

Community Music Therapy in Action:

Healing Through Pirit Chanting in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Pirit is an important Buddhist ceremony with healing aims in Sri Lanka. Centered on chanting provided by monks, this communal event can take place in a variety of environments and remains open to everyone. This article provides an insight into the history of pirit, and its aims and functions in contemporary circumstances. It discusses its therapeutic potential and its presence in and applicability to a modern city environment.

Keywords: *Community Music Therapy, Pirit Chanting, Healing Rituals, Hēvisi Ensemble*

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Pirit Chanting

Pirit, *paritta*, or *paritrāna* is the protective doctrine preached by the Buddha. “*Pirit* refers to Buddhist scriptures, which Buddha recited for merciful world-being” (Gamage 2003: 11). “It is a style of intoned recitation based on phonological properties of the Pali language, but restricted melodically to the Rgvedic three-tone scale. As the oldest Theravada tradition outside India, the Sinhala Theravada chant traditions also offer rich insights into Indian Buddhist musical principles” (Sheeran 2000: 968).¹ According to *Mahāvamsa*², the first Buddhist *pirit* was chanted during the reign of the second king Upatissa (410 A. D). People, animals, and all living beings were suffering due to lack of food and water and due to contagious diseases. To protect the people from this *durbhikshaya* (“terrible epidemic”), *bhikkus*³ chanted *Ratana Sutra*⁴ while walking around and sprinkling chanted *pirit vatura* or *pirit pān*⁵ all over the city of Anuradhapura. *Mahāvamsa* refers to this as *Gangā Rōhana Utsavaya* (comp. Kulathillake 1987: 68). Since then, the kings of Sri Lanka commenced *pirit* chanting during periods of drought and famine. It was believed that dangers arising from natural and supernatural powers could be averted by this means (Wijesekera 1987: 202, 203). Until today people consider chanted *pirit vatura* and *pirit nūl*⁶ as a blessing to heal all kind of diseases and to avert calamities and problems.

The aims of the *pirit* chanting match those indicated by Even Ruud, one of the leading theorists of music therapy in the Western world. In Ruud’s words, “community music therapy talks about how to humanize communities and institutions, and is concerned with health promotion and mutual caring. (...) Music has again become a social resource, a way to heal and strengthen communities as well as individuals” (2004: 12, 13). Music has an important role in building and strengthening cultural and self-identity, thus contributing to the quality of life. “Improving quality of life means that as persons we feel better about ourselves, less isolated in society, that we keep the ‘right’ balance between our roots (past tradition) and our present life; between our uniqueness and the group’s identity” (Amir 2004: 254). June Boyce-Tillman’s notion that “most cultures have used music to excite and relax people” (2000: 56, 57) is applicable to Sri Lankans’ healing ritual context, including *pirit*.

Sri Lankan Buddhists express considerable faith in the efficacy of *pirit* and this can be observed in both private and public events, in religious, social, cultural, and economic activities in both rural and urban areas. In all cases, the aim is protection and blessing of an individual and/or community. A *Pirit* chant is considered appropriate before the commencement of any new undertaking or in times of fear, an epidemic, a sickness, a long journey, the launching of a new business, before marriage, or birth giving. Obviously, the aims of *pirit* are to remove deeply rooted fears and to ensure the welfare of the community.

¹ According to C. de S. Kulathillake, the number of tones in Sri Lankan *pirit* is not limited to three, but to five, which is correct (s.a.:4).

² *Mahāvamsa* is a historical poem in Pali language, referring to the early history of Sri Lanka.

³ *Bhikku* means a buddhist monk, *Bhikkus* is the plural form.

⁴ *Sutra* derives from the Pali term “*Sutta*”, which means discourse or oral declaration of Buddha (more in Clough 1892: 703).

⁵ *Vatura* or *pān* means water.

⁶ *Nūl* refers to chanted *pirit* thread and *nūla* is a singular form of it.

In hard situations, such as fear for life, continuous illnesses, damages, or epidemics, Sri Lankan Buddhists usually called for help an astrologist, a Buddhist monk, and/or a traditional healer, while nowadays they often give priority to Western medicine. A modern lifestyle often implies uprootedness, weakening of family ties and social networks, and ultimately individual isolation and loneliness (comp. Ruud 1998: 63), which can have negative consequences on mental health. In the words of Swedish philosopher Lennart Nordenfelt, “sometimes illness exists where no disease can be found” (1991: 83, 92), referring to people unable to realize their individual goals and thus living in an unhealthy state of mind. In such situations, they need community’s help and relationship to build up a sense of belonging. Sri Lankan Buddhists believe that “*pirit* has assumed the combined role of exorcising devils, nullifying sorcery, countering curses and effecting cures by one act of chanting” (Wijesekera 1987: 207) and acts as a curative remedy. In the words of German psychotherapist Wolfgang Mastnak, “The variety of music-therapeutic results ensures that the effect of music on the psyche is based on a multifunctional process comprising physiological, emotional, and cognitive factors as well as on anthropological, cultural, and individual conditions” (Mastnak 1993: 78).

Any numbers of Buddhist monks in charge of a temple are invited to chant *pirit* by and for individuals and communities. They sit in what is considered a sacred arena, and chant together taking turns. “They do not sing in unison. Rarely do they hit the same pitch, so that the chanting sometimes gives the impression that they are singing in minor thirds or fourths. Their words are however, always together and the ornamentation, too. In this chanting of *pirit* also the *bhikkus* never go beyond the range of a minor third” (Surya Sena 2008: 21). *Pirit* is chanted either during the whole night or just for one or more hours. Anne Sheeran mentions that *pirit* ceremonies can last anywhere from one hour to seven days (2000: 969). Generally, *pirit chanting* ceremonies lasted as long as the problem required it, while following the end of civil war in Sri Lanka in 2009, one could find these ceremonies lasting for months, with the intention to bring life back to equilibrium.

A *pirit chanting* ceremony commences in a specially constructed pavilion decorated with white or silver paper or with young coconut leaves. *Mandappa* is the Sinhalese word for a pavilion, which literally means a stage (Figures 1 and 2). The *Pirit mandappa* is expected to accommodate ten to twelve monks. Usually, it takes an octagonal shape and is covered by a textile-made canopy in white color, decorated with various kinds of herbs and flowers. Strings are drawn crisscross from the canopy in a geometric pattern. Sprigs of different tender leaves are hung on the strings. The whole event emphasizes white color, which symbolizes purity, holiness, and prosperity.



Figures 1 and 2⁷: Views of a Pirit Mandappa

A small table is kept in the middle of the mandappa and covered with a white cloth (Figure 2). A tray of multi-colored flowers of several kinds, a *pirit* book, a ball of thread, a panicle of Arecanut flowers, and a fresh clay pot filled with water is placed on the table. The pot's mouth is covered with a white cloth. A tray of betel leaves with all ingredients, i.e. Arecanut, Cardamom, Cloves, and Lime etc. are kept for chewing. Sucrets, 'Yelmi', dried Ginger and other herbs are made available in a plate for clearing the throat. Lights and oil lamps are lit, and incense is burnt. At the four directions of the pavilion fresh clay pots are placed with a spread-out coconut flower in each. A small clay lamp is placed on the pots of coconut flower (Figure 1) outside the pavilion. On the floor of the pavilion are laid mats for the monks and around the pavilion mats are spread for the attendees. *Pirit* chanting ceremony requires no special costume for the monks, while the attendees wear white cloths.

⁷ Figures 1, 2 and 3 were taken by Mr. Chandana Seneviratne and reproduced here with his permission.

The proceedings commence with addressing to Buddha, *Dhamma*⁸, and *Sangha*⁹ with five precepts (*pansil*). Thereafter a senior monk explains the purpose of the ceremony and the significance of *pirit* chanting with its benefits. A monk who has a good voice and required experience acts as the leader, while the other monks join together as a chorus. Pali, the language of *pirit* is not generally understood by most of the present attendees. For the Buddhist monks' chanting is from memory, without the use of an immediate written source. The first session lasts about one hour and the *Suttas* chanted are *Mahamagala sutta*, *Ratana sutta*, and *Karaniya metta sutta*. At the end of the chanting, water (*pirit pān*) and thread (*pirit nūl*), empowered by the words uttered during the ritual and thought thus to have magical potency, are distributed to the participants (comp. Obeyesekere 1999: 86). "A piece of the thread is tied by a monk on the right hand wrist of the chief householder or patient and others while reciting a stanza repeating thrice by the monk" (Wijesekera 1987: 206).

The Role of Music

As already stated, *pirit* as a sound-producing form of human behavior refers to chanting. Its essence is vocal, and instrumental accompaniment is neither required nor expected. The question whether it is considered music or not depends on the taking into account outsiders' - *etic* or insiders' - *emic* point of view. On one hand, the chanting is elaborate and can be notated as music. While on the other hand, one should keep in mind the prohibitions for Buddhist monks to receive music education and to get involved in musical activities. In the same way, one should not forget that anybody could have inborn skills to chant or sing or could improve their talents through oral traditional experiences unlike the other preachers.

Pirit usually requires an *hēvisi* ensemble to announce the event and to invite monks to the ceremony. Such an ensemble includes a brass trumpet *horanā*, cylindrical drum *davula*, and kettle drum *tammättama* (figure 3 illustrates them from left to right in order).



Figure 3: Brass Trumpet *Horanā*, Cylindrical Drum *Davula* and Kettle Drum *Tammättama*

⁸ Dhamma refers to Buddha's preachings.

⁹ Sangha refers to Buddha's followers (Bhikkus).

Pirit chanting is non-rhythmic. *Ātānātiya dēshanāva*¹⁰ is a particularly important section of *pirit* chanting in musical terms. The performing monks organize themselves into two groups and present the chant in a dialogue form. Each group intends to show more power than the other group and uses a rough voice quality. The competitiveness between the two creates an aggressive mood, which may leave the listeners shocked. This is often related to the increase of tempo and pitch. The section is focused on chasing away devils' malefic influences. Sinhalese Buddhists believe that the monks' vibrating vocal chords have capacity to harmonize one's body, soul, and mind, remove fears and doubts, and grant prosperity. This is why pregnant women ask for a monk to chant a *pirit* to them prior to their delivery in hospitals. Such a firm belief made some gynecologists, i.e., western medicine practitioners, think of introducing *pirit* into their hospital environments in Sri Lanka.

A few years ago, gynecologist Dr. Upali Marasinghe, introduced *pirit* chanting to the Kalubowila general hospital in which he still serves as director of the maternity ward. In his opinion, *pirit* is suitable for removal of unwanted fears from women prior to their deliveries. Some of them have to be hospitalized due to unusual bleedings, miscarriages, or blood-pressure problems. Being put in a position to stop their regular work and instead lay in a bed, they develop fears in the new surrounding that eventually leads to loss of appetite and later for many psychophysical imbalances. "We don't have suitable medication, or any other treatment that would have better effect on their state of mind than the *pirit*," claimed Dr. Marasinghe in our personal communication (2009), which is highly matched with Guy Eades idea of "... the arts can be directed towards building relationships between communities and the hospitals which serve them. (...) Equally, the arts working in the community that is outside hospital buildings, enable individuals receiving health care to express and develop methods of communication which are of immense personal value and creativeness but also at times ask the health delivery organization to be self-critical" (1997: 108). "The World Health Organization sees cultural activities as necessary to what it calls 'healthy cities' and we can turn this argument to the institution of the hospital" (Miles 1997: 249).

Rituals are generally considered effective in dealing with acute psychic disorders, such as fears, and therefore limited to their cure. For instance, Dr. Marasinghe recommends pregnant women who are suffering from uncontrollable fears to listen to recorded ritual music and the *pirit* chant for the sake of their relief. In an interview led by the author on 23 February 2009, he also expressed the following opinions:

Q: Why do you, being a Western medical practitioner, propose to your patients to listen to the recordings of rituals and/or pirit?

A: There is no medicine to release patients from uncontrollable fears. In the past our ancestors practiced rituals and *pirit* to get rid of their fears. Nowadays it is impossible to practice rituals in hospital settings, so the best thing what we can do is to motivate current mothers to listen to recorded ritual sounds and/or especially *pirit* to release their unwanted fears.

¹⁰ *Ātānātiya dēshanāva* means one of the major sections of *pirit* which is chanted in the midnight to chase away the devil spirits. kus).

Q: Why are you suggesting that Western medicine has no solutions for such problems?

A: I am sorry to say, but Western medicine is a myth. We see human body as being divided into many systems and this is how Western medicine treats people partially. There are specialized doctors for mind, chest, physical disorders, eyes, ears, and so on and there is a huge pharmaceutical industry spread all over the world to support them. Medicine prescribed for one organ may be harmful for another organ. Human being is not a machine to be repaired part by part. The body, mind and soul are interconnected. Buddhist philosophy suggests the same, and human efforts should keep them in balance. Destruction of this balance results in diseases, which doctors control by prescribing pills. This is not a complete healing and I am against it although I am a Western medical specialist.

Tony Wigram's opinion that "After nearly 250 years of separation, medicine, health psychology, and music therapy are approaching each other again, realizing that man is not a 'machine', but a complex, bio-psycho-social being" (2002: 21) provides a useful point concerning the shared, broader understanding of disease within the ritualistic and Western medical domains in Sri Lanka.

Potentials of Pirit Chanting Applicable to Modern City Life Environment

1. Social gathering enables the families and individuals to meet neighbors and other people to share their feelings, i.e. to strengthen social networks.
2. Community members' shared involvement in preparing the complex of *pirit* setting is widely understood as maintenance of public harmony.
3. Getting rid of fears from public exposure to the society equals building self-confidence through focusing the group's attention to a troubled individual.
4. Focusing the group's attention to a troubled individual helps the individuals to overcome feelings of loneliness, ignorance, and lack of social understanding.
5. The fear of becoming possessed by devils gives place to realization that devils are in fact, afraid of humans. They listen to the monks' chants and blessings to restore the patient's health.
6. The monks' blessings bring relaxation, and comfort to all involved.
7. Sitting on the ground throughout the ritual contributes to the restoration of psychophysical balance of the participants.
8. Ceremony treats the person as a whole, without taking the affected part of the body out of the total context.
9. Distribution of *pirit vatura* and *pirit nūla* removes participants' psychic problems with the belief of magical potentiality of *pirit*.

Conclusion

Sri Lankan case study demonstrates how important it is to take into account cultural understandings and interpretations and to focus on performative nature of diagnosis, treatment, and healing. In Benjamin Koen's terms, this has potential "to lead us to much deeper understandings of how disease, loss, grief, pain, and suffering are made meaningful, and how health and healing can be created and maintained" (2008: 15). Consequently, medical ethnomusicologists focus on "how

healers and healing practices orchestrate the production and apprehension of sounds and the performance of music as one of those technologies of healing” (Roseman 2008: 18). Wolfgang Mastnak’s notion that “...archaic as well as ethnological practices comprise a high level of knowledge of natural healing-factors” (1993: 83), is highly applicable to *pirit* chanting which is believed to be the most effective curative tool for the Sri Lankan communities. The study of musical healing event, as demonstrated here, is a meeting point of medical and musical knowledge to upgrade the quality of modern city life environment, which is further proved by the Gary Ansdell’s notion that, “The current elaboration of Community Music Therapy is timely, given the newly available and interconnecting body of thinking (and rethinking) in the areas of music and its relationship to socio-cultural life” (2004: 65).

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