

On the Pirit Ceremony in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The sutras recited by monks in communion and in ceremonial surroundings are contained in a Pali work called the Book of the *Parittas* and in Sinhalese it is referred to as the *Pirivānā Pot Vāhanse*. The more elaborate ritual that we see today and the more mundane objectives involved in the whole exercise are obviously very late in origin. The *Parittas* have been originally recited by the saṅgha for the exclusive purpose of warding off of evil spirits. The earliest recorded evidence for a *Pirit* ceremony is the one held in a city called *Viśāla* in India. The deity was suffering from an epidemic and plague and demons gathered there to devour the bodies of people who died of diseases. The Buddha is said to have visited this city in the company of Venerable *Ānanda* and recited the *Ratana Sutta* and sprinkled sacred water in the city whereupon the demons were subdued.

So as following I require into the origin of the *pirit* and the *pirit* ceremony.

Keywords: Buddhism, deva, *Pirit*

(1)

The objective of driving away of evil spirits is clearly retained in modern *Pirit* ceremonies where this sutra is recited,

But the same anecdote is basically dramatized even in some of the curative demon rituals called *Sanni Yakuma* or *Daha Ata Sanniya*. Instances are recorded in the great Chronicle (like the *Kojiki* in Japan) called the *Mahāvamsa* of Sinhalese kings causing the chanting of *pirit* in time of calamity.

There are however more mundane purposes for which it is used now. A curse survey reveals the following objectives:

For the entire family: Sickness in the family, house-warming ceremony, Deaths in the family and other circumstances of a more secular nature.

For the entire country: In times of national disaster, drought, floods etc.

For individuals: Success in professions, easy child birth, success at examinations, leaving the country on a foreign trip etc.

In all these instances the focus of attention is on the efficacy of the chant — the power of the vocable. Chanting has become a spiritual balm for the people. The sacred water (*pirit pan*) sprinkled at the end of the ceremony is believed to react almost immediately. We also hear of snake bites being treated with the recitation of special sutras like the *Khandha Paritta* or the

More Paritta. This is a very late development and places the monk in the role of a shaman which is not the general Buddhist practice. Idealistically the Buddhist monk has to follow a celibate life cut off from house hold activities. All their actions are designed to bring spiritual welfare. They are not expected to do any action to obtain presents whether in kind or in money. In this respect he is different from the Japanese *Shinto*, priest or the *Miko* who are essentially shamans. But in the last instance referred to the monk's role comes very close to that of a shaman. In Sri Lanka we have different practitioners for shamanism. They are designated either by the name *Kapuwa, Kapurāla, Kapu Pattini* who is a god medium and *Kaṭṭandiya, Kaṭṭandi-rā* who is the demon priest. But these are only god or demon oriented rituals where dancing and excessive drumming etc. take place. In the *Pirit* ceremony the monks do not dance neither do they play any musical instruments. The use of drums is resorted to only as an introduction to the ceremony but this is the work of laymen and is meant to create the necessary atmosphere. This is another point of difference from the Japanese Buddhist practices of certain sects where the 'priests' are cast in the role of shaman and they dance and sing in unison.

(2)

Pirit is recited by many monks seated inside a gaily

decorated octagonal structure called the *mandapaya*. A post is erected at the center of the pavilion and is referred to as *inda-kāla* which resembles almost a microcosmic center. The ceiling is laid with a white canopy and on it are hung many ritual leaves and branches. Two plantain posts are erected at the entrance and decorations made with palm or coconut fronds are fixed on to the sides. Tiny clay lamps filled with coconut oil are placed on the outer brim of pots covered with coconut flowers. These are lit prior to the ceremony. Inside the pavilion is kept a table, on which a water pot, the *Pirit* book and some trays with betel leaves and other ingredients are placed. Several balls of thread are loosened and are drawn across the canopy stretching into the audience. One end of the thread is tied to an areca sprig and the other end is held by a devotee.

One of the patrons (*dāyakaya*) carries a pot of sacred water strained from a well selected in very strict religious atmosphere. He goes to the place of chanting pirit in a procession and under a canopy. The devotees meanwhile light lamps and candles. The monks are conducted to the place under a canopy and replete with the five kinds of religious music (*pancha-tūrya nāda*) and at the entrance their feet are washed and swept. The relics are then taken in procession and deposited inside the *mandapaya*. The monks now attend to their religious duties; the bowls of thread are loosened and are passed from the center of the pavilion to the audience and the devotees hold on to the thread while the monks chant *pirit*, they themselves touch the thread. It is believed that through this thread some 'magical potency' is conveyed. At the conclusion of the ceremony the long threads are broken into pieces and are either tied on arms or are taken by the devotees to their houses as palliatives.

The three main suttas is chanted: *Mahā Maṅgala Sutta*, *Karaṇī Metta Sutta* and the *Ratana Sutta*. The presiding chief monk always makes a short discourse (*anusāsana*) in which he explains that the works in the suttas have been compiled from divine and auspicious vocables (*divyākṣara*).

End of ceremony: Under normal circumstances the recitation extends for 90 hours, there are however shorter-duration recitals depending on the circumstances. At the end of the ceremony merit is transferred to the departed beings. It also involves the related process of sharing of merit.

On transfer of merit (*pariṇāmanā*) and sharing of merit (*anumodanā*):

I am of the opinion that these two processes closely resemble the two concepts *kansha* and *ekō* in Japanese Buddhism.

Another late addition to the *Pirit* ceremony is the dramatization of a dialogue between the chief monk (representing the Buddha) and the *Deva-Dūta* (representing the messenger of the deities). This episode is commonly referred to as the *Dorakaḍa* (entrance) *Asna* (message).

This involves the belief in Devas in Buddhism. It is therefore very necessary that we understand this phenomenon in a general way.

English term 'god' means a superhuman being worshipped as having power over human beings and natural objects. In Pali it means any superhuman being regarded to be in certain respects above human level. They are believed to be living in divine abodes according to the quantum of merit gained in the human world. There are six *deva* worlds and one *Brahma* world. But in the following religion of the island the conception of the *deity* is a little different.

(3)

I notice a sort of Pan-Sinhala Buddhist concept which has been built up over a period of time, For instance according to the Buddhist cosmology there are Four Guardian Gods (Cattāro Deva Rājāno) namely, *Dhataratṭha*, *Virūḍha*, *Virupakkha* and *Vessavana*. They guard the four directions East, South, West and North respectively. (These approximate to the "Sitemo" in Japanese Buddhism. I find that Virudha is the same as *Zojoten* (Asakusa in Tokyo), Dhatarattha is *Jikokuten*, Vessavana is *Bishamon*.) In folk conceptions of Sri Lanka the four guardian deities today appear to be another group. They are selected from a team of gods such as *Vishnu*, *Kataragama*, *Saman*, *Vibhūṣana*, *Pattinī*, *Nātha* and *Daḍimūnda* and are popularly referred to as the *Satara Varam Deity*.

It appears that this conception has originated during the 14th century and is recorded in an inscription called the *Lankātīlaka Vihāra* Inscription. In other words the inhabited microcosm of the *Cattāro Deva Rājāno* was the entire cosmos and the *Satara Varam Deity* was the Sri Lankan geographical location.

In this respect there are other deities of different character.

Patron deities of localities, titular deities of paddy fields etc., deities related to different aspects of life so on.

It is essential here to notice certain basic similarities between the ritual objects in a *pirit* ceremony and a *matsuri* of Japan. The pent roofs (*kuṭāra-qē*) (Jap. *Kurizuma* and *kurin*) are placed one above the other rising up. It shows an extent of wall space between them thus interrupting the eye and crating a

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sense of infinite repetition or cosmic verticality. An usual correspondence of a nearly similar type is provided by the ritual decoration called *quo qe dīva* in a *pirit* ceremony. The areca flower in which *pirit* thread is tied resembles a *qohei*. The pavilion is ritually cleaned and boundaries are demarcated and in this respect resembles a *maito*. Ritual leaves hung on the pavilion roof and sides resemble the *sakaki* or bamboo branches and leaves always hung inside the *maito*. The demarcation of the boundaries with coconut fronds and flowers and areca leaves hung on ropes tied to poles driven to the ground at different intervals is almost similar to the demarcation through the *shimenawa* and the hanging of *shida* and *shimenawa*.

The place where *pirit* is recited as in the case of the myth becomes a 'ritual arena'. The carrying of a water pot filled with sacred water into the pavilion resembles the same intention that we notice in the ceremony called *hiina oroti* (purification ritual using water) in *Hana Matsuri* for instance. Incidentally the ladle used to pour water on the feet of monks before they enter the pavilion (this is called the *kenissa*) is very similar to a *hiishaku*.

Hanging of *shida* on the *shimenawa* in Japan is a very common ritual exercise. It is identical with the hanging of coconut leaves (young yellow fronds) on ropes on different occasions such as decorating the path leading to temples (like a *sando* in Japan), decorating the roads during processions etc.

(4)

On Dorakada Asna and its Ceremonial Procedure:

- 1) Monks chant the great *paritta* called the *Maha Pirit*
- 2) A monk selected for the purpose reads the almanac (*lita*). The auspicious time for the reading of the message (*Dorakada Asna*) is announced.
- 3) Another monk recites the temple message (*Vihāra Asna*) written on a talipot leaf requesting the gods of temples and god-image-houses (*devāla*) to assemble at the ceremonial pavilion (*maṇḍapaya*) to listen to the chanting. While this message is relayed rest of the monks hold the *pirit* thread at different intervals.
- 4) Another message meant for the gods in the god-image-houses is inscribed by a monk on a talipot leaf. Other monks leave the place at this stage. The message called the *Devāle*
Talpata is made into four copies.
- 5) The talipot leaves are taken to the god-image-houses by

the *Deva-Dūta* accompanied by either four or eight young boys who are his attendants. They carry swords for protection. The group is accompanied by a procession.

- 6) A ceremony within the *devālaya* premises now takes place. Monks recite the *Karaṇīya Metta Sutta*. A round of auspicious drumming by professional drummers ensues. At the end of the recital sacred water is sprinkled on the *devālaya* premises. *Pirit* water is taken in a pot. The Messenger hangs the talipot leaves on the four corners of the house. The procession winds its way to the temple where the pavilion is. He is taken to a secluded room within the inner sanctums and the young attendants stand guard.
- 7) A procession of monks followed by the procession of the *Deva-Dūta* now proceeds towards the pavilion. A monk who has been assigned the task of reciting the sermon (*anusāsanāva*) accompanies the Messenger holding his hands.
- 8) The *Deva-Dūta* stands at the entrance to the pavilion with the attendants guarding the entrance. On both sides of the entrance are placed or tied weapons as a symbol of protection.
- 9) The monks meanwhile take their places inside the pavilion and attend to the ritual preliminaries such as placing the water pot on the table etc. They recite the *Mahā-māngala Sutta*.
- 10) A dialogue now ensues between the *Deva-Dūta* and the monk who recites the sermon. *Deva-Dūtava* stands at the entrance and the monk stands inside the pavilion. The devotees are seated around the pavilion, mostly on mats spread on the ground. There is complete silence.

The literal meaning of the term *Deva-Dūta* is "Messenger of God" and in the context of the ceremony he is made use of as a messenger to take the talipot leaves to the gods precincts and also to convey news about the arrival of the gods. In a way he becomes not only a messenger of gods but also a messenger sent by the monks to gods. The term *Chigo-san* has been often translated into English as "Page Boy" which is somewhat misleading because in English a page boy is one belonging to many contexts. In Japan *Chigo-san* appears in *Matsuri* which are religious occasions and not in a predominantly secular context. Let me explain this fact by referring to *Gion Matsuri* in Kyoto.

He is dressed in the costume of *Gion Gozutenno*. He rides on horseback in the manner of a *Shinto* priest. He is selected

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generally by the followers of the *jinja Naginata Hoko Chigo-san* at times is said to act in the rôle of a *Miko*. He follows a set ritual procedure and is allowed into the most hallowed sanctums of the *jinja*. At home he spends a very religious life. In the circumstances he is more than a mere page boy, he becomes a meaningful part of the whole gamut of the *matsuri*. He is indeed among the gods and in such circumstances it may not be wrong to identify him as a messenger of god, or a god-like figure.

(5)

I notice many similarities and a few differences in the rôles of *Deva-Dūta* and the *Chigo-san*.

Following are some of the main similarities:

1. Both are young boys. I am told that the *Chigo-san* in *Gion* is always within the age bracket 08 to 10 years.
2. Both are carefully selected or nominated by the followers of temple or the *jinja*. In Sri Lanka the *dāyakayas* or the patrons of the temple in consultation with the monks select the boy. In *Gion*, I have been told that a similar procedure is adopted in his selection.
3. He is selected from an influential family. In Sri Lanka family antecedents have been taken into consideration and at times the selection has been religio-politically oriented. In *Gion* the boy once selected was from the noble *Ichigo* family of Emperor *Kome Tenno* but since the boy fell sick no substitute was made. Originally he has been selected from among boys of merchant families and *Naginata Hoko Chigo* was nominated by the families of *Naginata Hoko-cho*, one block east of *Karasuma*.
4. He is treated as a very religious personality almost like a god. Parents always take pride in the fact that their son had been selected as the *Deve-Dūtaya*. In *Gion* it is normally held that *Chigo-san* is given the fifth rank title, *Sho-gōi* and *Jūmangoku*, perhaps in feudal and royal ranks respectively. In any case he is always from a rich family.
5. The boy in Sri Lanka is dressed in costumes normally associated in popular Buddhist mind with gods as seen in the images of gods in temple paintings. A crown, earrings of gold, bangles of gold, gem-studded breast plates, costly foot-wear, tapestries covering the body and other luxurious garments are presented to him. Similarly the *Chigo-san* of *Naginata Hoko* gets costumes from the family normally on the 22nd of June, which includes a hand-dress, jewellery, and on the 23rd at the *Yūno* ritual he is given presents by members of the *Naginata Hoko* and he is ritually adopted and titles are also given.
6. In Sri Lanka he is made to live the life of a celibate away from home and mostly at the temple where the monks teach him the reciting of the message. He stays there under the watchful eye of the chief monk from a week before the event. He is not allowed to partake of fish or meat and he becomes a complete vegetarian. In other words he is treated 'like a god'. In *Gion* even the boy's house is prepared for the occasion and a worshipping place is erected on the 22nd of June. Even inside the shrine precincts he is allowed into places not normal open to laymen. His feet are washed by the priests at the entrance to *Honden* and he gets a seat in front of the inner altar though of court on a lower elevation in between the city fathers, and he is blessed by the priests. He could proceed beyond the *shimenawa* at the corner of the street on the day of the parade. In the case of the *Kuze Chigo* from *Ayate Kuminaka jinja* in *Kuze-cho* he could go into the shrine and sanctuary on horse back by riding through the prohibitive sign.
7. The messengers in both cases are conducted in huge processions and in the company of monks or priests.
8. *Deva-Dūta* is accompanied by attendants carrying swords. *Chigo* in *Gion* has been accompanied by attendant called *Kamuro*. In some of the *matsuri* such as *Tenjin* of *Tenmangu* shrine in *Osaka* I presume there are two persons right behind the *Chigo* with weapons.
9. In Sri Lanka in the past the Messenger rode inside a palanquin and now he rides on a special cart or in a car. In Japan usually he is not allowed to touch the earth while walking although this is not normally adhered to as in *Tenjin* where he walked all the way. In *Gion* usually he rides on horse back.
10. After the ceremony is over parents and relatives of the boy normally look up to him as a venerated son and there are many instances when these boys entered the Buddhist order of monks at a later date. I

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am however unable to pass any remarks in the *Gion* case because I had no opportunity of meeting the boy in his family surroundings. There are however certain general differences in the two which I consider to be differences in detail and not in contexts. I list a few of them.

(6)

1. In a single pirit ceremony there is only one *Deva-Dūta* whereas in *Gion* there are several; there are 3 main types: *Chigo* of *Naginata Hoko*, *Kuze Chigo*, and *Ayagaza Hoko no Chigo*. At the *Koka* matsuri held as the festival of *Kokawa* in the Wakayama prefecture there are groups of villages from which several *Chigos* are nominated.
2. *Chigo* in *Gion* has been at times carried on the shoulders of members, so is it at the *Kokawa matsuri*. But in Sri Lanka he is not taken on the shoulders, however he does not walk either.
3. No females are selected in Sri Lanka as the *Deva-Dūtaya*. In *Aoi Matsuri* in Kyoto a girl rides on a palanquin.
4. *Deva-Dūta* does not act in the role of a trance medium like in *Gion* where the *Chigo* at times acts in the role of a *Miko*, a shaman. *Deva-Dūtaya* does not dance, neither does he play any musical instruments but in *Gion-mae* the *Chigo* uses a tiny drum and resorts to hand movements.
5. I could not notice any recitations by the *Chigo* as in the case of the *Deva-Dūtaya*; perhaps the sketchy dance movements and the playing of the tiny drum may be the substitute in the Japanese situation. There are however *norito* recitations at the ceremony by the priests.
6. These are however not big differences but only changes depending on the time and place and the occasion. The larger gamut of the performances conveys to my mind a broader identical infra-structure.

(7)

Is it possible to compare a Shinto (God) ritual with a Buddhist ritual in Sri Lanka? To answer this question it is necessary to go back once again to the question of the concept of gods in the Buddhist organization of Sri Lanka. Gods are referred to in Pali language as *Deva*. In terms of canonical Buddhism they are heavenly beings who are themselves subject to the cycle of existence. They grow old and die like humans. They cannot emancipate beings. In popular Buddhism however there is a

galaxy of gods. An imposing mountain or a huge banyan tree may be an abode of gods. There are specific places associated with gods and even demons. *Gale Bandāra* is a god of mountains and *Maha-sohon yakā* is a demon of cemeteries or *grave-yards*.

Generally gods are those with good qualities and demons cause harm. I think this belief structure basically arises from the belief in ancestors. In the Buddhist chronicle *Mahāvamsa* it is recorded that the first sermon of the first Buddhist missionary to Sri Lanka, Venerable Mahinda, in the 3rd B.C. is *petavatthu* (*Peta*—departed beings, *vatthu*—story). In the mind of the average man, for instance, a great king when he is dead goes into a happy existence. Although he is not physically seen he is ‘somewhere there’. So we notice that a kind of linkage between ‘this world’ and the ‘next world’ arises on account of this belief in ancestors. If the person who dies is one with good and noble qualities it is believed that he gains a good existence and men tend to worship him even asking his assistance. Since they are not physically present or seen it is assumed that they are living in this tree, this mountain and in such other places. So, the linkage between this world and the next world gives rise to ancestor worship and geophysical associations. In other words ancestor worship results in animism, tree worship etc. In worship it is assumed that these departed beings possess great power which is referred to in Sinhala as *ānubhāva*, *amusas* or *mahima*. Their protection is beseeched.

(8)

The personality of the Buddha has gradually been incorporated into this belief structure. Although he is not considered to be a deva in canonical Buddhism yet he has been referred to as ‘*Devānamindo*’ (The lord of the gods). The next result is that benevolent kings and heroes are either deemed to be future Buddhas or great gods. For instance king *Dutugāmanu* of Sri Lanka is considered to be the next Buddha *Maitreya*, the 25 th Buddha. I believe this last belief is religio-politically oriented. Therefore we notice in Buddhist ‘worship’ in present day Sri Lanka two levels of beliefs. Sarachchandra explains this phenomenon clearly when he says: “Instead of absorbing non-Buddhist beliefs and practices, and thereby tainting the original creed, as it did in other countries, Buddhism came to a different kind of compromise with them in Sri Lanka. The gods and demons of the folk religion were looked upon as mere instruments whose help

man could obtain in the ordinary business of day-to-day living. They were all subservient to the Buddha. Thus Buddhism did not come into conflict with the folk religion, we find it attempting, in a small way, to take the place of the folk religion in the lives of the people. Thus gods of the Hindu religion were admitted into Buddhist belief structure either in their original name or in a localized form. Indra became *Sakra*, *Vishnu* is worshipped as *Vishnu*. Anthropologists have argued that Buddhism, god worship and the folk religion are not separate traditions but an inter-related system, a well-connected unitary structure, with the Buddha at the head and varying levels of status for all other gods and demons. The gods have been used for secular benefits.

Although it may seem far-fetched, nevertheless, the concept of *Kami* and even *Oni* in Japanese religions comes closer to this definition. So we notice the following similarities:

(9)

1. They are polytheistic, ethnic, and exist mostly in the folk religion.
2. They are anthropomorphic by nature.
3. They are mostly connected with ancestor-worship.
4. They possess hyrophanic features.

Some positive examples are:

In Sri Lanka it is believed that Buddha *Maitreya* is residing in the heavenly world called *Tusitā* (*Maitreya*—*Miroku*, *Tusitā*—*Tosotsu-ten*) and the king *Dutugāmuṇu* will be born there. Ichiro Hori refers to a 'prayer' inscribed on the back of the halo of the bronze statue of the *Sakya-muni* dedicated to prince *Shotoku* wherein it is stated that the spirit of prince *Shotoku* might go to the Buddha's Pure Land (*Sukhavatī*). In the religio-political sense we see the deification of *Sugawara-no-Michizane* as *Kitano Tenjin*. At times many natural disasters such as floods, droughts etc. are associated with the wraths of gods. (*Deva Kōpaya*). Many such instances are recorded in the *Mahāvamsa*.

"When Buddhism first came to Japan, it was accepted, as in the case of other cultural importations, primarily as a complex of objects and ideas (*sūtras*, statues, doctrines, etc.,) clearly Buddhist but hardly Japanese. Yet in the process of assimilation and creative reproduction a Buddhism that is unmistakably Japanese was born." In Sri Lanka we see a situation of compromise and not necessarily absorption. Also in Shintoism gods are hardly represented through images obviously because

they are invisible beings. But in Sri Lanka they are very often shown in physical form as for instance in many paintings on Buddhist temple walls. But they do not dress like monks, rather like kings. In other words the artists conceived of them as 'super human' beings but not as Buddhas or the sangha.

(10)

Pirit ceremony reveals the process of compromise and the fact that it has been held at times of crises. The supremacy of the Buddha is evident from the fact that gods have been requested to attend the ceremony and listen to the suttas at the end of which they will shower blessings on the people. But their blessings are dependent on the strength of the chanting which alone is supreme.

Gion matsuri, it has been pointed out, was held to ward off evil in the time of epidemics during Summer. (This is only one of the stories associated with *Gion Shōja*, the earlier name for *Yasaka Jinja*. As the festival had the power to assist the people in times of crisis they started to worship the gods associated with epidemics. They symbolized the deity with a wooden pole (*hoko*) a halberd so that injurious spirits would gather at this. The character of the god later changed from an injurious being to a powerful helpful deity. In this transformation I notice that the concept of god has assumed the position of a spirit who are of use to people of this world and not necessarily beings relevant to the spiritual life or state of being after death.

The same explanation can be given to the concept of god associated with the *pirit* ceremony.

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