

## Spiritual rituals at the Thalangama Lake, Sri Lanka

Punsisi Jayasekara and Pay Drechsel

*At the Thalangama lake, near Colombo, like across Sri Lanka, we can observe every week traditional spiritual rituals, or at least their remains if performed in the night, privately within the family circle. What can be found the next morning are offerings of food and other items placed on beautifully designed trays made from sticks, banana leaves, coconut coir, etc. These offerings are commonly placed at three-way junctions. Among the objects found regularly on or near the trays of banana leaves are plates with cooked food, sweets, a diversity of fruits, coconuts, but also coins, a drinking cup, clothes, a pillow and mattress, a comb with mirror and hair, small bottles and other symbolic items - clearly all with a deeper meaning. Also commonly observed are sets of containers, each with an egg inside, which are thrown into a stream or water canal - possibly as part of a ritual to trap and seal spirits, symbolizing their irreversible exile to prevent return. Another observation concerns large numbers of cut lemons thrown in the lake or canal. While these rituals are performed privately (although in part with loud drumming) other rituals at the lake are public events, such as the water cutting ceremony.*

*In this article we explore a few of these traditions in our vicinity for those interested in the cultural and symbolic meanings behind these practices.*



In Sri Lanka, exorcism and spirit rituals are part of a long-standing tradition that involves both white magic—which is protective, curative, and productive—and black magic, which is destructive and harmful. Traditional healing rituals such as Thovil (Devil Dance), *Bahirava Puja*, *yaga* and *Bali Shanthikarma* continue to play a significant role in addressing spiritual disturbances believed to arise from demons (yakku), restless spirits (preta), or unfavorable planetary forces.

These practices are deeply rooted in a rich historical blend of pre-Buddhist animistic traditions, South Indian folk practices, Hindu and later Buddhist ceremonial adaptations. Victims who are

believed to have been affected by spiritual entities must undergo exorcism rituals to be cured and cleansed of these forces.

Thovil, also referred to as ***devil dancing***, is a traditional exorcism ritual performed when a person is believed to be possessed by a demon or affected by malevolent spiritual forces.

These theatrical, night-long (at auspicious times and usually not public) ceremonies involve masked dancers, rhythmic drumming, fire torches (*pandama*), burning powdered resin (*dhumma*), and chants recited by a ritual specialist (*kattadiya* or *gurunānse*). A typical *Thovil* requires at least three participants—the ritual specialist (who leads the ceremony), a dancer (who impersonates the spirit), and a drummer.



To attract and appease the troubling spirit, symbolic offerings such as food (*pideni*), including rice and a pot with 7 cooked vegetables, betel leaves, flowers, coconuts, sweets, lime, alcohol and marijuana, coins, and personal items like a mirror, comb and hair are placed on a ritual stand (*thattuva*).



The ritual specialist leads the ceremony, while the dancer impersonates the negative spirit. Demon characters may wear fearsome masks or be painted with ghastly makeup, creating a powerful visual impact. The ritual is performed to cure illness, remove spiritual disturbances, and protect individuals or communities from negative forces, using dramatic performance as a powerful form of symbolic healing. The comb, mirror, and hair are in this context symbolic items used to appease or engage spirits or demons. The hair might primarily represents a human subject of a ritual, serving as a substitute or sacrificial offering to transfer negative influences



away from the person, or might also appeal to the anthropomorphic features of particular spirits or demons by appealing to their narcissism or providing a means to trap or distract them.

Another prominent tradition is the Bali ceremony, which focuses on astrological disturbances rather than direct spirit possession. In *Bali Thovil* and *Bali Pideniya*, ritual offerings known as *Dola Pideni Dima* include rice, traditional sweets, curries, oil, honey, and water pots, which are placed near clay statues of planetary deities. A live cock, with its legs tied together so that it cannot run about, is placed in a corner as an offering to the evil spirits. These rituals are often recommended by astrologers when a person is believed to be under the influence of a malefic planetary alignment. In some cases, blood will be extracted from the comb of the cock.

Another such ritual is Bahirava Puja which is performed primarily to protect land, homes, and property from misfortune and spiritual harm. It is considered a blessing ceremony that invokes Bahirava, a guardian spirit believed to safeguard the earth's riches, buried treasures, and natural balance. However, some also view Bahirava Puja as a defensive or exorcistic ritual, performed during house or land-related disturbances. It targets spirits of deceased landowners (preta) believed to be lingering due to attachment. Offerings include items in sets of seven—such as flowers, sweets, and yams—along with protective threads tied around the property and sacrificial offerings like a buried cock. In some cases, spirits are believed to be captured in sealed bottles and cast into the sea - an irreversible exile meant to prevent their return. The above-mentioned **closed containers, each with an egg**, seen floating in the canal between Thalangama and Averihena lake are however more likely related to a Thovil ritual than Bahirava Puja, but also aim at absorbing and capturing negative energy or spirits to be carried away in the water. We usually find around 5+ containers.



Crucially, many Thovil rituals end with the discarding of the *pideni thatu* (trays containing offerings and symbolic items) at a three-way junction. These junctions are considered spiritually potent locations where spiritual energies are believed to converge, or spirits can be released and left behind. This symbolic act ensures the afflicted person does not carry residual spiritual baggage back home, allowing the healing process to be complete. The presence of a water body, such as a lake or canal, at the exact location can hold

symbolic and practical importance depending on the specific ritual or tradition followed, like for floating offerings, or to enhance the symbolic and spiritual potency of Thovil offerings, but is not an absolute necessity. Trays can also be placed on a graveyard or a crematorium ground.

We commonly find **cut lemons** in our water bodies, especially after a Thovil ritual. They are supposed to absorb negative energies or curses. Usually, 7 lemons per person are used. Cutting lemons in half is thought to enhance their capacity to attract and contain these negative forces, as the act of cutting symbolically "opens" the fruit to spiritual energies. Flowing water bodies are seen as natural purifiers that can cleanse and carry away malevolent forces, as mentioned above.

Exorcism rituals in Sri Lanka are not uniform in structure or purpose. They vary based on several factors, including the specific *yakka* (demon or spirit) believed to be involved, the nature of the affliction—such as illness, misfortune, or spiritual unrest—and the cultural or religious context of the participants. Although these rituals may appear similar to an outsider—often involving drumming, dancing, chanting, and symbolic offerings—each one is carefully designed to suit the particular spiritual disturbance. The selection of offerings, ritual items, and performance style are all tailored to the spirit being addressed. While many of these rituals are performed with benevolent intentions, such as healing, protection, or restoring balance, some may be conducted for harmful purposes, like cursing or revenge, depending on the objective of the person commissioning the ritual. Only experienced ritual specialists possess the knowledge to interpret the symbolic meaning of the leftover items and accurately determine the specific type, purpose, and moral intent of the ritual performed.



The annual **water-cutting ceremony** (Diya Kepeema or Diya Kaepima) is not a component of the Thovil tradition but is related through shared cultural and spiritual goals of Buddhists (and Hindus), particularly the removal of negative influences and purification through water. The public ceremony is often performed at the end of a cultural/religious procession (Perahera). Famous are those of Kandy and Kataragama, but also at local lakes, like the Thalangama wewa, with certain variations in the rituals between different locations. A central component takes place on a raft or boat carrying a closed tent over the lake under which the “water cutting” takes place at an auspicious time, performed by a (Kapurala) priest with the



long sword who “cuts the water in two” simultaneously filling a pot with the (cleaned, sacred) water that has been cut. At other places people are bathing in the cleansed water or take it in pots home.

While these rituals have long traditions, they can be adapted to particular events, like the Satpathini Gammadu Peace Ceremony, also referred to as the Gammadu Shanthikarmaya,



which is primarily associated with the worship of the female deity Paththini (or Pattini), a revered goddess in Sinhala Buddhist and Hindu traditions. The ceremony which is usually performed ahead of significant events like the Sinhala and Tamil New Year, can also be carried out at other times to thank the deity for her help during the Corona pandemic.



## Further readings

1. Hays, J. (2022). *Exorcism and spirit rituals in Sri Lanka | Facts and Details*. Factsanddetails.com. [https://factsanddetails.com/south-asia/Srilanka/Ethnic\\_Groups\\_and\\_Minorities\\_Srilanka/entry-7973.html](https://factsanddetails.com/south-asia/Srilanka/Ethnic_Groups_and_Minorities_Srilanka/entry-7973.html)
2. Jinadasa, M. (2016). *Bali Rituals and Therapeutic Communication in the Traditional Rural Society in Sri Lanka*. *Journalism and Mass Communication*, 6(11). <https://doi.org/10.17265/2160-6579/2016.11.003>
3. Said, M. (2015) *People, place, and politics: Everyday-life in post-tsunami coastal Sri Lanka*. Durham theses, Durham University. Available at Durham E-Theses Online: <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/11259/> (e.g. chapter 7 and 8)
4. *Culture & Traditions in Sri Lanka & Botswana*. (2023). Sheppard.me.uk. <https://www.sheppard.me.uk/>; <https://www.sheppard.me.uk/sri-lanka/health/patients.html>
5. *Thovil dancing in Ceylon*. (2025). Blogspot.com. <http://wonder-of-ceylon.blogspot.com/2013/09/thovil-dancing-in-ceylon.html>
6. *Take a Journey into the Supernatural Heart of Sri Lanka · Renaissance Sri Lanka*. (n.d.). [www.renasl.org](http://www.renasl.org). <https://www.renasl.org/887/gods-and-magic-practices-in-the-supernatural-heart-of-sri-lanka/>
7. Disanayake, J.B. (1992). *Water in Culture: The Sri Lankan Heritage*. Ministry of Environment & Parliamentary Affairs, Sri Lanka.
8. *The Water-cutting Ceremony or Diya-kaepima* <https://kataragama.org/water-cutting.htm>

August 2025