

A Phenomenological Study of the *Pirit* Ceremony

by

SHANTA RATNAYAKA

Department of Philosophy and Religion,

University of Georgia, U.S.A.

Chanting in one form or another is found in all the religions. However, it has been developed into an elaborate ceremony in Buddhism. Traditionalists believe that the Buddha himself inaugurated the ceremony of Sūtra-chanting and that his disciples have performed it ever since. Buddhist Sūtra-chanting is more common in Theravāda countries of Southeast Asia than in the Mahāyāna countries of the North. For several centuries in their early history the Theravādins practised group chanting of the Sūtras in order to preserve the oral tradition. Therefore, they have developed a natural tendency to chant in groups.

Buddhists believe that those who bear the Sūtras in mind are protected by the power of the Sūtras, and furthermore they believe that by chanting the Sūtras they can protect others. For this purpose the Theravādins, from their early history, have set apart a special collection of Sūtras which are known as *Paritta* Sūtras¹. The monks to the present day know them by heart, and even the laymen memorize some of the often chanted Sūtras. *Paritta* Sūtras are chanted both at homes and temples by laymen and monks. In this paper I am concentrating only on the ceremonial chanting. Although I have seen Thai, Burmese, Cambodian, and even Japanese, Mongolian, and Tibetan chantings of the Sūtras, here I will take examples from Sri Lankans alone. However, most of the elements which I examine are common to many other Buddhist communities as well.

In the native language of Sri Lanka *Paritta* is called "Pirit"; therefore, the ceremony at which *Paritta* Sūtras are chanted is known as the "Pirit Ceremony". The usual pattern of the Ceremony is to have the monks chant the Sūtras while the laymen perform the rest of it. Occasionally laymen would perform a Pirit Ceremony by themselves. Depending on the significance and the motive of the given occasion, the Pirit Ceremony can last either for a couple of hours, one whole night, one day and two nights, or seven days and seven nights. An exceptional Pirit Ceremony like that of the Holy City may last even one month.

SHANTA RATNAYAKA

The Pirit Ceremony is very popular among Buddhists because it fulfills an essential religious need of man. Buddhists designate it as the “*dharma yāga*”² which indicates that it is a spiritual appeal for protection from calamities, fears, and ailments. On the other hand it is a shower of blessings and a means of prosperity. Hindus have performed their *yāgas* since the Vedic time. Jews, Christians, and Muslims make their ceremonial appeals because of similar reasons. All religions that exist in the world have ceremonies parallel to the Pirit Ceremony as this human and religious need is universal.

The Holy Pirit Book, Buddha’s relics, and the monks are indispensable and they are the special characteristics of a regular Pirit Ceremony. Nevertheless, there are other aspects of it which deserve the close inquiry of the modern scholars. In this article I will not call attention to the major Buddhist features of the Pirit Ceremony but instead investigate some of its aspects which are of universal significance.

The first aspect of the Pirit Ceremony is the pirit-*mandapa*, or the consecrated place for pirit chanting. This place has been dedicated for the Ceremony and no other activities are allowed inside the *mandapa* until the Ceremony is over. Cleanliness is maintained here in every possible way and only the required persons are allowed to enter it during the Ceremony. Any interference of an unworthy soul could pollute the sacred *mandapa* and consequently the Ceremony would be less effective. Although the sacredness of this place is well maintained during the Pirit Ceremony, when the Ceremony is over that place is no longer considered to be sacred.

In order to explain the religious phenomena of the pirit *mandapa*, we must explore briefly the significance of the “sacred place”. Twentieth century phenomenologists³ believe that the religious man cannot live without a sacred place. He will feel empty and experience meaninglessness without being close to a sacred place at least from time to time. A religious ceremonial spot is well guarded against any possible desecration. When a Vedic *yāga* was in progress outcastes were not allowed to come near least the sacred place would be contaminated. Likewise, God of the *Old Testament* spoke from a bush and said: “Moses, Moses! . . . Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”⁴ Thus the place where Hebrews met their God became a holy ground and was not to be contaminated. Even when a local deity is worshiped today in Sri Lanka, people may go to the ceremonial ground only after they have applied lime on their heads and have taken a bath in order to purify themselves from pollutions of any sort. This is done so that they will not abuse, but respect, the sacred place.

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE PIRIT CEREMONY

Even for a small localised religion, possibly limited to one country, a main holy spot develops from one of the places of worship. Likewise in a worldwide religion one of its holy places becomes the holiest for the whole world. Mecca is the holiest place on the earth for Muslims, as is Jerusalem for Jews and Christians. For Hindus, Mount Kailās is not only the highest point of the world, but also the dwelling place of God Shiva. Buddha Gaya, being the place where the Buddha won his battle against Māra and also attained Enlightenment, stands to be the most victorious and unshakable ground for the Buddhists.

Due to the extraordinary significance given, each of these places is considered, by the appropriate religion to be the Centre of the World. In Buddhist mythology Buddha Gaya was the spot where the first lotus seed took root and around which the earth gradually took its shape. Jews and Christians teach that Jerusalem is the “naval” of the earth. The sacredness of the centre of the earth is recognised by the sky and heaven as well. For example Muslims believe that Mohamed ascended to heaven from the Kaaba and even a bird does not fly over it. Buddhists believe that all the deities of the universe assembled at Buddha Gaya to pay homage to the Buddha at his Enlightenment, nevertheless, deities do not travel over the Bodhi tree. Mount Kailās is the place closest to heaven, and it was from Jerusalem that the Son of God ascended to heaven. Furthermore these religions believe that at one time or another there was a deluge in the world; but that even during that time their Centre of the World was not flooded.

The Centre of the World is always marked with the Cosmic Tree or Pillar. In Hindu mythology the great *Jambu* tree stands at the Centre. As a result their ancient world was called *Jambudvīpa*. The ancient Bodhi tree stands firmly at Buddha Gaya. In Mecca the Kabba itself looks a pillar. Jerusalem is marked with the Tree of Life and the Holy Cross.

When a sacred place is built by a religious community anywhere in the world it is modelled after the Holiest Place, i. e., the Centre of the World. A Buddhist temple is usually located at the centre of the village (or villages). An old preaching hall (*dharma mandapa*) has four wings which signify the four directions of the world. The Bodhi tree of the temple is the representative of the Bodhi Tree of Gaya. The holiest part of some Hindu Temples is a reproduction of Mount Kailās; at other temples that place is occupied by the pillar shaped *Shiva linga*. The Muslim mosque has its niche resembling a column on the side which is facing the direction of Mecca. And at the Christian church the holiest place bears the cross, a model carried over from the Holy Cross of their Centre of the World.

SHANTA RATNAYAKA

The symbolism explained here is very obvious in the sacred place of the Pirit Ceremony, i. e., pirit *mandapa*. The most significant spot is a reproduction of the Centre of the World; here the particular symbol of our concern is called "*indrakīla*." A sapwood tree, approximately five to six feet tall, covered with a new white cloth, is erected and firmly tied to the two main chairs of the *mandapa*. These two chairs are always occupied throughout the ceremony by a couple of chanting monks so that the *indrakīla* will never be out of contact.

Although the *indrakīla* represents the Cosmic Tree of the Centre of the World it does not have to be erected exactly at the geometrical centre of the pirit *mandapa*. Neither is the holiest centre of the earth necessarily the geographical centre of the country in which it is located. Kailas, Buddha Gaya, Kaaba, and Jerusalem are some examples. Chinese people believed that their capital was the exact centre of the universe even though it was not the geographical centre of China.

The practice of erecting the *indrakīla* goes back to the establishment of a capital or city in the ancient time. *Indrakīla* was the sacred and historical centre of the city. The column stood there firmly as the symbol of the unshakable city. This firmness of the *indrakīla* is again possible because it is the representative of the Cosmic Tree of the Centre of the World. Establishment of a city was a religious act in the ancient time. Gods created the cosmos and man imitated gods in creating cities, sanctuaries, and homes. *Indrakīla* of the city was man's imitation of the Centre of the World and the four quarters of the city molded the microcosm.

Just as the city is a replica of the cosmos so is the ceremonial place. I have seen in Indian museums heavy wooden poles which were erected in the Vedic time at sacrificial grounds. This pole which is known as *yāgastambha* symbolizes the Cosmic Tree, and represents the Centre of the World; being so, it brings the ceremony mystical power. Citing the *satapatha Brahmana*, Mircea Eliade makes a significant observation of the sacrificial ground thus:

... the building of the altar was conceived as a creation of the world. The water with which the clay was mixed was the same as the primeval waters: the clay forming the altar's foundation, the earth; the side walls the surrounding atmosphere and so on. The altar thus becomes a microcosm existing in a mystical space and time quite distinct in nature from profane space and time. To speak of building an altar is, in the same breath to speak of a repetition of the creation of the world⁵.

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE PIRIT CEREMONY

This universal religious act is repeated at the Pirit Ceremony by erecting the *indrakīla* and making it the holy centre of the *mandapa*. It is from the *indrakīla* that all of the sacred threads are spread to the four directions. These pirit-threads are held by the people who attend the ceremony. The Buddhists believe that just as electricity runs through the wires, the blessing and protecting power which is generated at the centre is transmitted through these threads to those who hold them. The four directions of the pirit *mandapa* represent the four quarters of the cosmos. Therefore, oil lamps are lit and other symbolic ornaments (e. g., *punkalas*) are kept on the four sides of the *mandapa*. An elaborate pirit *mandapa* bears even large weapons on its four sides as if to guard the four directions of the world against the evil spirits⁶.

Our next attraction of the pirit *mandapa* is the herb hung from its canopy. Green leaves and colourful twigs hanging all over the *mandapa* seem a simple decoration to the ceremony. But when the religious behaviour of mankind is examined, the green branches over the *mandapa* become much more than just ornamental.

The branches hung over the sacred place together with the firmly fixed *indrakīla* represent the Cosmic Tree. A similar practice is seen in the May Festival of Europe. Here the May-pole parallels the *indrakīla*. Though the pine tree is cut and most of its branches are lopped off in the ceremonial process of erecting the May-pole, other kinds of twigs are hung on the doors and windows during the May Festival. Even the May King⁷ is decorated with green leaves when he is taken in the procession.

The use of branches in religious ceremonies is seen throughout the world. In Esthonia, as Sir James Frazer describes: "nine kinds of herbs culled on the Eve or the Day of St. John are sometimes inserted in the roof or hung up on the walls of the house Bunches of the plants are also hung about the house to keep off evil spirits."⁸ In India during Hindu festivals mango and other branches are hung over the sacred spot. In China and Japan, Taoist and Shinto ceremonies add the essential item of purification by walking under the mugwort branches or wreaths of certain herbs hung in the sacred place. In the West, mistletoe is a mystical twig with various powers attributed to it. Due to this reason the mistletoe is known as the "golden bough." Quite similarly all the twigs hung at the Pirit Ceremony are well known as medicinal, rejuvenating, healing, and purifying.

The branches hung for the Ceremony must be live ones. Even the *indrakīla* is never made of a dead tree. It is always a fresh sap-tree with life force in it. In India and Africa sap filled trees are considered to be related to the Mother Goddess, the giver of life, and they are used in religious ceremonies. Because the *indrakīla* is the replica of the Cosmic Tree and the Centre

SHANTA RATNAYAKA

of the World, it must uphold life. It was from the Cosmic Tree that the life of the cosmos, life of plants, and the life of human and animal beings spread. Just as the whole world receives life force from the Cosmic Tree, the participants receive spiritual and healing life force from the *indrakīla* through its pirit-threads.

Life, death, and renewal of life of the world are the major themes that run through the religious symbol of the Cosmic Tree. The *Kātha Upanishad* teaches this as follows:

This is the ancient Asvattha tree whose roots are above and whose branches (spread) below. That is verily the pure, that is Brahman, and that is also called the immortal. In that rest all the worlds, and none can transcend it. Verily this is that.

The Prāna being present this whole universe comes out of Him and vibrates with in Him. He is a great terror like the raised thunderbolt. Those who know this become immortal⁹.

Any model of the Cosmic Tree also reinforces the theme of life and immortal power of existence. The following example is from Islam:

. . . the Moslem ascetic who founded El-Hemel at the end of the sixteenth century stopped beside a spring for the night, and struck his stick in the earth. Next day he tried to pull it out to go on his way but found that it had taken root and was shooting buds. He saw in this an indication of the will of God and made his dwelling on the spot.¹⁰

The Christian symbol of eternal life is the cross. The cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified was made out of a tree which had a divine origin and grew up at the Centre of the World.¹¹ Since Christ was resurrected, the cross of the Christian church is the symbol of eternal life. In comparative religious studies it is a symbol of the Cosmic Tree as well.

Another feature of the Pirit Ceremony is pirit-water. A pot of water is kept in front of the chanters through out the ceremony. At the end the water is sprinkled on the participants' heads. Most of the participants sip the pirit-water, and some of them even carry it away to preserve it in order to sprinkle on one's head during an illness or in general for the protection and the blessings.

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE PIRIT CEREMONY

The usage of pirit-water is as old as the Pirit Ceremony itself. It is said that the Buddha used pirit-water at the city of Vaisāli in order to protect the city from disease, devils, and drought.¹² English speaking people call pirit-water "holy water" because pirit-water for the Buddhists is like holy water for people of some of the other religions.

From ancient times Hindus have used holy water in their rituals. Water of the River Ganges is very sacred to them. A bath in the Sacred River purifies one from his sins. At the Kumbha Mela many people die from struggling to have a bath at the auspicious time. Even dead bodies are washed before cremation in the Sacred River as a means of sending the dead ones to heaven. This holy water is carried to Hindu homes and kept much as pirit-water is kept in Buddhist homes. Once a year, a pot of water is brought from a near-by river to the Hindu temple and is preserved until the same day of the next year. In Sri Lanka this ritual is known as *Diyakepeema*."

Muslims purify themselves with running water at the entrance of the mosque, and it must be done according to the prescribed method. The Shinto religion also has a great respect for sacred baths. Christian Baptism is another well known ceremony in which water is used for a sacramental purpose. Every Christian must be baptized and it is believed that Baptism regenerates the person who is baptized. Even Jesus Christ began his ministry after he was baptised with water. By immersion or sprinkling of holy water on one's head one is purified from his original sin. This signifies new birth or receiving a new life in God. Without this spiritual birth of Baptism one's biological birth has no meaning. Such is the grandeur of water in religion. Eliade states:

Symbol of creation, harbour of all seed, water becomes the supreme magic and medicinal substance; it heals, it restores youth, it ensures eternal life Living water, the fountains of youth, the Water of Life, and the rest, are all mythological formulae for the same metaphysical and religious reality: life, strength and eternity are contained in water.¹³

Life began in water; both Eastern and Western myths reveal that at the beginning of the world there was water. In some mythologies even the Cosmic Tree is preceded by water. Primordial water was the fountainhead of the entire life process in the world. The modern scientific theory of evolution has found no other answer to the origin of life. Mythologically that all pervading water was the source of the world.

Pirit-water represents the creative, primordial, fresh water of the world. In order to resemble the newly formed earth a new earthen pot to hold pirit-water is used during the Pirit Ceremony. A new minute well is dug especially

SHANTA RATNAYAKA

to obtain fresh water for the Ceremony. Both the well from which the water is taken and the pot holding the water have never been used before; therefore, the water of the Pirit Ceremony is new and it resembles the primordial water which was the source of both of the world and life. By the power of Pirit, that pure water is made more sacred, creative, and regenerative.

Furthermore, the association of the Cosmic Tree with the primordial water is imitated by the association of the *indrakīla* with pirit-water. It is obvious that the outcome of water-tree association is nourishment, flowering, and fruitfulness. According to the *Purānas* when the cosmos was filled with water the lotus grew at the Centre of the World, and on the lotus, Brahma the Creator appeared. Gradually the other gods, men, and the rest of the world came about. Judeo-Christian myths display the water-tree association of the Creation as : “The tree of life also in the midst of paradise: and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. And a river went out of the place of pleasure to water paradise, which from thence is divided into four heads.”¹⁴ This portrayal of the paradise resembles the mythical Himalayas with its *Jambu* tree, four lakes, and the four rivers which run out of the four lakes. By re-creating the original water-tree association, the Pirit Ceremony makes its world renewed, resanctified, and flourished.

The last item of our concern is the pirit-thread. Each participant of the Ceremony wears a piece of the pirit-thread which had been attached to, and distributed from, the *indrakīla* and the pot of pirit-water.

When the Ceremony is over people depart from the sacred place, the *pirit-mandapa*. In the spiritual sense this is a departure from the Centre of the world, the most holy place on the earth, and the spot from which the life and regeneration began. So understandably the participant feels nostalgic about the consecrated place and the sacred objects, i. e., the Cosmic Tree, life giving water and other sacred objects. The piece of the thread, which was once in unity with the sacred objects, and which is carried from the sacred place is a substitute for them, and it relieves the bearer from his nostalgia.

This behaviour of the religious man is seen on other occasions as well. On the pilgrimage to Buddha Gaya a Buddhist is eager to pick up a leaf from the premise of the original Bodhi tree. Pilgrims of the other faiths acquire similar relics from their holy places. The religious man always has the inclination to live near the sacred place. Again, as sacred place is a simulation of the Centre of the World the religious man's actual desire is to live near the Centre of the World, which is the victorious and holiest place on the earth, and the closest spot to heaven. When it seems impracticable to live at the holy spot he contents himself with a relic obtained from the sacred place. In the case of the Pirit Ceremony a piece of pirit-thread serves the purpose.

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE PIRIT CEREMONY

Pirit runs through the pirit-thread, therefore, the protective power of Pirit is carried with the thread. The renewal of the participant's holy life is sealed with the pirit-thread. Usually either one's wrist or neck is circled with the pirit-thread. By doing this, it is believed that, one's life force becomes coiled with the sacred thread which, for the bearer, now represents Pirit, the sacred place, sacred objects, the Tree of Life (Cosmic Tree), rejuvenating herbs, and the life giving water.

Footnotes

1. The holy book of this collection is the *Catubhanavara Pali*.
2. K. Prajnasara, *Pali Sinhala Pirit Pota* (Colombo : McCallum Publisher, 1956), p. XXI.
3. See Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. by W. R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1957).
4. Exodus 3 : 4 - 5.
5. Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. by Rosemary Sheed (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1974), p. 372. (Hereinafter referred to as *Comparative Religion*).
6. The display of weapons at the Pirit Ceremony is not a new development. The ancient Commentaries themselves have recommended it. See *The Sumangalavilasini* (Colombo: The Tripitaka Publication Press, 1918), p. 707.
7. A young man who plays an important role in the May Festival is called the "May-King," and he parallels in many respects with the *Devadūtaya* of the Seven Day Pirit Ceremony.
8. Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough, Part VII; Balder the Beautiful*, Vol. II, (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1955), pp. 53-54.
9. *Kāthopanisad* VI. 1-2. Translation from the Sri Ramakrishna Math Edition, 1956.
10. *Essais de Folklore Biblique*, Paris, 1923, p. 105, cited by Eliade, *Comparative Religion*, p. 370.
11. Eliade, *Comparative Religion*, p. 293.
12. *Paramatthajotika; The Commentary to the Suttanipata* (Colombo : The Tripitika Publication Press, 1920), p. 205.
13. Eliade, *Comparative Religion*, p. 193.
14. Genesis 2: 9 - 10.