

### **The performing Nature of Sri Lankan Buddhist Ritual: *Sanniyakuma*.**

The present paper aims to examine the performing nature of *Sanniyakuma*, one of major the Buddhist healing rituals in Sri Lanka. One significant aspect of its performance is to re-establish the sacrosanct atmosphere within the profane by creating a supra-mundane status with the supremacy of Buddhist teaching (*Buddhadhrama*) to eliminate the distresses of the society or individuals. Its main objective is to stamp out the evil effects caused by the demon *Kola Sanniya*, and his company of eighteen who have the capacity to grip the society or individual by transmitting diseases i.e. Chicken pox, Measles, insanity, infertility etc., The confidence of the Sri Lankan Buddhist behind the ritual is to control and eliminate the influence of certain unseen supernatural or non-human beings that are not benevolent for the society, by the supreme power of the Buddha's teaching. Thus, they perform a *Sanniyakuma* to re-establish the truth and power of the Buddha.

The consequence of the performance in this regard is the reinstatement of sacred, pure, and virgin (occurring for the first time) soil where the Buddha pronounced the supremacy of the Buddhist teaching (*buddhadharma*) within the profane space, and to re-assure its true nature by means of eliminating the evil circumstances with the sacred words of the Buddha. The objective is the re-actualization of the absolute reality, and restoration of the primordial time and space, where it originally took place during the Buddha's time. Emphasis of the ritual legends, its acts and customs, and the performing nature is the re-vitalization of the original occurrence where the Buddha eliminated the evil powers of non-human/super human beings by his supreme power and re-assurance of the original status of the society or the individual. Thus, this paper focuses to examine the performing nature of *Sanniyakuma* that aims to re-establish a sacred space and time within that of profane nature.

**Key words:** *Sanniyakuma*, rituals, Folk Drama, Healing rituals, Buddhist rituals

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**SANNIYAKUMA**

THE BUDDHIST HEALING RITUAL IN SRI LANKA  
where sacrality prevails within the profane

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the performing nature of the Sri Lankan Buddhist healing ritual *Sanniyakuma*, in re-establishing the sacred within the profane in the society with the supremacy of Buddhist teaching (*Buddhadharma*). *Sanniyakuma* is performed by the Sri Lankan Buddhist community to eradicate the evil effects spread by the demon named *Kola Sanniya*, and his company of eighteen upon the society and its individuals. The objective of the ritual is to eliminate such malevolent effects by proclaiming the Buddha's teaching, and establishing one's faith in the true nature of his words.

The significance of the performance is to transform the profane ground back to its original sacred, pure, and virgin (occurring for the first time) soil through ritual acts that affirm the true nature of the *Buddhadharma*, thus eliminating the evil circumstances with Buddha's sacred words. Its goal is to re-actualize the absolute reality and to restore the primordial time which originally occurred during the Buddha's time. The ritual legends, acts and customs, arena, and the performance are the elements of re-vitalizing the original occurrence when the Buddha eliminated the evil powers of non-human/beings by his supremacy. In so doing, the performers re-assure the original status of the society, which enabled the Buddha to convert evil beings to the obedient followers of Buddhism, thus eliminating the malevolent effects. Thus, this study focuses to examine the performing nature of *Sanniyakuma* to re-establish the sacred within the profane space and time.

## **Introduction**

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In a recent article, John Halverson mentions, the *Sanniyakuma* in Sri Lanka as something not having its sacrality in its context and in the ritual place.

“In the first act, some time after sunset, an exorcist (*Edura*) begins to establish ritual authority and place. In prayer and dance he worships the Triple Gem and the gods; in so doing, he allies himself with the power and the authority of the sacred. The ritual area is defined by his movements and purified by fire throwing and censuring... It is not quite a “sacred place” as the term has been given currency by Eliade and van der Leeuw – a place that it ritually “found” a topocosm or image of the universe, and a tabu area. The ritual area of the *Sanniyakuma* has none of these features. With its concourse of stray dogs and vagrant pedestrians, it particularly has no suggestion of the tabu. Nor does it, I think, quite fit the conception of Durkheim and Eliade of the generally sacred as the non-profane. The idea is vague enough in any case, but here the ritual area is set off both from the everyday world outside the circle and the supernatural world on the other side of the *vidiya* and thus become a third world, a meeting ground where the other two worlds come together under controlled conditions”

In this definition, Halverson explicitly recognizes a specific area called a ‘third world’ in the ritual arena of the *Sanniyakuma*, where the exorcist performs. In spite of a particular ‘third world,’ I argue that the entire ritual space in *Sanniyakuma* can be recognized as a sacred place in

the middle of the profane where the ritual takes place, revealing its own mythical time. And I propose that the ritual space of *Sanniyakuma* has its own taboos which sanctify the ritual space from the outer world thereby establishing a sacred place within the everyday life.

If I simply consider the followings: 1) myths and legends, 2) the ritual performance (the structure), 3) the arena (*Vidiya*), 4) the taboos governing the ritual and the arena, and 5) the liminal nature of the entire ritual as a place where the power is transformed and regenerated through the ritual acts of the exorcist, it is apparent that the ritual itself reveals its own sacredness and a consistency between the primordial time and space emphasized by Mircea Eliade. “In fact, the idea of a sacred place involves the notion of repeating the primeval hierophany which consecrated the place marking it off, by cutting it off from the profane place.” This notion of the ‘sacred place’ is evidently identified through the construction and the consecration of the space, the ritual enactments which take place in the *Vidiya*, and taboos persisted within and during the ritual; unfortunately, this is what Halverson fails to spot in his observation.

Apparently, all such implications are surrounded by a particular mythical environment which creates the perception of its origin of a sacred place through the primeval time for the performers and the participants. “This is the basis of innumerable ritual systems as well; in general, of the hopes all religious men entertain in regard to personal salvation.” The idea of personal salvation is essentially the initial goal of *Sanniyakuma* through the involvement of the orthodox Buddhism. Therefore, it is important to resolve the problem of the “third world” and redefine the idea as identified by Halverson.

### **Sanniyakuma- the Buddhist healing ritual**

Before moving into the real contradiction of Halverson’s explanation, let me brief the myth and ritual history of *Sanniyakuma*. The popular Buddhist belief of the performance of

*Sanniyakuma* is the elimination of mal effects caused by *Kola Sanniya* and his group of eighteen *Yakshas* and the *Mahasona*, the great cemetery demon. It is performed to cure a person gripped by disease, insanity, or bad luck caused by such malignant spirits and to propitiate them by the order of the Buddha to bring good fortune. The confidence of the Sri Lankan Buddhist behind the ritual is that some acts and behaviors of people are controlled by unseen supernatural beings that are not benevolent and thus called as *Yakku* or *Mala Yakku* (the deceased beings) or *Mala Pretas* and in any of these cases, the affected person gets sick (*Avesa, Aruda*).

As a consequent those effects cannot be healed through medication but by performing a *Yaga* or *Yakuma*. Within such a scope of understanding, Sri Lankan Buddhists perform *Sanniyakuma* in order to heal the sick person through exorcising under protected conditions. The ‘conditions’ implicitly implies the nature of the ritual which is performed in a particular space with an exact goal. The “goal” is to heal the sick by regenerating the power in him/her through the sacred power of Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. What I propose in this respect is that the ritual arena is the place where every other element is congregated under particular conditions in order to obtain the power by revealing the original time. Simply, it is the focal point where the demons and the patient attend under restricted conditions always controlled by the exorcist. The particular place is therefore, carefully constructed and protected by the holy power and maintained and controlled by the exorcist, becomes a sacred place. What Halverson, proposes as the ‘third world’ is thus a vague explanation to the entire ritual area. Let me explain further:

1. **Myth of the *Mahakola Sanni Yaka*- Re- integration of the absolute reality**

“Myth of origins and warrant has the important function of making transcendent connection that is of linking the present mundane time of the ritual practice with the authority of the Buddha and of connecting the present empirical place of the ritual with a supernatural realm

of demons and deities.” Halverson, on the contrary, applies Malinowski’s theory of the function of myth as an important event in *sanniyakuma* to create the sacred place within the profane area. That is essentially evident in *Sanniyakuma*, since its function is not to *explain* what happened in the history but to *assure* the sacrality of the primeval event took place in the sacred place in order to regenerate confidence in power within the patient.

According to popular belief, the *Kola Sanni Yaka* was supposed be born a human; however, due to a wrong decision taken by the king (his father), the child birth did not occur in the proper way. As a result, the one who was born became a *Yaka* or a demon that created disastrous results in the city and its people. The legend according to Paul Virz’s version highlights that the people of the city (Visala Nuwara), before the arrival of the Lord Buddha were not Buddhists and did not agree with Buddhist doctrine. After seeing the benevolent powers of the Buddha and Buddhism they all have converted into Buddhism. According to *Sanniyakuma*, this is the original place and the time where sacred occurred. And the duty of the exorcist is to reveal this absolute reality to ‘the present time, where the demon is present in person and later banish from the patient. According to Eliade, the primeval mythical time is the model for present. At that point, the re-enactment of the hierophany is cyclical rather than historical.

Virz lists the following demons and their representation of eighteen kinds of illnesses and ailments: *Kana-sanniya* (blindness), *Kora-sanniya* (lameness/paralysis), *Gini-jala-sanniya* (malaria), *Vedda-sanniya* (bubonic plague), *Demala-sanniya* (bad dreams), *Kapala-sanniya* (insanity), *Golu-sanniya* (dumbness/muteness), *Biri-sanniya* (deafness), *Maru-sanniya* (delirium), *Amukku sanniya* (vomiting), *Gulma-sanniya* (parasitic worms), *Deva-sanniya* (epidemic disease, i.e. typhoid, cholera), *Naga-sanniya* (evil dreams particularly with snakes), *Murta-sanniya* (swooning, loss of consciousness), *Kala-sanniya* (Black Death), *Pita-sanniya*

(disease related to bile), *Vata-sanniya* (shaking and burning of limbs), and *Slesma-sanniya* (secretions, epilepsy) *Mahakola Sanni Yaka* or the *Kola Sanniya* is the leader of these eighteen *Sanni-yakku* upon whom the ritual performance is held. The demons that represent the symptoms of certain diseases are mental or physical with no precise classification. The significance of these demons is that they do not affect people all at once; instead, they are the personifications of all such ailments. What people do in *Sanniyakuma* is to pray and command the demons that are responsible for the particular illness in order to cure them from such malignant powers.

This reveals an important fact about the sequential incorporation of Buddha's supremacy into the ritual. The incidents such as the vows by the prince, the arrival of the Buddha and the preaching of *Ratana Sutra*, the duties authorized to the guardian deities, and the conversion of primitive people into Buddhism by hearing the preaching of the Buddha provide a possible background for the village folk to construct faith in the ritual and rely on the ritual act. Essentially, this is a part of the experience of the village folk of the sacred time, and a place that has its own structure and origin which provides the basis for the present festival.

Beyond the fact of its mythical basis, what the myth supposes, according to Eliade, is that it relates to a sacred history in which the primordial event took place. "To tell a myth is to proclaim what happened *ab origine*. Once told, that is revealed, the myth becomes apodictic truth: it establishes the truth that is absolute." Sri Lankan village folk never denies the truth of defeating demons by the supreme power of the Buddha due to the fact that the ritual has its own myth created so as to establish the Buddhist doctrine on one hand, and for the reason their history reveals certain instances where Buddha defeated and controlled the evil powers of demons on the other hand. According to the great chronicle, *Mahāvamsa*, the Buddha had defeated the evil acts of *Yaksas* who prevailed in Sri Lanka and some have been converted as faithful refuges in

Buddhism. This has naturally constructed a possible background to reveal the absolute reality which is not related to its original doctrine.

Therefore, the myth of *Kola Sanniya* has provided a solid background to the Sri Lankan Buddhist to establish the absolute truth revealed by its myth. The fact is that this absolute reality is revealed through the ritual acts in the sacred place. It is indeed a place in the middle of the profane which governs the sacredness. Therefore, Halverson's comment the 'third world, a meeting ground' which is away from the *Vidiya* would rather be identified as one world necessarily identified as the *Vidiya*, where the deities and demons, the exorcist, and the patient participate under controlled conditions in order to reveal the absolute reality.

## 2. **Vidiya- Constructing the Sacred place**

According to Eliade, "The sacred place is a fixed point where the sacred manifests in any hierophany, there is also revelation of the absolute reality, opposed to the non-reality of vast surrounding expanse." Thus, the sacred place is constructed based on the primeval revelation and subsequently consecrated in order to reintegrate the primeval time and the event where the sacred manifested. What is significant from the perspective of the *Sanniyakuma* is the revelation of the absolute reality of the sacred place created by the exorcist. This enables him to eliminate and control the malevolent powers caused by the demons (*Yakku*) through the supremacy of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha.

The contradiction occurs since there is an incorporation of a pantheon of gods and demons that have deeply rooted in the popular religion and their association into the main stream, yet making no 'differentiation in religious function.' However, this juxtaposition provides a solid base for the folk belief that certain diseases and ailments caused by particular

demons can be healed while establishing the transcendental power of Buddhist doctrine in order to control those evil beings.

Thus, the construction of the arena is one of the important events in *Sanniyakuma*. It is centered in front of the house of the patient (*Aturaya*) following the ritual formula. The traditional belief of the location of the *Sanni vidiya* is to the north of the house but at present this rule is rarely observed. “This is the revelation of the sacred direction in order to preserve the profane man from danger to which he would expose himself.” The materials used are ‘banana stems and tender coconut leaves provided with a simple roof of leaves and divided into different parts inside with a small door.’ In fact, the connotation of the *vidiya* is to imply the cottage or the dwelling of the spirits at the beginning they were devastating the Visala Nuwara and the place where the first performance occurred in order to heal the stress of Menikpala Devi, the first patient in the primordial history.

It is apparent that all these goals following the construction of the arena is to create a sacred place where supernatural beings descend. In fact, the revelation of the sacred time occurs in a sacred place where it happened at first and essentially cutting off from the profane. By erecting it and marking it off by the strings decorated with tender coconut leaves, and consecrating it by sprinkling holy water mixed with turmeric powder (*Curcuma longa L*) and lime (*Citrus aurantifolia*) involves the ‘notion of repeating the primeval hierophany where people found their personal salvation,’ and symbolize it as a sacred place amidst the larger profane area.

In addition, the preliminary arrangements of the performance area are under taken solely by ritual acts and conducts, by chanting *pirith* reciting *mantras* and playing drums in order to avoid mal effects (*Vas*) to the *Edura* and the *Aturaya* and to propitiate the place and the invocation as a place for gods and demons. This includes the preparation of vestments, ritual

objects and flower stands (*Mal Yahan*) as part of the ritual act. Such involvements enable the exorcist to make it a place for himself as well as the *Aturaya* and the particular deities and demons to benefit under the sacred power of the Buddha..

This indeed implies the dual representation of the ritual place. Whereas the appearance of the *vidiya* constructs its physical ground in order to reveal the primeval event taken place, the ritual acts relating to the construction obviously provide a solid base for the exorcist, the patient and the participants to construct a psychological model of the original place which helps to transform the power through the ritual performance occurred within the space. In fact, the occurrence of both these level is an important factor to reintegrate the power and the confidence in the patient. This psychological model includes the entire area where ritual performers, the exorcist, and the patient enter and not the limited space where the exorcist perform, as Halverson identifies. The fact is that the participation of all three categories is an important aspect in order to reveal the primordial history, necessarily controlled by the exorcist.

Therefore, the arrival of the patient and the demons is headed by the abstract power dominated by *Edura* in a protected environment, by subduing with fire and verbal conduct.. We can observe the parallel progression of both these parties from either side of the arena under the authority of the exorcist. Whereas the patient arrives from inside the house, the demons arrive through the space behind the *vidiya* making their appearance in front of the *Aturaya*. Therefore, it is apparent that the place where *Sanni* arrives is also a part of the arena and thus included within the sacred place. This is where Halverson lacks in his observations since these two areas are always controlled by the exorcist by the sacred power of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha as one single unit. Hence, the control over the entire area by the exorcist should not be negated as it is the base for the revelation of the sacred history under the supreme power.

In addition to the main elements of the ritual space, the *Kumara-Vidiya*, particularly made for the offerings of the *Kalu-Yaka*, one form of the *Mahakola Sanni Yaka* constructed out of several sticks fixing on the ground (*kattarikka*), pieces of banana leaves and tender coconut leaves, and decorated with king coconuts and twigs of nine different trees since these are said to be the places where the *Yakku* dwell.

The finest of the stage elements is the erection of the Beds of Flowers (*Mal-Yahana*), a small but important and decorated structure, where oil lamps light throughout the night, the flowers for different demons including coconut flowers, rice and various kinds of grains are placed out on behalf of the demons. Apart from these major elements, the offering plates for subordinate *Yakkas* such as *Mahasohona*, *Suniyama Yaka*, *Abhimana* etc; are also constructed and placed in different places of the stage; *Edura* recites particular *Mantras* composed on behalf of them at the specific time of the performance. The fact is that, although the illness occurs due to the malign effects of one *yaka*, they all dwell together as one unit (*Sangama*); thus, if the offerings are given only for one *yaka*, it does not effect as is expected.

It is apparent that the arena where the ritual is taking place is a mythical model, since it has been ritually defined, purified, protected, as explained by Halverson. By arranging the stage in such a ritualistic manner, the exorcist provides a sacred place where all the gods and demons can avail as of its importance. I wonder why Halverson does not comply with the predominant characteristics of the ritual space of the *Sanniyakuma*. Kapferer's explanation is significant in this regard:

“Most of the ritual action is confined to this area, and it is demarcated by the variety of ritual structures. Once the ghosts and demons enter this ritually bounded place, they are understood to be confined or bounded by it, a property of the power of ritual structures which encircle the perimeter of the performance area.” This provides sufficient evidence to prove why

Halverson lacks in his argument, that not only the area where the exorcist performs, the entire area is ritually constructed in order to make the sense of the sacred place. On the other hand, the supernatural beings including the demons and the other deities would not be expected to descend to a place where there is no sacrality, or the absolute power does not persist.

As Eliade supposes, man creates his own sacred place among the profane, the ritual-maker has provided the best place in order to perform the ritual at its best. The consecration of the area by sprinkling holy water makes the entire place out of evil where the sacrality evokes. In such an area, the demons and the other deities invoke under a controllable distance which is solely undertaken by the exorcist, invoking the sacred power of the Buddha and his teaching. “Thereby the arena is considered to be an inexhaustible source of power and sacredness which enables the man to have and share the same power. This mythical conception is carefully observed and accepted by the patient and the audience. Obviously, it is an archetype of the original dwelling of the demons, and ‘repeatedly constructed and discloses the archetype of the sacred space *in illo tempore*, an archetype which was then indefinitely copied and copied again with the erection of new altar.’ Halverson should not be misleading by concerning about the physical appearance and the surroundings of the ground.

### **3. The Ritual- Re-actualization of the absolute reality and the restoration of the primordial time**

The revelation of the absolute reality within the sacred place is the enactment of the ritual performance. The task is the successful recovery of the patient or the re-establishment of the community. The mission of conducting a successful performance is thus handed over to the well conducted Buddhist practitioner, the *Edura/ Yakedura* and his endurance. The precise day, date, and time is entirely decided upon the horoscope of the patient (*Aturya*), basically the victim of

the demonic attack, due to the reason that not all the days of the week gain positive results. The reality is the avoidance of the dominant direction of the *Marea* who presides over all the acts of *Yakku*, *Mala Yakku* and *Pretas*.

The suggestion is clear; this is the avoidance of the profane time and space where the best result would be obtained. “Religious participation in a festival implies emerging from ordinary temporal duration and reintegration of the mythical time re-actualized by the festival itself.” The *Edura* is entirely concerned about the sacred time and space and necessary directions where the performance should be conducted in order to sustain the governance of the ritual and to obtain power through ritual act. Indeed, it is the responsibility of the exorcist to avoid the weaker times and establish the strong time. This understanding derives from the point of its origin that “the understanding of sacred and the strong time is the *time of origins* where the stupendous instant in which a reality was created.” Eliade continues, in this regard, that the man always continues to find this original time. Apparently, it has become the duty of the *Edura* to coincide with the original and the strongest time where he can revitalize the Buddhist doctrine.

In addition to the selecting of an auspicious day, the ritual usually begins at dusk, proceeds through the dawn of the next day and finally goes through the noon of the next day. The act of exorcist from the beginning of the performance is to communicate with the evil spirits in order to alleviate the bad circumstances. Thus, the ritual performance follows three time intervals (*Yāma*): 1) *Sanda Samayama* (evening watch), 2) *Mediyam Samayama*, (mid night watch), 3) *Aluyam Samayama* (morning watch). “These critical times are known as *Samayama Velawa* or “demon time”: day break, noon, evening and midnight.” During the specific period, certain ritual acts should be completed in order to enact and call upon the *Yakku*.

Obviously the function of the structure creates its own time and space which is equivalent to the original manifestation of the gods and divine beings to the place where the total

destruction occurred. Eliade's theory of festival time appears to coincide with this aspect, since this provides the basis for "the reintegration of this original and sacred time that differentiates man's behavior *during* the festival from his behavior *before* or *after* it." This is, in fact, obtained through the communication of the exorcist with the demons on behalf of the patient within the ritual space where the sacred power occurs. Therefore, we should not deny the structural stratification which creates its own mythical space where gods and demons manifest under the control of the supremacy of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. This, for sure, provides a solid base for the consolidation of the doctrine which occurred at first. By enacting in a typical manner and by repeatedly performing, the ritual re-establishes the same power.

By enacting for about 30 Sinhalese hours through the distinctive time periods, the exorcist focuses on the patient (*Aturaya*), since he/she is the representative of the typical disease behaving in the ritual manner by observing certain customs. Although the audience is not expected to follow certain hard and fast rules, they believe that to be free from intoxication during the performance period may deliver them the highest results. Although, the attention of this paper is not to explain the ritual structure, I would focus on certain acts and behaviors of the exorcist, in order to resolve the problem of 'third world' and redefine why and how this entire area becomes a sacred place.

As Halverson emphasizes, one of the significant acts is the admitting of the sacred power of the Buddha by the exorcist (*Edura*). At the beginning of the ritual, he comes to the stage, basically believed to be the sacred place for the spirits to attend, and recites the *Namaskara* or the bowing for the Noble Triple Gem as "*Namotassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhasa.....*" and repeats the same consecration process in order to make sure that the arena is out of any evils or pollution (*killā*). This involves the entire area where the patient and the actors who perform as demons occupy during the performance. Therefore, this particular act

reveals the expectations of the sacred place by extending the idea of mythical time and place around the entire arena, where Halverson lacks to address.

Another remarkable performance is the crossing through the barrier (*Kadaturawa Taranaya*) by the *Kola-Sanniya*, which is held in front of the *Aturaya* by the assistants of the *Edura*. This is a significant event since it demands the entrance of the demons to the arena through some commandments of the exorcist. According to the ritual enactment, this is the event he begets the permission from the Buddha that “he may descend to earth, but only to cure people and to receive the offerings which they have prepared for him. He must return before the sun rises.” According to Gananath Obeyesekere, *Kola-Sanniya*, a non-Buddhist demon is accepted to the arena only after he obeys the rules and the sacred power of the Buddha. Indeed, this process is continued and conducted by the exorcist under controlled conditions where he has the power and the authority; and the demon is only permitted to the ritual space only under such conditions. The special object called *Igaha* is used to command the demons by keeping on the head of the *Aturaya* to remove the illness from the body with the sacred power of the Buddha. This proves that the area where the entire performance takes place is a sacred place, instead of a particular segment, for which Halverson attempts to designate as a ‘third world.’

Significantly, these ritual enactments, including ritual objects, recall the sacred time and its space where the first act was held. This is only an interpretation of the first performance, that is, in order to reintegrate the sacred powers. “Cosmological constructs are embedded (of course not exclusively) in rites, and that rites in turn enact and incarnate cosmological conceptions.” The invocation and the enactments sincerely used as a source of power that is the perceived possession of the exorcist having life-giving knowledge and the capacity to intervene in a *mythical* manner.

The most important event that takes place is the “ritual of the mat” (*Pedure Depavilla*), where the chief exorcist lies on the mat and invites the demon of the blood (*Riri Yaka*) to consume the food on his belly and finally his body on behalf of the *Aturaya*. At the end of this enactment, the exorcist is folded in the mat and taken out imitating that the corpse is brought to the cemetery as an offering for the demons. (This is what the legend specifies) The theory behind this enactment is the offering of ‘life to life’ that the demons should leave the body of the patient leaving him cure by sharing the body of the exorcist. Hypothetically, this is accepted though, the village folk and the patient identify that the demons can never consume the body of the exorcist, due to the fact that he is embodied with the sacred power of the Buddha. At that stand point, the act is only a tricking of demons in order to leave the body of the patient.

One important fact of the performance of *Sanniyakuma* is the communication through magical words, mantras, spells and recitations in order to communicate with deities and demons. Involvement of certain rhythms and different approaches through magical spells indeed provides a mythical environment in the place where the ritual takes place. Although this is not occasionally understood by the general audience, the recitation of *mantras* and other verses essentially regenerates some magical power which has its own objectives through out the healing process. The fact that somebody may argue that these spells are worthless would not be of worry, because it is the language used to communicate with demons (*Yaksa Bhasava*). The person who uses this language is none other than the exorcist since he is the person who represents the sacred power of the Buddha.

Tambiah’s explanation of Malinowski’s theory of language and its functions is evident in this context because, the meaning of this language is the effect of words on human minds and bodies, as through these the environmental reality is created or conceived in a given culture.” One may apply Fritz Staal’s syntactic explanation of ritual language, as something meaningless,

as he continues “meters and chants are like rituals in that they fail to express meaning, but reflect syntactic structure in its pure form,” to comply with Halverson. In contrast, these *mantras*, to be much precise, are the spells that provide a certain environment to communicate with supernatural beings, solely spelled by the exorcist. The important behavior in this connection is the creation of power through such recitations and invocation of gods and demons by means of controlling through the sacred power of the Buddha. This is what Susanne Langer has identified as the “Transparency in Language” since the words or vocables are in themselves worthless in ritual context. Similarly, the exorcist ritual has its own exegesis and the exorcist is the person who communicates with those evil beings with the tribute to the Buddha and his teaching, thereby governing the entire ritual area where they perform. Therefore, the magical spells and *Mantras* reveal its own mythical language which is solely understood and spelled by the person who evokes the sacred power. What Halverson should specifically understand is the governance of the utterances of the exorcist and the parties he communicates, the demons and the patient, are the share holders of the same sacred space.

#### **4. Taboos governing the stage- Consolidation of the sanctification of the sacred place.**

Similar to other rituals, *Sanniyakuma* has its own taboos. “On the day on which an *Edura* or *bandanaya* is going to perform a ceremony, he may have no sexual intercourse, because this might weaken the effects of the *mantra*. Furthermore, he must not eat pork, as this considered to be unclean and may likewise have an unfavorable influence of his work.” This simply implies the taboos and certain prohibitions governing the ritual. The objective of the acceptance of such taboos is the purification of the exorcist before entering into the sacred place where the absolute reality is revealed. According to the religious man, this absolute reality is

something sacred and the place where it was occurred has an equal importance. The broader sense of such restrictions is the fear of pollution (*killā*) which would weaken the sacrality of the place where they perform.

These taboos apparently separate the exorcist and his assistants as well as the patient from their daily life activities as a prior preparation for the re-actualization of the absolute reality. “For modern consciousness, a physiological act- eating, sex, and so on-is in sum only an organic phenomenon. But for the primitive, such an act is never simply physiological; it is, or can become a sacrament, that is, a communion with the sacred.” From the perspective of *Sanniyakuma*, this is the beginning of the communion with the sacred by establishing taboos upon himself and the assistants, and the patient, prior to stepping onto the ritual space.

Although Kapferer very briefly explains the taboos governing the ritual, the truth is that the exorcist avoids certain daily practices from the day that the decision is taken to perform the ritual. In rather traditional performances, the exorcist is a well conducted Buddhist practitioner; hence he is away from many secular activities, entirely a vegetarian, obeys the Buddhist doctrine and concerns about the merits (*karma*.) In the particular case of *Sanniyakuma*, he even more coincides with the ritual act and avoids eating any kind of fish or meat, away from sexual intercourse as specified by Kapferer, thus purifies himself physically and mentally. Popular tradition allows him to do so during the particular period, they bath in particular places, (*tota*) which is not used by any other person and ritually purified every single day.

Particularly, during the period when they prepare for the ritual, exorcist does not attend funerals due to the fact that the funeral places are believed to be the places where the pollution prevails. In addition, he does not walk in front of cemeteries since the belief is that the great cemetery demon (*Mahasana*) will affect him during the period of his observance and weaken the sacred power he has gained through specific observances. Although there is no distinction

between these acts from the labors and acts performed at ordinary times, the main objective of the prohibition in the ritual place is the saturation with the sacred.

According to the legend, the first patient undergone such an experience is the sister of Mahavishnu, *Manipala Devinnase* by the first exorcist, *Oddisa Irsi*. He has ordered her to bath, massage her head with oil and then go to the little palace where he performed the ritual (*vidiya*). This implicitly reflects that the objective of governance of the taboos is the avoidance of pollution. This mythical understanding essentially appears in the *Sanniyakuma* that the patient is expected to bath and purify himself, and observe the five precepts (*Pansil*) before entering into the ritual space. In so doing, he is directed to the ritual stage under protected conditions which is the responsibility of the exorcist. This proves that, the entire ritual area is under the power and the authority of the exorcist, while enforcing certain taboos.

Therefore, Halverson would have to re-identify that there are certain taboos undertaken prior and within the ritual and those are the symbols of averting certain mal effects that weaken the power and confidence of the sacred place and the enhancement of the sacrality of the ritual area by diminishing every potential for pollution. For instance, none other than exorcist practitioners, no fish, meat, alcohol or intoxicated persons are permitted to the ritual ground. Similarly, no daily broadcasting other than *pirith*, are permitted within the ritual space. Certain prohibitions essentially resemble ‘the passage from profane to the sacred time.’ The evidence is enough to void the misinterpretation of Halverson that the ritual place is not ‘ritually bound’ or ‘no taboos.’

##### **5. Rite of Passage- the liminal nature occurred in the sacred place**

It is apparent that the *Sanniyakuma* is performed and concluded with a long recital of the *Mantras* on behalf of the gods and demons and finally praising the Buddha for controlling them

for the benevolence of the mankind. “As on that *occasion* such and such a ritual was performed to banish X illness, so *today* by the performance of this same ritual, illness is banished.” This obviously proves that the performance demonstrates the re-actualization of the sacred time and space where it obtained its own paradigmatic function in the primordial time that is sanctified by the presence and activities of the gods and semi divines. The exorcist, the patient and the participants all entrust that the ritual takes place revealing the original time and space where it was occurred for the first time, and that can definitely be helpful in differentiating the behavior of the patient during and after festival, from that of before the festival.

The fact is that the participants distinguish the sacred from the profane, by undergoing certain ritual acts that occurred at the primordial time and space and thereby going through a liminal phase. I agree with Eliade and Ranjini Obeysekara. In the broader sense, Catherine Bell recognizes the rite of passage as ‘ceremonies that accompany and dramatize such major events as birth, coming-of-age initiations for boys and girls, marriage, and death. Sometimes called “life crisis” or “life cycle” rites, they culturally mark a person’s transformation from one stage of social life to another.’ In such experiences “people make offerings to a god or gods with a practical and straightforward expectation of receiving something in return.” This attitude certainly establishes a possible background for a therapeutic movement of the weakened mind of the patient and regenerates the power through ritual enactments.

This explanation particularly applies to the ritual progression of the *Sanniyakuma* since its aim is to adjust or modify the existing behavior to his or her previous customary conditions. As we already know that the goal of the exorcist is to heal the person gripped by the influence of the demons, the ultimate objective is the transformation of the power and confidence in the sick person and to cure him. In this perspective, the ritual process that undergoes in the arena confines the liminality of the person, through the mediation of the exorcist with the demons and the

patient. Essentially, this liminal process involves “symbolic stages and passages that redefine social and personal identity.” The identity here explicitly implies the notion of the natural behavior of the person or the standard structure of the society. However, this liminal process in the *Sanniyakuma* avails through the participation of the demons, the exorcist, and the patient with the equal distribution of the sacred power of Buddhism, within the sacred place. Hence, not only the places where the exorcist performs, but also the stage components where the demons and the patient reside during the ritual are segments of the same sacred place.

Unfortunately, Halverson fails to recognize in this process as a specific progression through the entire ritual enactments, rather attempts to define within one single act of *Kadawatha Taranaya*. According to him, ‘it is the real person in the real social world who undergoes a change of status via ritual; in this *Sanniya* ritual, it is the mythological figure in a mythological world.’ I agree to a certain degree that the *Kola Sanniya* changes his status according to the demands of the exorcist. However, that is not the actual transformation means. Actually, the change of status of the demon could be identified as a taming of an aggressive, non- Buddhist, supernatural being within the Buddhist frame work rather than a rite of passage. In reality, it is his original nature and what happens in the ritual enactments is his obedience to the commands of the exorcist in order to get access to the arena to accept their offerings. It is the signal of his inclusion to the pantheon.

One should recognize this inclusion as a temporary permission to the ritual ground where he gets his offerings by the sacred order of the Buddha. Once he gets his offerings and goes out of the ritual space he is none other than the original demon. That is what the Buddha has emphasized according to the legend. The authentic transformation occurs in the mind and the body of the patient who has previously undergone several changes due to the mal effects of the demon and, it is in this sacred place he recovers through the reintegration of power and

confidence by the sacred power. The significance in these two aspects at the same time is the liminal nature of a ritual performance enacted by the exorcist by mediating between the *Aturaya* and the respective demons. Halverson would have to consider the particular ritual act as one single event of the entire performance and consider its connection towards the wholesome aspects.

The best example is the convulsion (*Avesaya*) of the patient during the mid night watch (*Mediyama Samayama*) as a result of the malign power that makes the person ill. “He is then directed to the altar of the Buddha, where he is interrogated by the exorcist in a very rough and stern manner- or rather, not he but the demon in him. By the power of the Buddha he is obliged to confess his identity and to promise to leave the patient upon the completion of the proper rite. “The general effect is hierophantic, solidly establishing the special nature of the place and the proceedings.” Halverson complies with the liminal nature, though he negates the same. This particularly implies the process of transformation of the patient which is totally different from that of the *Kola-Sanniya*, what Halverson should re-define, since the patient finally recovers, where the demon possesses his original behavior.

## **Conclusion**

In an overall observation of the *Sanniyakuma* as an exorcist ritual, it is apparent that the main objective is the revelation of the sacred place within the profane, where Sri Lankan Buddhists can develop their confidence in Buddhism and eliminate the mal effects caused by demons. The distinction of the assimilation of the two religions; Buddhism and folk beliefs appears to be possible, due to the fact that the institutional religion provides long term aspects of the life and the fate of the soul after death, whereas these rituals provide some solutions for unseen social disorders which are assumed to be caused by malign powers. Therefore, such

rituals are performed to cure the sick, obtain prosperity in this worldly life, through the ritual procession of *Edura*.

The significance of *Sanniyakuma* at this stand point is the introduction of the Buddha to the stream of myth and the ritual practice so as to construct an authoritative power in the Buddhist teachings. On the other hand, the introduction of furious demons into the main stream Buddhism through which the dominancy of Buddhism is another aspect of *Sanniyakuma*. To the ordinary Buddhist practitioner in Sri Lankan tradition, merits (*karma*) are something acquired by meritorious acts (*punyakarma*) through the gradual process of birth and rebirth. The broader understanding of this *punyakarma* is the avoidance of bad merits (*pāpakarma*) which results in having a birth with illness and misfortune throughout the *samsara*. Regarding the performance of *Sanniyakuma*, the concept of *karma* is an influence of some other way to the present life, which had occurred through the powers of malign beings. The influence of such beings is the result of bad communications with them and, if they are not consoled and controlled, it is a continuum. The unique way to cater both these objectives is to perform the ritual in order to console them the way the Buddha cooperated and controlled them through the sacred powers of Buddhism.

According to the folk belief, this consolation should be occurred in the sacred space, according to the way it was performed at the beginning and satisfied the malign beings in the history. Hence, the performance takes place in a sacred place where they can reveal the sacred time and the space in order to re-establish the original hierophany. Indeed, the first performance occurred in the *vidiya*- the sacred arena, by the *Oddissa Irsi*- the first exorcist, to the *Manikpala Devi*- the first patient, according to the legend. This historical event reveals certain aspects of the sacred place which absolutely discloses the construction, the consecration, the purification, and certain taboos that govern that space. By enacting and reintegrating every possible element in the historical event, the exorcist re-establishes the sacrality of the space and the ritual enactments he

undertake, in order to recover the patient. The ritual performance thus, carried out by the participation of the exorcist, the demons and the patient in the same sacred ground in order to triumph over the evil by equally distributing the sacred power. On the other hand, if the exorcist aims to obtain the success, he is expected to sanctify the place, other wise, the sacred power would not sustain and the deities would not descend. Thus, what Halverson should understand is this possibility of the governance of the power in order to come up with his objectives.

Finally, my general observation in relation to Halverson's comment on *Sanniyakuma* is that we should not think that the "religious man" would be aware of the purification of the entire world prior to his enactments. Instead, he focuses on the sacrality of the place where he performs in the middle of the profane in order to reveal the sacred time which always reintegrates the super mundane qualities of the past time to the present world. Although it is clear that the village folk are not aware of the doctrinal and mythical aspects of religion in isolation, they believe in the supremacy of Buddhism where ever the evil circumstances avail. However, from the perspective of the exorcist, in relation to the ritual place, he is aware that the area beyond the ritual boundaries is not under his authority. In such a circumstance, 'astray dogs and vagrant pedestrians' beyond the sacred place is not a matter of fact for the exorcist, since he has demarcated the sacred space within the profane by every possible manner. That does not mean that the ritually purified area is not a sacred place, or there is 'a third world, a meeting ground where the other two worlds come together.' On the contrary it is a unique space where sacrality prevails under the sacred power and can be analyzed by the theories of Eliade or van der Leeuw.

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