

# スリランカの無形文化財としての舞踊芸術

## Significance of Performing Arts as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Sri Lanka

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### [要旨]

スリランカには、多様な文化を映し出す媒体としての舞踊芸術が長い間伝承されてきたが、急速に消滅しつつあるものも少なくない。古くはスリランカの先住民であるヴェッダー族の舞踊から、シンハラ族の暮らしの中から生じたもの、また、ポルトガルやオランダ、イギリスの統治下で生まれた比較的新しい舞踊などもあり、スリランカの歴史、宗教、慣習、儀式、迷信などが、その地方や民族、そして時代に根ざした舞踊表現として独自の様式を生み継承されてきた。その多様性と文化的価値に今一度着目し、これらが無形文化財として永続的に保存していく取り組みをすべきである。

## Objective

Sri Lanka inherits a great performing art tradition which includes all types of performing aspects which modern stage expects to achieve. Therefore studies should focus on grasping the techniques of these traditions in order to nurture modern performing arts. On the other hand, programs should be launched to maintain its traditional value for posterity. The objective of this article is to ponder the culture we have inherited and also to make it an intricate continuing construction.

## Introduction

Cultural diversity of a country is mainly based on ethnicity and religiosity of its inhabitants. Culture of each ethnic community depends on their customs, beliefs, rituals, superstitions, communication and oral tradition. During the course of time some ethnic communities of Sri Lanka have decreased in numbers and some are dying out rapidly. But throughout history from generation to generation they have transmitted knowledge, practices, representations, expressions and skills. Art of performance is one of the powerful media which helped them to transmit their traditional knowledge and skills. All practices of different communities of Sri Lanka has come down to us as intangible cultural heritage of the country.

## Development of Performing Arts

It is reasonable to assume that the development of performing art traditions of Sri Lanka occurred in two different pathways. Performance traditions of aboriginal people or *Vaddas* of Sri Lanka who lived in Northern, North Eastern, Eastern, Sabaragamuva, Uva and Central province of the country who are less polluted from foreign elements can be recognized as indigenous. Another tradition of performing arts originated from *Sinhalese* folk life which contains a vast volume of cultural expressions and traditional knowledge.

## Performing traditions of Discourse Communities

Many foreign and native scholars have carried out in depth studies on the ceremonies and ceremonial dances of aboriginal people of Sri Lanka. Scholarly publications of Seligman (1911), Parker (1909), and pertold (1973) provide detailed information on this subject. In their publication on *Vaddas* C.G. and B.Z. 2 has described twelve kinds of ritual enactments performed by aboriginal people of Sri Lanka (Seligman, 1911: 209-272). All ceremonies are associated with ancestral spirits who are styled as “*Yakku*” (Demons). Descriptions provided by the above scholars clearly indicate that these ceremonies involved vigorous dance movements. Though the possession is not a main element of *Vadda* dance, the performers as well as onlookers get possessed by chance, which may have involved the

performance of vigorous dance movements. Out of the twelve ceremonies Seligman has mentioned in his book, *Kiri Koraha* (a bowl contained milk) is the only ceremony that has come down to the modern day. But the *Vaddas* who live in the villages of Ridimaliyadda and Ratugala of Badulla District perform a ritual called “*Hakma*” which is very similar to *Kiri Koraha*. According to them “*Hakma*” is the major ritual and “*Kiri Koraha*” is only a part of it. However, none of the above scholars have given any information on such a ritual or ceremony.

During the course of time these performances have lost their original motivation and significance, not being able to convey the intended message as done in the past. *Vaddas* of Ratugala are interested in playing cricket. They are of the opinion that the government should provide them with comfortable vehicles for easy transportation. These developments clearly indicate that the aboriginal people of Sri Lanka do not want to live as a marginalized community. Their main expectation is to transit to the mainstream culture, which raises critical questions on how to preserve their original culture. However, the different types of songs sung by *Vaddas* are well preserved and documented by various responsible institutions.

Another endangered discourse community in Sri Lanka can be identified as “*Ahiguntika*” whose main occupation was snake charming and palm reading. They have come to Sri Lanka from Telagana province in India. Raghavan (1953) has paid an interest in studying the culture of this nomadic tribe. At present they live in villages

named Aligambay in Ampara District and Kudagama in Anuradhapura District. Their lifestyle has drastically become economically unstable, after being granted permanent settlement by the authorities. They speak hybrid language which includes *Telugu* and *Tamil* words. At present they do not practice snake charming or palmistry. Many scholars are currently engaged in research on this community. University of Kelaniya has started a linguistic survey under the HETC project to safeguard the intangible culture of discourse communities of Sri Lanka.

The Burgher and Kaffir communities who live in Batticaloa District is a good example of the cultural diversity of Sri Lanka. It is said that they are descending from African slaves brought to Sri Lanka by the Portuguese, Dutch and British during their stay in the country. They speak the Sri Lankan Portuguese *Creole* language, which has been flourishing in Sri Lanka for over 300 years. They introduced *Kaffringha* and *Baila* - new genres of dance music to mainstream music which became very popular among Sri Lankans. A large number of Portuguese *Creole* folk verse lies in Hugh Neville collection in the British library. Even though Portuguese *Creole* is now an endangered language, their music is well established and thriving in the mainstream music even today.

*Tamil* and Muslim communities live in Northern, Eastern and Central provinces of Sri Lanka and they maintain cultural activities distinctive to them. Playing music with sticks or “*Kali Kambatam*” is a kind of performing art handed down to the present generation from

traditional families in that area. The history of Kalikambatam goes back to 300 years. They perform a range of folk tales using dance and music with the accompaniment of sticks. This form which is said to have a Saudi Arabian origin is very popular among Muslim communities and moreover, the younger generation is very keen to join and learn this art. *Akkaraipattu Kalikambatam* group even performed at the Jaffna Music Festival held in 2011 in Jaffna, Sri Lanka.

*Karman Koottu* is a dramatic tradition popular among certain *Tamil* communities, especially among the estate workers in the central province of Sri Lanka. Techniques and the subject matter of *Karman Koottu* clearly indicate an Indian origin. *Karman Koottu* is based on the story of *Ananga* or Indian God of love. Stories based on the Indian epic *Mahabharata* are performed by a group of actors in this region in a professional manner. Portrayal of all characters by a single actor or portrayal of different characters by different actors are the notable characteristics of this dramatic art.

*Paparavaham* is one of the *Koottu* traditions performed by *Tamil* people in the Chulipuram area in Jaffna. This has been developed as a temple art in that area and was abandoned for about twenty years until the end of the ethnic war, when performances started again. Subject matter of the play has been based upon the Indian epic *Mahabharata*. The dramatic performance takes place in a circular space of temple courtyard and spectators are seated on three sides of the performing arena. As far as the spectacle is concerned, the influence of Indian folk theatre is

clearly evident.

Another *Koottu* tradition, namely the *Kovalan Koottu*, which is more ritualistic in nature, prevails in Mullaitiu District. This ritual drama is performed to appease the gods in order to obtain good harvest and avoid contagious diseases. Certain purification rites have to be followed before the commencement of the play including the purification of the performers and the performing arena. The themes of *Kovalan Koottu* have been taken from the popular *Tamil* epic *Silappadikaram* composed by poet Illanko Adigal during the Sangam period in South India. Due to its association with religious beliefs and agricultural activities it can be assumed that this art form will continue to persist in the hand of another generation.

*Sinthunadai Koottu* is performed by *Tamil* communities in Neerveli, Jaffna. This drama is performed in Hindu temples to appease the Goddess *Mutthumari*, in order to appeal her to protect the village from drought and sickness. This is also called *Katthavarayan Koottu*, named after the main character of the play. Rhythmic movements of legs or the *Sindunadai* style is the salient feature of this drama. A legend connected with Goddess *Mariamman* is enacted in the play. Poems written in praise of *Marimuttuamman* are found among the Sinhala communities in southern Sri Lanka.

*Tamil* community in *Nagar Kovil*, a small village in Jaffna district, performs a drama which carries a story of Colonial rule in Sri Lanka. The story is about an unsuccessful attempt made by the British to take the people of *Nagar Kovil* abroad

as labourers in a ship, promising them a better life and the power of a *Nagar Kovil* Snake that intervene to prevent the mishap. Actors dressed in European costumes look much realistic in nature.

*Vasanthan Koottu* performed in a village called Kadduwan of Jaffna district is said to be a two-hundred year old tradition. The drama is associated with the worship of *Virapaththirar*, an incarnation of Lord *Shiva*. The name of the poet who composed the play is *Virapaththirar Vasanthan*. This drama which is ritualistic in nature conveys its meaning mainly through song and dance. While playing, they make a circle. All the performers use two sticks and act in pairs. Their rhythmical movements are highlighted by the accompaniment of *Mrithangam*, *Talam* and *Harmonium*. Songs of the play elaborate the natural beauty of the village.

*Villu Pattu* is a tradition of storytelling practiced by the people in Acchuveli, in Jaffna district. Singing, storytelling and acting are done by a single actor who beats the bowl as he sings. Most of the stories have been taken from the epics; traditional stories are interwoven with contemporary stories while maintaining its traditional value. Humor is incorporated in great deal while emphasis is given to conveying an idea that has moral significance. Performance of *Villu Pattu* in Jaffna Music Festival was of greater importance, because the art of storytelling is rapidly dying away in this country.

A kind of musical drama or *Isai Nadakam* which is said to be evolved from Parsi theatre tradition is still in vogue in Alvai, Jaffna. *Poothathambi* is a famous play performed by a

theatre group and carries a story which is believed to have happened during the Dutch regime. Actors narrate the story through singing. As this is musical drama, music plays a major role in the play. *Ragas* and *Thala* of Karnatic music create the mood required by the play. Colorful backdrops used in the drama show the influence of Bombay Parsi theatrical characteristics.

### **Ritual Culture of Sinhalese village folk**

Mass volume of rituals, customs, beliefs and ceremonies associated with *Sinhalese* folk life can be found in all parts of Sri Lanka. People who are experts in conducting and maintaining these activities are identified as artists and craftsmen. Therefore these artists and craftsmen are responsible for transmitting all these practices from generation to generation through a father to son or teacher to pupil relationship. Ritual tradition of Sri Lanka is the most important among them, as all other practices are centered around ritual tradition. There are three major ritual traditions available in Sri Lanka based on geographical demarcation, named as Up Country or *Kandyan*, Low Country or Southern Style and *Sabaragamu* Style.

*Kohomba Kamkariya* or the invocation to *Kohomba* God is the major ceremony of *Kandyan* tradition out of which the magnificent costume of *Kandyan* Dancer evolved. Making a *Ves* (guise) costume itself is a great art. Artistic tradition comes from the generation of *Tittapajjala Gunaya Gurunnanse* which is famous for making fine

costumes as well as traditional *Kandyan* dance. Almost all major *Kandyan* dance items have been introduced from the above ritual. Origin of the ritual is attributed to the time of King Panduvasadeva who came to throne after Vijaya, the first King of Lanka, which is a controversial issue that needs further investigation. According to the myth, the ritual had been performed to cure the King Panduvasudeva from an illness caused by a curse made by Kuveni, a native woman who was abandoned by Vijaya after fathering her two children. This was a seven day ritual that has now been limited to only a few hours. *Kandyan* drum or *Geta Beraya* is the major instrument used to accompany this ritual dance.

Low Country ritual tradition which is rich in the number of demon ceremonies or exorcisms have gained fame due to its dramatic presentations. Demons are superhuman beings that have the power to make people ill and cure them after receiving desired offerings. Due to this belief Sri Lanka inherited a vast range of colorful ceremonies with a wide variety of dance, drama, costumes and music involved. *Riddi Yagaya*, *Maha Sohon Samayama*, *Sanni Yakuma* and *Suniyam Yagaya* are the major demon ceremonies conducted in Low Country tradition. *Riddi Yagaya* is performed to relieve barren women from barrenness, or to prevent untimely delivery of a child or still birth. Low Country dance tradition consists of dances extracted from the above ceremonies. This is accompanied by the *Yak Beraya* or Low Country drum. Ceremonies conducted to appease deities are also a part of Low Country tradition. *Pattini* and *Devol* are the

major deities propitiated in these ceremonies. A style of masked dance known as *Kolam* enhances the richness of the Low Country tradition. *Kolam* narrates a story through masked dance. Making masks is also a unique art form developed in that area simultaneously.

*Sabaragamu* tradition is rich in rituals which are performed to invoke Gods as well as Demons. *Pahan Maduva* is the major ritual performed in this part of the country to satisfy the Goddess *Pattini* in order to obtain her blessings. *Mangara*, a deity believed to be the protector of cattle, is also worshipped in these rituals. It is believed that most of the rituals that were belonging to *Sabaragamu* tradition have disappeared during the passage of time. Dance of the *Sabaragamu* tradition has evolved from these rituals and are not refined as the other two dance styles, which is a unique characteristic of the *Sabaragamu* tradition. In addition to this, the performing art tradition of Sri Lanka is constituent of *Vannam*<sup>(1)</sup> *Talam*,<sup>(2)</sup> *Saudam*<sup>(3)</sup> and various other dance forms, some of which have not been passed down to the present generation. Another set of rituals named as *Bali* are performed in all three traditions, in order to obtain the protection of Planetary Gods whose influence might cause misfortune on individuals. The priest who conducts *Bali* ceremonies are expected to be a master in the arts of painting and sculpture.

(1) Poems composed and sung in praise of birds, animals, nature and Gods. A unique dance in all three traditions.

(2) Songs sung to praise the higher qualities of

Lord Buddha.

- (3) Developed as a temple art, poems dedicated to vast number of God are included. *Saudam* is a song that have to be sings first and then dance.

## Folk Songs

Folk songs associated with popular customs, festivals and ceremonies can be found in all parts of the country. Playing the swing is the most common game that men, women and children take part during the New Year season. Some songs are sung to extoll the virtues of Gods and get their protection and blessings. One such song goes as follows;

“As it goes up my heart burns  
When it comes down I feel relieved  
Be not afraid, if one bar is missed  
Ask for the blessings of Goddess *Pattini*”  
(Ratnapala, 1991, 23)

It is customary to sing pilgrim songs when village people take part in pilgrimages. People who go to Adam’s Peak on pilgrimage never forget the custom of singing songs even at present. These are sung to 6 ensure the safety of the people and to invoke the blessings of the Triple Gem. People engage in pilgrimages in groups. The leaders of the group sing the first line and the rest of the group repeats it. The leader starts the second line and the group follows afterwards.

Folk songs are usually anonymous. But there are few songs attributed to Andare, a court jester of a *Sinhalese* King. One such song reveals his

anger over a toddy tapper who refused to give him some toddy to drink. These types of songs are called *Vaskavi*.

“May you slip with each step you take  
May you out yourself with the knife  
each time you use  
May each rope-noose you tie break  
each time  
May you fall down from the tree,  
for not giving me toddy”  
(Ratnapala, 1991, 31)

Fearing that something evil might befall on him due to the curse of Andare, the toddy tapper gives enough toddy for Andare to drink. Then Andare recites a seth kavi to banish the influence of the curse bestowed on the toddy tapper, which goes as follows;

“Village toddy tapper of ours a dark  
and handsome man  
He distributes toddy to all  
and sundry without dregs  
He taps all flowers that blossom  
one after the other  
May God bless him our village  
toddy tapper”  
(Ratnapala, 1991, 31)

Folk tales, riddles, customs and beliefs of people of Sri Lanka have been recorded and preserved. All the art forms described above are human activities. For example, folk tales are published as books. But the manner in which it is

delivered and the expression given are the most important elements in its preservation. Therefore the individuals who transmit these cultures from generation to generation should be considered and valued as human treasures, as they play a major role in safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage of Sri Lanka.

The Jaffna Music Festival held in 2011 paved way for Sri Lankan folk artists to perform in a public forum. Such type of activities must be encouraged in order to continue these art forms as live traditions into many more generations to come.

## Conclusion

Main challenge lies in front of us is how to deal with the new? Can we completely forget the past and proceed with new thinking and innovations? Even though the change is our solitary aim, innovation is our proclaimed idea, we should deal with the past and new ways of interpreting them in order to achieve what we expect from the future. Therefore the cultural practices we have set behind compellingly ought to be seen in new ways and look forward to identify its significance as intangible cultural heritage of the country.

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