Rituals of Exorcism

Posted on

Maureen Seneviratne



Kapuyukkariya ceremony of exorcism practiced in Sri Lanka from ancient times.

Belief in the power of spirits to control human destiny and the awe of the unknown are very strong among Sri lankans even today. Newspapers advertise charms and amulets to ward off ill-luck, cure illness, bring success in examinations and business, and win the hearts of those you wish to love. While Buddhism, the religion practised by the majority, eschews such belief, most Buddhists involve the Hindu deities in worship, and the influence of planetary forces are often matters to be

reckoned with in the daily lives of most Sri Lankans.

It is an old tradition among Sri Lankans that misfortune in whatever form it comes is attributed to specific forces of evil, or the unfavourable conjunction of planets ruling one’s life. Prolonged illness, failure of crops, loss of property, lack of success in business or profession, obstacles to marriage, unhappiness with children and the machinations of rivals are all areas which most Sri Lankans would believe are matters where extra-human assistance is necessary. Any or all of these situations could be attributed to demons and evil spirits, or the planets, or both.

Ceremonies of exorcism and propitiation have, therefore, been practised in Sri Lanka from the most ancient times. In fact, the chants of these rituals indicate that their origins reach far back into pre-history and the days of tree, rock and spring worship.

The exorcist is a respected person in the Sri Lankan rural community, as he is also a much sought after person in the urban sectors. The rituals of exorcism practised here are many and varied, often colourful and entertaining. They vary from simple “thovil” ceremonies performed at the home or premises of a person, family or business affected by misfortune and desirous of obtaining relief through divine intervention, to “bali” or sacrificial ceremonies to propitiate specific demons, and “sanni” or rituals of cure performed if a person is affected by illness caused by the 18 malefic influences identified in Sri Lankan folk tradition. There are rituals of exorcism and cleansing done for whole villages, and still carried out in some urban pockets in and near Colombo, as well as large ceremonies in which even the government participates intended to bring blessings on the country, its leaders and specific development projects.

Exorcism rituals can be dedicated to the “grahas” or planetary deities; are performed to placate and supplicate the “sanni yakkhas” or class of spirits, eighteen in number, who inflict incurable maladies on human beings; and may invoke the blessings and benison of such powerful gods and goddesses as Kadira, Vishnu, and Pattini of the Hindu pantheon venerated for centuries in Sri Lanka. The most commonly held are the “bali” rituals: the term “bali” itself meaning a “sacrifice” (pooja). It is a ceremony held, as elaborately as a man can afford, to ward off and destroy the evil that seems to remorselessly dog him, his business life and property or his health and that of his family. It is basically a propitiation ritual and conducted by the “bali edura” or exorcist. The “bali” ritual is in essence also a social event in a village or small town today, though in the hey-day of these cults it

might have been performed in a royal palace. The “bali” statues are moulded out of clay, brightly painted and put on the main altar and signify the particular planetary deity to be invoked. Torches are lit as are coconut oil lamps; today one would have electric lights and jets powdered resin burning in bursts of flame and smoke from his torch. The drummer suits his drumming to the tempo of the dance, from a slow beating to a quick tattoo, just sufficiently, not unduly loud. The chants and the dance continue non-stop until midnight. The chanting of the songs in rites of exorcism now assume a more resonant tone to the throbbing of the drums. The chanting proceeds till dawn, when the final stage is reached in the proceedings.

Dancing, frenzied in the finale of the dance, at the close of the accelerated steps the dancer falls in a trance. His assistant advances, places an ash pumpkin on his chest which he cuts in two with a stroke of the knife. Possessed of the very spirit, the dancer rises and runs amok pulling down the altar and offerings…continuing to do so in rhythmic steps, throwing handfuls of resin against his lighted torch… At the conclusion of the rites it is believed the evil spirits have departed and the patient subject and object of the ceremonial rises from his couch, weary with lack of sleep, but fortified with the feeling it has done with a world of good (From Sinhala Natum: Raghavan).

The sanni exorcisms were evolved in the south and are part of the Ruhuna or Southern repertoire of folk beliefs and practices. The sanni dances are exorcist ritual performances, 18 in number, depicting 18 malefic influences. Each sanni is depicted by a typical mask. These are carved out of wood and express in visual form the craftsman’s conception of each malady. For instance, the kana sanniya (blindness) is shown by an expressionless face with vacant eyes. Exorcism ceremonies which include ancient and traditional masked dances consist in invoking each yakka (devil) propitiating and gratifying him with appropriate offerings. The sanni dancer usually has a weird appearance, painting himself as he does with black resin paint all over his body: all this has an almost hypnotising effect on the affected person.

The “sanni” exorcisms are held in a specially prepared shed in the three watches of the night. Several dancers take part, armed with incense burners, torches and vessels containing water mixed with turmeric, pots bearing coconut’ flower , king coconuts and betel. All these are auspicious and purifying agents. Some dancers bear sticks. These may signify power over the forces of evil. “It is believed that the performance of the “Dahata Sanniya”, as it is called, has a magical influence not only over the patient but also over persons who witness it.” (Raghavan).

> All through the night he dances, throwing in the process handfuls of powdered resin burning in bursts
> of flame and smoke from his touch. The drummer suits his drumming to the tempo of the dance, from a slow beating to a quick tattoo, just sufficiently, not unduly loud.

As for the “Kohomba Kankariya”, it is the most ancient exorcism ritual of all and dates back to the very beginnings of recorded history in Sri Lanka – at least 2,500 years. The dance, it is believed, was revealed by the gods themselves to mortals in dire despair. The first performance, so legend has it, was held to effect a cure for the king, Panduvasdeva, afflicted by an incurable malady (466 – 415 B.C.), as a result of “Divi Dos” (an evil caused by a leopard which was the form taken by the witch princess Kuveni, discarded mistress of his forbear, King Vijaya, to revenge herself upon her faithless over). The “Divi Dos” however, most afflicted Vijaya’s successor and nephew, Panduvasadeva. The deity of the Kohomba (Margosa) tree is invoked and supplicated in a most elaborate manner in the performance of this exorcism cult, in which scholars have seen traces of ancient, primitive beliefs and practices.

The premier role is played, or rather danced, by the yakdessas or leaders, the Yes dancers, who play a significant role. Troops of other dancers take part, all representing minor deities. It is also significant that the Kohomba trees – its leaves, bark and roots – have been used in the making of medicines against infectious diseases from times immemorial and that the affliction suffered by king Panduvasadeva was some sort of skin disease akin to smallpox or a malignant skin rash. The series of dances in the “Kohomba Kankariya” ritual are magnificent to behold and have a depth of symbolic meaning. The rituals are long-drawn-out over several days and the artefacts needed are so many and so expensive that the performance is a rare event today. Certain dances, songs and chants from the main ceremony have been adapted for the Kandy Perehera ritual held annually in the full moon of July/August. It is important to note that this perehera is also a ritual purification ceremony and has a long history of enactment from pre-Buddhist times. Several other ritualistic exorcisms exist in Sri Lankan culture such as that dedicated to the goddess Pattini and the yearly rituals at Kataragama, where god Skanda-Kadira is invoked to bring blessings upon the land and its people as much as by individuals seeking succour and protection from evil influences that beset them.





A Thovil – performed at a home affected by misfortune.