

The main purpose of this paper is to review one of the articles written by Professor Gananath Obeyesekere. The chosen article is titled “*Pregnancy Cravings (Dola Duka) in Relation to Social Structure and Personality in a Sinhalese Village*”. Obeyesekere graduated from the University of Ceylon (now known as the University of Peradeniya) in 1955. Thereafter, he completed his master’s degree and Ph.D at the University of Washington, Seattle. He taught at several Universities such as the University of Ceylon, the University of Washington, Seattle, and the University of California, San Diego. Thus, Obeyesekere, an eminent native Sri Lankan anthropologist, worked at both national and international levels (Vitharana & Ranasinghe, 2018).

Professor Obeyesekere was Chair of the Anthropology Department at Princeton University and worked there as a professor from 1980 to the year 2000 (de Silva, 2021). In 2002, he retired from service at Princeton. Though retired, he chose to carry out further investigations related to Sri Lankan society and culture. From the outset, he chose to work in the English language rather than in his mother tongue i.e., Sinhala. This was done for the purpose of enlightening the perspectives of foreign scholars and directing their attention to Sri Lankan society and culture. This venture has proved to be an unqualified success, since his work is still being subjected to discussions and citations worldwide. Through his work, Obeyesekere has attempted to review the unspoken traditional and cultural conventions of Sri Lankans. Thus, Obeyesekere’s works can be identified as masterpieces in the disciplines of anthropology and sociology.

When considering Obeyesekere's publications, the following have drawn serious scholarly attention.

- *Land Tenure in Village Ceylon: A Sociological and Historical Study, 1967*
- *Medusa's Hair: An Essay on Personal Symbols and Religious Experience, 1981*
- *The Cult of The Goddess Pattini, 1984*
- *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka (with Richard Gombrich), 1988*
- *The Work of Culture: Symbolic Transformation in Psychoanalysis and Anthropology, 1990*
- *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in The Pacific, 1992*
- *Imagining Karma: Ethical Transformation in Amerindian, Buddhist, and Greek Rebirth, 2002*
- *Cannibal Talk: The Man-Eating Myth and Human Sacrifice in the South Seas, 2005*
- *Karma and Rebirth, 2005*
- *The Awakened Ones: Phenomenology of Visionary Experience, 2012*
- *The Doomed King: A Requiem for Sri Vikrama Rajasinha, 2017*

Apart from these influential books, Obeyesekere has written a vast variety of articles for various reputed journals. Among them, the article that has been chosen here, "Pregnancy Cravings (Dola Duka) in Relation to Social Structure and Personality in a Sinhalese Village," was published in the journal "*American Anthropologist*" (volume 65, issue 2) in 1963. This article attempts to explicate how the Dola Duka complex was institutionalized in Rambadeniya, an isolated jungle village in the Pattu

(district) of Laggala, which lies to the Northeast of Matale in the Central Province of [Sri Lanka] (Obeyesekere, 1963, p. 323). In order to achieve his objective, Obeyesekere has divided the article into a few sub-sections. This helps the reader to have interesting and continuous reading while being privy to classical Sri Lankan society and culture. This manner of presentation helps the reader to better comprehend the notion of the Dola Duka complex, even though they may not be familiar with the concept.

The article, which is structured into several key sections, begins with an introduction, followed by an exploration of the psychological basis of 'Dola-Duka' and its cultural background. It then delves into the interpretation techniques of 'Dola-Duka' and examines the physical and psychological conditions of women experiencing it. It also discusses food rejection as a precursor to cravings, categorizing these cravings into eight distinct types: sweets and childhood foods, sour foods, festival foods, expensive and rare foods, foods expressing hostility, male foods, foods symbolizing the penis, and idiosyncratic foods. The article concludes by summarizing the findings and interpretations of the concept of 'Dola-Duka.' When studying the above classification, it is clear how the article is structured to provide a broad idea about the Dola Duka complex. At a glance, it can be seen that through this article, Obeyesekere has considered not only the psychological aspects of these cravings, but also the functional and symbolic aspects of pregnancy food cravings known as Dola Duka. Thus, it can be argued that Obeyesekere has addressed the most essential characteristics of the Dola Duka complex, both theoretically and practically. In discussing the article, it is beneficial to compare Obeyesekere's findings with similar research conducted in other societies. In many cultures, pregnancy cravings are understood through various lenses, including psychological, sociocultural, and even medical

perspectives. For instance, in Western societies, pregnancy cravings are often attributed to hormonal changes and nutritional deficiencies. Research conducted by authors such as Dickens and Trethowan (1971), Tierson et al. (1985), Weingarten and Elston (1990), Bayley et al. (2002), Orloff & Hormes, (2014), Hainutdzinava et al. (2017), and Blau et al. (2020), highlights that cravings can reflect a woman's subconscious desires or unmet needs during pregnancy, a perspective that resonates with Obeyesekere's assertion that Dola Duka is a culturally constructed phenomenon rather than merely psychological weakness.

Moreover, studies of Indigenous cultures, such as the Navajo, reveal that food cravings during pregnancy are often tied to spiritual beliefs and cultural practices. For example, pregnant women may crave specific foods believed to ensure the health of the baby or to fulfill cultural obligations. This contrasts with Obeyesekere's findings, which emphasize the social dynamics and gender roles within the Sinhalese context, suggesting that Dola Duka serves as a mechanism for women to express envy (without being judged) and assert agency within a patriarchal society. Additionally, the Dola Duka complex can be compared to similar concepts in other South Asian cultures, such as the "pica" phenomenon in India, where pregnant women crave non-food substances. While Obeyesekere focuses on pregnancy food cravings as a manifestation of cultural and psychological constructs, the broader literature suggests that cravings can also encompass a range of desires that reflect societal norms and individual experiences.

By situating Obeyesekere's work within this broader comparative framework, it becomes evident that while his analysis is deeply rooted in the specific cultural practices of the Sinhalese, there are parallels and contrasts that can enrich the understanding of pregnancy cravings across

different societies. By examining each section of this work as described below, we can gain a better understanding of the concepts explained above. The introductory stanza of the work attempts to shed light on how pregnancy and food cravings are interrelated, and through this, the author reveals how these factors have an unseen relationship. This has been illustrated by quoting from Webster's well-known play, *The Duchess of Malfi*.

Bosola: So, so, there's no question but her tetchiness and most vulturous eating of the apricocks, are apparent signs of breeding.

(Obeyesekere, 1963, p. 323)

The *Duchess of Malfi* is a tragedy written by the English dramatist *John Webster* in 1612-1613. At that time, this play enjoyed a huge audience both nationally and internationally. By quoting from this famous tragedy, Obeyesekere reveals that western society and culture, even in the 17th century, had also identified that there is an unseen/inevitable relationship between food craving and pregnancy. Therefore, it is clear that the introduction to this article is an interesting one, and shows how *skillfully Obeyesekere situates a local cultural phenomenon within a broader intellectual tradition*. By quoting from this play, he draws the perspectives of an international audience into dialogue with Asian (especially Sri Lankan) society and culture through a single, carefully chosen, literary reference.

Typically, as discussed, the introduction provides a guided pathway to the article. It illuminates the meaning of *Dola Duka*, how it differs from a normal dietary requirement, and has become a hidden desire of a pregnant

woman. Nevertheless, the main difficulty with this article, its primary limitation, arises from its aligning of the concept of Dola Duka only with Sri Lankan Buddhists and their society and culture. It could be argued that it would have been more enriching if Obeyesekere had also considered perspectives from other religious traditions in Sri Lanka. However, this omission does not necessarily reflect neglect; rather, it can be understood as a methodological choice. Since his ethnographic study focused on a particular traditional Sinhalese Buddhist village, the practices of other religious communities may not have been directly relevant to the scope of his analysis. As readers, while we may expect a broader comparative discussion, it is important to recognize that Obeyesekere's main objective was to provide a detailed, context-specific exploration of one cultural setting rather than a multi-religious overview.

In the article, Obeyesekere attempts to explicate the Dola Duka complex through a psychological perspective while being anchored to the chosen study area, i.e., the Laggala village. For this, Obeyesekere has used the research findings of Deutsch, Benedek and Sigmund Freud. Though much of the discussion has been based on Deutsch and Benedek, Obeyesekere eventually links his analysis to the stages of human development introduced by Sigmund Freud, especially the oral stage. However, in his analysis, Obeyesekere concludes that Dola Duka is a culturally constructed idea, not simply the reflection of a psychological desire.

In a final analysis, dola-duka should be treated as a cultural complex, and not as a simple psychobiological constellation of symptoms, as it may be in Western society (Obeyesekere, 1963, p. 325).

In this way, Obeyesekere links the psychological aspect of Dola Duka to the culture of the village in Laggala. Through this, the reader can gain an understanding of not only Dola Duka but also the psychological and cultural conditions related to it.

As mentioned above, Obeyesekere sees Dola Duka as a culturally constructed phenomenon. Therefore, “*The cultural background of Dola Duka*” explicates the way in which the Dola Duka complex has become rooted in Sri Lankan society and culture. This segment of the article has provided much detail on Sri Lankan society and culture and has attempted to give a constructive base to the Dola Duka complex as well. Here, Obeyesekere describes the cultural background of Dola Duka using the smallest social unit in society i.e., family. At the beginning of the segment, Obeyesekere describes the social status of men and women in the area. As the discussion develops, he extends this to cover children’s behavior, the transition during puberty, the processes of socialization, patterns of marriage, the roles and duties within the household, and even adultery. These aspects are not discussed in isolation but rather as part of the broader cultural context in which the Dola Duka complex is situated. For instance, the emphasis on women’s subordinate position, the regulation of sexuality, and the moral codes surrounding purity and impurity all provide a backdrop that helps explain why pregnancy cravings have become symbolically significant. By situating Dola Duka within these wider social institutions, Obeyesekere reveals that it is not merely a psychological phenomenon but one embedded in gender relations, kinship structures, and the moral expectations of village life.

According to Obeyesekere, it is clear that in the 1960s the social position of females was considerably weaker than that in modern society. Women were judged according to notions of purity and impurity, and their

social interactions were constrained by strict moral codes. For example, women were expected to maintain unquestioned faith in their husbands, and they were often discouraged from even looking directly into their husbands' faces. This sense of inferiority is further illustrated in the remark: '*How can it be so? Look at us with our monthly periods*' (Obeyesekere, 1963, p. 330), which highlights how menstruation was used as a justification for viewing women as impure and subordinate within the village context. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that there is no difference in the amount affection and love shown to girl children and boy children, contrasting, perhaps, with the social situation in India. Though Obeyesekere tries to construct a picture of the background of the village, and its socio-cultural aspects, the readers of this segment may feel that he has strayed from the main goal of the article. The patterns of adultery in the Laggala village area might be interesting reading, but when considering the goals and aims of the article, the discussion is somewhat excessive and wanders beyond the main thesis.

However, when considering the overall theme of "*The cultural background of Dola-Duka*", Obeyesekere has provided theoretical support for his observations. He has diligently interpreted the social, cultural and traditional conventions in the study area. By demonstrating the social pressure at work on females, Obeyesekere convinces the reader that the phenomenon of Dola Duka is their way of expressing envy of males, albeit in a socially and culturally approved manner. Thus, Obeyesekere opines that Dola Duka functions as a mechanism of self-protection.

The mechanism of dola-duka... gives a woman an unflinching opportunity to emulate male roles and thus give expression to male envy in a culturally approved manner (Obeyesekere, 1963, p. 334).

The segment "*Dola Duka: technique of interpretation*" attempts to expound the salient features of the Dola Duka complex. In this interpretation, Obeyesekere demonstrates how Dola Duka, and the desires of real life have become symbolic inputs for women's imaginings. These imaginings give rise during sleep to "dreaming". Obeyesekere argues that in order to achieve something that is built in the mind, women will see it in their dreams, and they would become their Dola or desire. Therefore, Obeyesekere illustrates in a systematic way how Dola Duka has an unseen relationship with dreams which function as symbols and also express the hidden desires of women.

Another section of the interpretation draws on Sigmund Freud's symbolic interpretation of food. Obeyesekere relates the concepts of 'dreams' and 'food' with the Dola Duka phenomenon, suggesting that these two factors have a direct influence on pregnancy cravings in the Laggala village. In Freud's framework, food often functions as a symbolic substitute for deeper unconscious desires (Freud, 1900), and Obeyesekere adapts this idea to show how culturally mediated cravings and dreams become socially meaningful within the Sinhalese context.

In the section "*Physical and psychological condition of the woman during Dola-Duka*", Obeyesekere connects all the psychological conditions and the physical changes of these pregnant mothers. He also sheds light on how women are treated by their relatives and their husbands. However, by reading the earlier segment and the next segment along with this segment, the reader might feel that the flow of ideas has been interrupted. The reason is that this segment of interpretation contains similar ideas to those included in the earlier segments. Therefore, a certain degree of repetition of ideas has taken place.

All the above explanations, and arguments are concentrated in the next two segments of the article titled “*Food rejection-precondition to craving*” and “*Food Cravings.*” Generally, in the “*Food rejection-precondition to craving*” segment, Obeyesekere tries to illustrate the types of foods that tend to be rejected and the foods that are more attractive to consume. On the other hand, Obeyesekere illustrates how the community has given a symbolical value for every food item that is consumed by the peasants in the research study area. In order to provide a better discussion on food items, Obeyesekere has divided this segment into two sub-segments. Thus, it can be argued Obeyesekere has carried out an in-depth investigation on the food culture of traditional Sri Lanka.

The “*Food Cravings*” segment comes next. This segment is much more interesting reading than the other segments. It is possible, here, to obtain a sense of how difficult it is to find some food items and how precious the resources are. Thus, to provide a clearer idea on Sri Lankan society and culture, Obeyesekere has classified this segment into more sub-segments. In the long run, Obeyesekere points out, fulfilling the Dola Duka of a pregnant mother is important not in a nutritional sense, but within the local cultural ethos. It reflects a husband’s ability to demonstrate care, responsibility, and social competence. In this context, men are expected to be resourceful and tactful enough to meet these cravings, since doing so symbolizes their commitment to their wives and reinforces their status within the community.

Almost all the details discussed previously are concentrated in the *Conclusion* segment. In the conclusion, Obeyesekere attempts to synthesize his analysis by moving from a broad cultural perspective (macro level) to a more specific, individual perspective (micro level). He recalls the major points discussed throughout the article and emphasizes that Dola Duka is

not merely a personal craving, but a culturally constructed phenomenon embedded in social structures. In doing so, he highlights how an individual experience, such as a pregnant woman's food craving, reflects and reproduces larger cultural norms and social dynamics. In doing so, Obeyesekere has recalled the major premises of the article and pointed out that Dola Duka is not only a hidden desire, but also a culturally constructed phenomenon, as it is in Indian culture. Thereafter, Obeyesekere invites future research to verify the claims presented in the article.

Obeyesekere's article "Pregnancy Cravings (Dola Duka) in Relation to Social Structure and Personality in a Sinhalese Village" presents a significant exploration of cultural practices surrounding pregnancy cravings within the Sinhalese context. However, while his work is foundational, several critiques can be made regarding the scope and execution of his ideas.

A main limitation that can be identified is the repetition of certain points. From the outset, Obeyesekere classifies and elaborates on the key cultural constructs related to Dola Duka in a systematic way. However, in several sections, similar ideas are revisited without adding interpretation that is new. This tendency to restate earlier arguments makes the article somewhat dense and, sometimes, difficult to follow.

Another limitation can be identified in the introduction, which is that of not introducing the roots of the idea of Dola Duka. Had the author begun the introduction by referring to the Indian ideologies influencing Sri Lankan society, it would have improved the introduction, as he concludes that the notion of Dola Duka had its origins in Indian society and culture. The other important shortcoming is the lengthy discussion of somewhat irrelevant details. Since the main goal of this article was to explicate how the Dola Duka complex had been institutionalized in the Laggala village,

readers will expect a brief description of the village, and a detailed discussion of the socio-cultural validity of the Dola Duka complex. Instead, by describing the socio-economic activities of the Laggala village in great detail, Obeyesekere has, to some extent, deviated from achieving the main objective of the article.

When approaching the concept of the Dola Duka complex as a whole, it is evident that Obeyesekere views it as a kind of socially constructed shield for women and also as a means women have to compete with men, as the latter enjoy greater respect in society. However, when considering the validity of this idea in the present context, it is clear that the situation is more complex and would entail a deeper analysis.

Additionally, the article's primary focus on the Sinhalese Buddhist context may limit its applicability to other cultural or religious frameworks. While Obeyesekere provides an in-depth analysis of Dola Duka within this specific context, there is a missed opportunity to compare these findings with similar practices in other communities, such as Hindu or Muslim populations in Sri Lanka. This rather narrow focus could lead to an incomplete understanding of pregnancy cravings and their cultural significance, as other religious traditions may offer contrasting or complementary insights.

Generally, the article discussed not only the Dola Duka concept but also Sri Lankan society and culture. Thus, the author succeeds in opening the hidden, yet persistent cultural context of the Dola Duka complex. Therefore, Obeyesekere has provided an excellent opportunity to his readers to study, comprehend, re-investigate and compare the study with others as a time horizon-based study. In addition, the article; *Pregnancy Cravings (Dola Duka) in Relation to Social Structure and Personality in a Sinhalese Village* has provided insights into the social norms, traditions

and conventions of the Sinhala village community in Sri Lanka. In addition, Obeyesekere has furnished ample examples to support his theories and perspectives. Therefore, the article is theoretically original and empirically sound.

In conclusion, while Obeyesekere's work remains a significant contribution to the field of anthropology, sociology and other related disciplines, addressing the critiques advanced in the current paper through comparative analysis and broader cultural engagement would enhance its scholarly rigor and relevance. A more comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach could yield deeper insights into the cultural practices surrounding pregnancy cravings in Sri Lanka, ultimately enriching our understanding of the Dola Duka complex.

When viewing the article as a whole, it should be mentioned that this seminal paper has not only provided insights into Sri Lankan traditions, customs and practices but has also focused international attention on Sri Lankan society and culture. Therefore, this ground-breaking work can be recommended to anthropologists, sociologists, researchers and other interested readers who are keen on knowing more about the inhabitants of Sri Lanka and their traditions, customs, marriage patterns and other socio-cultural characteristics.

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