

Paimpath Mangalya: The Crowning Glory of The Female Dancer

A coming-of-age recital of the famous Ves dance of the Kandyan Dance genre is a grandiose display of religious dance performed to the musical beat of drums, chants, and rhythmic gestures. It's more than a stamping of feet. It's a window to the soul, values, beliefs, and way of life of the natives that once enriched this land that we call Sri Lanka.

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Photography Sujith Heenatigala.



Seeking blessings from the Buddha prior to performing Paimpath Mangalya.

For the ordinary people of yore, dance and religious rituals were interwoven. They were part of daily life where every milestone and misfortune displayed piety and propitiation to

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the divine. The Ves dance belonging to the Kandyan Dance form, originating from the hill country of Sri Lanka, burst forth from the grassroots. It is a Shantikarma ritual known as Kohomba Kankariya. The Kohomba Kankariya is a rich display of mastery in mudras of worship to the throbbing sounds of the drums invoking the pantheon of gods seeking recourse from ill health and the travails of life.

The Mahavamsa chronicles a history of song and dance among women and men dating thousands of years back to Vijaya, Kuveni, and the Anuradhapura period. Dance in later times had become a creation and an expression by ordinary people who used it to celebrate religion, worship, mark good times and ward off the bad. One of them was the famous Ves dance. It was brought from the village foreground to mainstream religious performances in 1919 when it was first performed in the annual Dalada Perahera.

As the Ves dance and its preeminence as a form of Kandyan Dance gained momentum in 1932, the first Ves Mangalya, known as the Ves Bendeema, the coming-of-age recital for male Ves dancers, was introduced.

The Ves Mangalya for women is the Paimpath Mangalya. This ritual graduation ceremony for women is a gift from the teacher to a pupil who has reached a point of maturity in mastering the Ves dance. The graduation ceremony initiates a pupil as a virtuoso of the performing art. Customarily, the Paimpatha, a headgear, consists of seven silver spokes that rise like the rays of the sun when worn by male Ves dancers.

The pupil crowned with the Paimpatha, irrespective of age, is an accomplished adherent of the Ves dance.

For women, the Paimpatha acts as the primary headgear, an intricate tiara feminized to resemble the sun's rays. The pupil crowned with the Paimpatha, irrespective of age, is an accomplished adherent of the Ves dance.

The rituals are sacrosanct and preparations for the glorious day of coronation are elaborate. It requires dedication and sacrifice. The pupils getting ready for the crowning are not only mature dancers but are prepared to come of age through a sacred process of denial and adherence to a holy life.

The ceremonial day is set carefully, an auspicious day determined according to the horoscope of the candidate or candidates.

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Further, the teacher begins practicing for the ceremony on an auspicious day and time per the pupils' horoscope. The preparation period varies between two and three months. The first day of practice begins with much fanfare, following poojas and offerings to the Buddha and gods Sarasvati, Natraj, and Ganesh, invoking their blessings for a fruitful time of preparation. The rigorous preparation includes a vegetarian diet and a life of sanctity where the candidate chooses to live virtuously. Buddhist worship is central during this time; hence the teacher and the pupils participate in a Bodhi Pooja, invoking blessings for a successful outcome.

As placing the Paimpatha on the head of a dancer symbolizes the pinnacle in one's training, the candidate is expected to match that with a great sense of spiritual maturity by engaging in poojas in the temple, denying evil, and living peaceably with all.

The day before the ceremony, at dusk, the candidates are taken to the temple to perform a Bodhi Pooja and a ritual known as "Abharana Pe Kirima." This ritual is performed by a "Gurunnanse," a master of ceremonies. Here the dancers' regalia is placed at an altar amid the recital of stanzas by drummers and dancers invoking the gods to eliminate any malevolence. The meaning of the ritual and the term 'Pe Kirima' is to single out the ceremonial objects in an offering to the deities before their use the following day. The ceremony interacts with the gods, invoking their blessings upon the regalia and for a successful recital the next day.

On the auspicious day of the recital, the performers rise early morning, as early as two, for a ritualistic bath. Following the cleansing ritual, accompanied by their parents and teacher, the girls dressed in white head to the temple with a pot of water placed at the Buddha's foot. The regalia kept in the temple the previous evening is shifted to the Buddha's chamber. The graduating pupils get ready in the temple. The crowning glory of placing the Paimpatha on the girls' heads is done at an auspicious time by the teacher or assistant teachers amid the chanting of pirith by Buddhist monks and beating drums. The girls are dressed by others and are not allowed to see themselves in the mirror.

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Bodhi pooja is done a day prior to the ceremony.



Worshipping the relics (Dhathun Wahanse).

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Abharana Pe Kirima ritual displays the dancers' regalia at an altar with dancers and drummers invoking the gods to eliminate malevolence.

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Atamagala rite performed to receive blessings.

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Ceremonial objects are worshipped before crowning.



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The crowning of the Paimpath by the teachers reflects the mastering of Ves dance.

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Receiving blessings from the teachers.



Wahantharawa, reminiscent of the puberty rituals.

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Symbol of fertility; the suckling cow.

Dressed in all their finery, the girls come out covered in white cloth, reminiscent of the rituals of puberty. They are brought before the finest symbol of fertility and prosperity, a suckling cow, also an auspicious symbol.

The list gets interesting as the girls are made to strike at the bark of a jackfruit tree, a tree that emits milk when cut. Following these auspicious rituals, it's time for the girls to look at themselves, which is a three-step rite, first trying to get a glimpse of themselves in a basin of milk, followed by a basin of water, and finally through a mirror. The basin used for this purpose is a 'Koraha', a traditional Sri Lankan kitchen utensil. Their faces are covered in white cloth again, and the girls are assisted in carrying the water-filled clay pots placed at the Buddha's foot to the Bodhi Tree. Here amid the chanting of stanzas to erase maleficent forces, they empty half of the water at the Holy Tree, then dash the half-filled clay pot on the ground.

Resplendent in their finery, the headgear standing out like the rising sun through the misty mountains, the girls walk up to the specially built altar decorated with the inner stem of the banana tree and Habarala leaves (*Alocasia macrorrhiza*). The girls offer baskets of fruits to the gods inviting them and seeking consent to begin their ceremonial recital. The recital

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begins with a worship performance amid incantation of stanzas to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. This is followed by a recitation to the parents and the teacher before other ceremonial performances begin. The guru decides the ceremonial recitals and often numbers around three to five versions belonging to the Kohomba Kankariya, an extensive repertoire of 84 ceremonials.

Kuveni Asne; a dance performance. The revival and advent of the Ves dance into a gamut of social settings provides a window to a history that sustained people through the theatre of life.

After the ceremony, once the audience has left, the long line of purification rituals culminates with the Dehi-Kapima or lime-cutting rite. It is done to ward off any remaining malevolent elements and to beat the evil eye.

The revival and advent of the Ves dance into a gamut of social settings provides a window to a history that sustained people through the theatre of life. To our ancestors, the Ves dance was therapeutic. In today's parlance, it oozed positivity. Witnessing the sanctity of an old ritual sustained to this day tells a lot about the importance of dance in creating a histrionic and pulsating disruption in people's lives to bring joy in the end.



Symbol of fertility; striking of the bark of a jackfruit tree

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Auspicious rituals are carried out in three steps by looking at a bowl of milk and water.



Taking a glimpse in the mirror for the first time.

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Dashing the clay pot to chase away maleficent forces.



Lighting the oil lamp at the 'Ailaya', the specially built and decorated altar.

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Offering fruits to the gods.



Invoking blessings from the gods.

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Performing Mangalam (the auspicious first dance).



The drummers pay respect to the gods.

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The dancers perform in synchronization with the beats of the drummers.

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Kuveni Asne; a dance performance.



Dehi Kapima; lime cutting to ward off evil eyes.



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